OFFICIAL REPORT
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Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 8 January 2026

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Thursday 8 January 2026

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CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
1st Meeting 2026, Session 6

CONVENER

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)
*Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)
*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Professor Robert Beveridge
Professor Catherine Happer (University of Glasgow)
Professor Nick Higgins (University of the West of Scotland)
Catherine Houlihan (ITV Border)
Nick McGowan-Lowe (National Union of Journalists)
John McLellan (Newsbrands Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

James Johnston

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 8 January 2026

[Stephen Kerr opened the meeting at 08:33]

Temporary Convener

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Good morning, and welcome to the first meeting in 2026 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. We have received apologies from Clare Adamson and Jamie Halcro Johnston.

Item 1 is for the committee to choose a temporary convener. In the absence of the convener and the deputy convener, it falls to me, as the oldest committee member present—I expected to hear gasps of surprise at that—to chair the meeting initially. Our first item of business is to choose a member of the committee as temporary convener for the duration of this meeting. I would be willing to take on the role of temporary convener. Do members agree that I should do so?

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Are we happy for our older colleague to do it?

Stephen Kerr: Okay—fair comment.

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Temporary Convener (Stephen Kerr): Thank you for the acclaim.

Scottish Broadcasting

08:33

The Temporary Convener: We will begin our meeting proper. The next item is for the committee to begin taking evidence on our short inquiry on Scottish broadcasting. We are joined in the room by Professor Robert Beveridge, who is a former professor at the University of Sassari; Professor Catherine Happer, who is professor of media at the University of Glasgow; and Professor Nick Higgins, who is director of creative media at the creative media academy at the University of the West of Scotland. You are all very welcome.

I will begin with some broad questions and we will go from there. How would you describe the current state of broadcasting in Scotland? That is a very broad question. I will go to Professor Happer first.

Professor Catherine Happer (University of Glasgow): It is a very broad question, and a difficult one to answer in some ways, because there are different areas within this very broad sector, some of which are flourishing and some of which are not doing quite so well. If I was to give a broad overview, I would say that we see in the broadcasting sector a series of strategies being implemented to respond and adapt to a rapidly evolving media landscape, while confronting the structural challenges that are being faced by media organisations across the world, including in the United Kingdom, which also have particular implications for Scotland.

From the perspective of the work that I do on exploring audiences' news consumption habits and the ways in which they seek out information to make interpretations about what is going on in the world, the changes that we have seen in our technological landscape have to be thought of in alignment with the rapidly evolving political landscape, because it is looking very different. Those things are coming together to produce outcomes such as the one that we saw recently at the top of the BBC, with the director general resigning over the editorial of a "Panorama" documentary and the bringing into question of how public service media and news media tackle impartiality in a very different media landscape.

Different parts of the sector are therefore facing different challenges. Others on the panel probably have more expertise in drama and entertainment than I do, because my work focuses on news. One of the big challenges that news broadcasters are facing is that the most recent Ofcom report said that, for the first time ever, more people are accessing news via social media than via broadcast news. We have been seeing that

trajectory for a number of years, and it is particularly exaggerated in younger age groups.

Such a move away from linear broadcasting is not necessarily a problem if people are going to broadcast in other ways, but they are now going via social media. There are huge audiences and a huge appetite for news, and people are accessing news that has originated with some of our broadcasters, including the BBC and STV, but they do not always know where it actually comes from. That raises questions about the licence fee as a funding model, and so on. It also raises questions about the way in which people are accessing that information, how it is mediated through social media influencers and the different factors that are tempting news audiences away.

There are lots of different questions there. If you just want the big story on broadcasting in Scotland in the past few years, it was the launch of the BBC Scotland channel in 2019, which was discussed for many, many years, particularly the launch of its flagship news broadcast, "The Nine", an hour-long news show that had also been discussed in BBC Scotland for many years with the lobbying for the Scottish six and all the rest of it, and the great loss that last year's axing of that programme was to Scottish broadcasting. There are a number of reasons for the failures of "The Nine" that translate into low audience figures. It is a very difficult time to launch a new news broadcast when audiences of news broadcasts are dwindling anyway. There are also questions about visibility, where the channel sits, and the electronic programme guide, for example.

Devolution was one of the most important constitutional changes in the past 100 years in the UK, and we were finally catching up with a Scotland channel from the BBC, but unfortunately, the audiences are so low that the channel is not fulfilling its role in public service media, in bringing in audiences to Scottish stories, Scottish experts and Scottish voices, and in fostering the talent of the next generation of Scottish journalists.

If I were to give an overview, it is a story of decline that needs urgent intervention. I will leave it there; I know that we will go into more detail on some of these things.

The Temporary Convener: You have given us a number of thoughts. Let us hear from the other witnesses, and then we will come back to some of what you have said. I am sure that we will hear other interesting and provocative things from Professor Beveridge.

Professor Robert Beveridge: I agree with everything that Catherine Happer said, but you will not be surprised by that.

Where I am coming from is asking the question of how we ensure that we get Scottish stories, not just Scottish scenery, on screens. I am also very concerned about how this Parliament can ensure the best deal for viewers and listeners in the forthcoming processes of the BBC charter review.

The Temporary Convener: Professor Beveridge, what are you saying then about the current state of Scottish broadcasting? Can you give us an overview that leads you to those conclusions?

Professor Beveridge: If you read the recommendation that I have made, you will see that I think that we are living in a groundhog day situation. Scotland has always been seen as a region and not as a nation, and because of that, and in particular in the context of the BBC, I do not think that viewers and listeners get a good deal out of the current public service broadcasting settlement in Scotland.

Having said that, I would like to commend the BBC for showing "Culloden" on Tuesday night, and I hope that it shows that around the anniversary of the battle. I would also like to commend Nick Robinson for broadcasting from Edinburgh and for giving due attention to the Scottish parliamentary elections on the "Today" programme. However, the very fact that I have to say that that is unusual demonstrates the importance and validity of the research by Professor Stephen Cushion at Cardiff University, which shows that the broadcasting settlement in the UK does not enable the nations of the UK to properly understand one other. I hope that that helps to answer some of the questions.

The Temporary Convener: Yes, thank you for that.

Professor Nick Higgins (University of the West of Scotland): It is clear that the business models for all broadcasters are currently challenged and up for debate at this particular moment. The drop-off in linear television is something that broadcasters must adapt to; they must also adapt to online audiences and the loss of audiences. For production companies, that has had a consequence in terms of the lessening of commissions and the lowering of budgets, which in turn has a knock-on effect on the freelancers, who are the majority of the people who work in the TV industry in Scotland.

Overall, I would say that right now Scottish broadcasting is in a precarious state. Leaving news aside, which raises questions around trust that are very clearly in the green paper on the charter, there are also questions of trust around the models of Ofcom and the production targets for outside the M25. There is a lack of transparency in data on how Scotland receives its share of the BBC revenues. This is a moment, with the renewal of the charter, when the Scottish

Government can ask for more clarity around that. That in itself could lead to more opportunities for Scottish creative industry workers.

It is a tricky time for everyone who works in broadcasting, but there is a real opportunity here to try to get better out of our Scottish broadcasters.

Professor Beveridge: I add that, over the past year, STV's share price has gone down by 50 per cent, and my understanding is that it is worth only around £55 million. Therefore, it could be subject to a takeover by another company, and if ITV is bought up by Comcast, for example, we could end up having STV owned by an American company. You will see from one of my recommendations that I do not want STV to be taken over by anybody unless there is full agreement by the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government.

The Temporary Convener: Let me go back to Professor Happer to ask you to expand on some comments. You said that some sectors of Scottish broadcasting are thriving and others are not. Will you drill down a bit and be very specific about where you think we have a thriving Scottish broadcasting scene and where we do not? We can probably see where we do not, but where is it thriving?

Professor Happer: "Thriving" is probably a very positive word. For example, one of the responses to "The Nine" being axed was to think about the nature of the digital media landscape and trying to meet audiences where they are. Podcasting is a real growth area. I have to say that the BBC has been very clever on that. For years and years, it had been making radio programmes, which it then put on BBC Sounds and rebranded as podcasting. The BBC has always been incredibly innovative. It was one of the first to drive video streaming, with the iPlayer, and then the market took over.

08:45

An example is "Scotcast". I speak to young audiences who are very much lost to news broadcasting. I have to say that, in my focus groups, I struggled to find anybody who had actually watched "The Nine", unfortunately—the numbers are so low. However, "Scotcast" was talked about a lot. That seems to be an area where BBC Scotland is actually reaching the hard-to-reach audiences.

There have been some successes in drama and, obviously, there is "The Traitors", although we might want to discuss whether we see that as a success for Scottish production. Obviously, that is controversial, as teams from London or elsewhere are brought into Scottish locations. However, it also creates work for runners, researchers and camera and sound people, so there is something to be said there. It also brings locations in Scotland to a broader audience.

There are examples of successes. I talked about the strategies that broadcasters have engaged in to try to meet audiences where they are, and there are some successes. However, I would not say that the broadcasting sector as a whole is flourishing. We could identify individual successes, which I do not think is enough. Overall, it is probably a story of decline.

Professor Beveridge: One example of excellent success is BBC Alba and MG Alba, and particularly their commercially and critically well-received drama "The Island". One of my recommendations is that we pump more investment into BBC Alba, as I think that that would pay many dividends.

The Temporary Convener: Staying with you, Professor Beveridge, could you comment on the BBC charter and framework renewal process? What should a future BBC deliver for Scotland? How should it be structured to deliver better for Scotland? In your written submission, you are quite heavy on the fact that, structurally, the BBC does not serve the people of Scotland's best interests. What would you like it to look like?

Professor Beveridge: I would go back to my namesake Lord Beveridge's report from the early 1950s, as I said in my written submission. I would like to see a federal BBC, as that would lead to a situation in which a partnership between BBC Scotland and the BBC was put into practice. BBC Scotland should have control over its schedules in the interests of viewers and listeners in Scotland. It should not just have opt-outs. I commend the BBC and, in particular, the former chairman David Clementi, for setting up the BBC Scotland channel. However, again, I have concerns about the future of the BBC Scotland channel if it does not get the funding and support that it needs. It could be wiped out by cuts from BBC London.

The Temporary Convener: Would you like BBC One to be BBC One Scotland?

Professor Beveridge: Absolutely; 100 per cent.

The Temporary Convener: That is very clear in your written submission.

Professor Beveridge: Yes, simply. As I said in my submission, STV has control over its schedules and I do not see why BBC Scotland should not be the same.

The Temporary Convener: Professor Higgins, do you have a view on what shape the BBC in Scotland should be, after the charter and framework renewal?

Professor Higgins: My view is that BBC Scotland could do more and be more ambitious,

and that it should have a greater budget to do that. It should be a sector leader on skills and development, and it should be a catalyst for the whole media ecosystem. My worry is that, at the moment, BBC Scotland is in many ways too insular and does not have enough relationships and activities with other stakeholders in the media ecosystem.

In my case, that is higher education and the small number of universities that actually teach practice-based film-making and television production. We would like to see the return of a national screen skills committee, which the BBC could chair. We would like to see bursaries and the BBC sponsoring events. BBC Studios is sponsoring the London Film School's showcase in a couple of months' time, and BBC Film in London is supporting the screening of some of the London Film School's films.

BBC Scotland could do similar. It could work with the Glasgow Short Film Festival and, in a different manner, with some of the production companies. One of the most positive things to come forward in recent years has been the British Film Institute diversity standards, and Screen Scotland should be commended for adapting the standards to make them Scotland specific. BBC Scotland has taken the standards on board and committed to them, too.

I come from an institution whose students have a particular profile. Many of them are the first generation to go to university. At least a third of them come from Scottish index of multiple deprivation 20 backgrounds, which the new diversity standards in Scotland have suggested should, in some sense, be seen as equivalent to a protected characteristic.

We have incredibly successful film makers who get British Academy of Film and Television Arts nominations and win Royal Television Society awards. However, I am not seeing them inside BBC Scotland two or three years out from university; I am not seeing them, as talent, given a pathway into that institution, and we are missing a trick with that. It is not just my institution; we, Edinburgh Napier University, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, the University of the Highlands and Islands and Glasgow Caledonian University have all invested, as has the Scottish Funding Council, in training talent with skills for television production, but we are not seeing enough stepping stones into BBC Scotland, which is the biggest employer and commissioner in the Scottish screen ecosystem.

The Temporary Convener: Are you saying that the BBC's presence in our universities and colleges is minimal or non-existent?

Professor Higgins: I would not say that it is non-existent. It is ad hoc. There are many great colleagues in the BBC who come in and do talks, and they are extremely welcome. We have a module on television formats and they are also involved with that. However, it is ad hoc. With the old Creative Skillset structure, there was a formal commitment. They chaired that board. They brought together all the stakeholders from the production and post-production companies, as well as the relevant accredited courses in Scotland. It was an interface and a mechanism to share opportunities and to get feedback, and that interface and mechanism currently does not exist. Although lots of good things are happening at an individual level, insufficient amounts are happening at a formal level.

The Temporary Convener: There is a lack of deliberate strategy, as such.

Professor Higgins: I would say that it has dropped off.

The Temporary Convener: If there was anything at all, it has wilted.

Professor Higgins: Yes.

The Temporary Convener: I turn to Professor Happer with the same question that I asked Professor Higgins. I would like to hear from you on the BBC and anything else that you want to say.

Professor Happer: I have a lot of sympathy with the view that was expressed about the shape of BBC Scotland. Increased autonomy for BBC Scotland is certainly an important aspect of this discussion, which relates to a really important discussion that is happening in academic and industry circles about the decline in trust in traditional media.

A decline in trust has been experienced right around the world by traditional media, by which I mean TV, radio and newspapers. Our research shows that one of the ways in which that manifests itself in British and Scottish audiences is through a perception that public service news broadcasters—the BBC and the others—are far too close to government and politicians and that their independence is no longer there. That has a particular character in the Scottish context because there was a historical disaffection with the coverage of the independence referendum. There are still strong feelings. I am not suggesting that, when you go into focus groups, people talk about this and that it is absolutely at the top of their minds, but you will probably have seen from the Ofcom figures that, in Scotland, trust in the BBC is lower, which I think is a hangover from that period.

The independence referendum period showed BBC Scotland's inability to be autonomous in its

coverage of its own affairs, because there was a clear perception among audiences that a lot of the control came from the BBC network and BBC London. That was perhaps unfair, but there was certainly a perception that London was calling the shots and—almost—that the state line was being followed in respect of the coverage of that debate. The more that BBC Scotland and its journalism can be independent from London and from politicians in both Westminster and Holyrood, the better. That is a really important aspect of rebuilding trust in journalism, which, as I say in the Glasgow university media group submission, is impacting particular groups.

There is a danger that access to news content from broadcasters will become a two-tier system. If you look at the figures, you will see that older, more educated and higher-income groups are consuming the BBC, including BBC broadcast news. However, the BBC is not serving younger and lower-income groups quite so well, as was highlighted in relation to underprivileged groups in the most recent digital survey by the Reuters institute for the study of journalism at the University of Oxford.

Our research with media audiences puts some flesh on the bones of that, and of the perception that the agenda flows from Governments and politicians through to journalists. That agenda is seen as very narrow and does not engage with the issues that the public cares about, with a very narrow set of questions being put to politicians. It might be that, as MPs and MSPs, you feel as though you are being strongly scrutinised, but that is on a narrow agenda.

That is the way in which audiences, who now have a range of alternatives to go to, see it. There is work to be done to rebuild things, including what independence means for the BBC and its journalism.

The Temporary Convener: Is there not resentment, though, of the concept of the TV licence, particularly among younger people? When I talk to younger voters, it is not uncommon for them to say that they absolutely refuse to pay the TV licence. They really are not interested in the idea of being taxed to watch TV.

Professor Happer: It is not really a refusal. They just do not see it like that; they just do not think that that is something that they will ever, ever purchase.

The Temporary Convener: I agree.

Professor Happer: Few young people have a TV licence. They think that it is something that their parents' generation had. They will say, "I never watch linear TV—I don't even use that term. I don't watch live TV, so why would I need a TV licence?"

There is a branding problem with the TV licence fee. There is also a sense that, if young people are accessing media via a side door, even if they end up with BBC content, they do not consider that they need to pay for it.

There is a real problem here. I know that it is a politically contentious view to hold—

The Temporary Convener: This is the place for such views.

Professor Happer: Okay. The licence fee must be looked at. That view is contentious because, once upon a time, political opponents of the BBC would say, "Get rid of the licence fee," when what they really meant was that they wanted to get rid of the BBC. What I am seeing more recently—in preparation for this meeting, I have read quite a few of the briefings that are being submitted to Westminster's deliberations on the issue—is a strong recommendation to move away from the licence fee structure because it is delivering reduced revenue, it is an unpopular funding model and it is regressive.

In the past three years, after 100 years of operating a licence fee model, countries across Europe, including Germany and Denmark, have moved to either general taxation or household levies to fund media. It is politically contentious—

The Temporary Convener: What do you mean by "household levies"?

Professor Happer: A household levy is a universal flat tax that all households pay for public service media. That is quite a different way of looking at it.

Different models are coming into play. I do not think that the licence fee will sustain public service media in the longer term. I read one of the briefings by Georgina Born, who is a great historian of the BBC and an absolute advocate for the BBC. I was so surprised to read that her views on the licence fee have changed in the past five years or so.

The thinking and the research are moving in a particular direction. To continue to rely on the licence fee puts public service media at risk.

The Temporary Convener: That is very interesting.

George Adam: Good morning. I am quite interested in what you said, Professor Happer, about the BBC in general. This is probably a question for everyone on the panel. Previously, the BBC did not need to come before us, but it did so as a courtesy. However, it does so when charter renewal is under way—I think that the rules were changed so that it at least had to engage with us in some shape or form.

When the previous director general came to the Parliament, we got the impression that he very much thought, “I am just here to do a tick-box exercise. I do not want to engage with the Scottish Parliament.” As Professor Beveridge said, it was like an afterthought. How do we make that relationship better? We all believe in public broadcasting, and we believe that it should be better. How do we get BBC directors to engage with us in this place in a more positive manner?

09:00

Professor Happer: I will let Professor Beveridge go first while I think about that one.

Professor Beveridge: As I said, it needs to be written into the charter that they are required to attend the Parliament—or, rather, this committee. Not only that, but the director general of the BBC and the chair of the BBC, not only the director of BBC Scotland, should come here. More than that, as I said when I made this recommendation 15 years ago—it received a little bit of media coverage at the time—the BBC Scotland director and the director general’s salaries should contain a performance-related element.

George Adam: I read that in your paper and found it quite interesting, because it is a very un-BBC idea.

Professor Beveridge: Over decades, Governments of all stripes have said that the BBC should become more commercial or be more commercially-oriented. I do not see what is wrong with performance-related pay for people at the top of the BBC.

George Adam: I agree with you. BBC Scotland is going through a bit of a change, because it has finally caught up with the market, especially on the radio side, and it is accused by some of becoming too much like—to refer to the vernacular—Radio Clyde, which is one of the most successful commercial radio stations in the UK.

Professor Beveridge: Yes, that is true.

George Adam: On the other side, it is trying to access an audience that it does not currently have. I am probably part of that key audience, and I quite like the changes, but is it too little, too late, or is it a step in the right direction?

Professor Beveridge: I have two further points. One is that, when I suggested performance-related pay 15 years ago, the feedback that I got from my BBC Scotland sources was that professors should perhaps also have performance-related pay, which is a good idea. Secondly, I draw your attention to the reported salary of the chief executive of STV, which is around the same level as that of the director general of the BBC, even though STV is tiny compared with the BBC as a whole.

The BBC is sometimes unfairly attacked for the level of salaries that it gives to its executives, but their performance certainly needs to be accountable. If it is not accountable to the MSPs in Scotland, how else do we ensure accountability for the performance of the BBC, other than through the Culture, Media and Sport Committee down at Westminster?

Professor Happer: In some ways, it is disappointing but not that surprising to hear your comment about the previous director general. The BBC does have a London-centric problem, which seeps into the journalism in different ways, as I referred to earlier.

Before my current job, I worked at BBC Scotland as an audience researcher in the strategy team, and we spent years preparing all the documentation for the next charter renewal well in advance. We devoted an awful lot of resource and energy to doing that, but I can see now that, as you said, a lot of that was focused on persuading the Government in London that we were doing the job and engaging with our strategy team in London, and I note that separate hearings are going on in London.

As Robert Beveridge said, anything that could be written into the charter renewal that requires executives to actually engage with the politics and the teams in the nations and regions—including Scotland—rather than treating them as a bit of an afterthought, would be a really positive move. It is interesting that the deliberations at Westminster, which I think go on from now until March, are almost exactly the same. I do not know whether you know the answer to this, but I am interested to know about the interaction between the different processes. I guess that a report will go forward from this, and then—

George Adam: That is a whole other inquiry for us.

Professor Happer: Yes, but it is a very interesting question. It comes back to the point about autonomy, because the BBC’s London-centric problem seeps into the coverage and the degree to which BBC Scotland can actually serve the needs of its own Scottish audiences. It is a bigger question, but the lack of engagement is quite disappointing.

George Adam: Professor Beveridge, you mentioned Comcast, which bought Sky a few years ago and nobody thought anything of it. Now, Sky wants to merge with ITV, and it is trying to say that it will have a great British broadcaster fighting against the big world streamers. However, as you rightly said, Sky is owned by Comcast, which is a US-based company. I was interested in what you

said, because it is something that I have also brought up. In a few years' time, Ofcom will not be the problem; it will do what it does and just let the broadcasters do what they want. The Competition and Markets Authority will be the problem, because it will say that the merged company is creating a monopoly or cutting down competition for advertising. A few years down the line, once ITV and Sky get through all that, that will probably be when they look at STV, because £55 million is not a lot of money to Comcast.

Professor Beveridge: STV is vulnerable at the moment. You referred to the CMA, which made a huge mistake about 20 years ago when it rejected the proposal for project kangaroo, whereby the BBC and ITV were going to come together and develop a streaming service. The CMA said that that would not be in the interests of the market. I do not know whether Glenn Preston from Ofcom is coming to the committee later on, but Ofcom's role in these matters is interesting. I have said that Ofcom really needs to take more account of the citizen interest and not just the consumer interest.

This is where I diverge a little bit from what Catherine Happer was saying about the BBC licence fee. There needs to be a huge public education programme to convince or persuade people that public service broadcasting is actually a cultural health service. I might not watch the BBC, but I have no problem paying my licence fee, because other people are getting information that at least aspires to accuracy, impartiality and balance, even if it does not always achieve it. That is absolutely central to the future of a democracy.

George Adam: One of the bigger issues is about STV North news being broadcast from Glasgow. There has been a slight change, because Ofcom managed to snarl a wee bit at STV and change it slightly so that there will be more opt-outs, but that move is still taking away from the area. That is a big decision now, but if we end up with a company such as Comcast, for example, in charge of STV, our question would be, is STV still in Glasgow? We are talking about a company that owns NBC, Universal Studios and so on—it is massive.

Professor Beveridge: Not to mention American media companies being under the suzerainty of President Trump.

George Adam: That is another concern.

Professor Beveridge: That is not something that I would value or welcome. I do not think that Scottish viewers would want to see President Trump having influence over the kind of news that we get in this country.

Professor Happer: I just want to pick up on the submission. You mentioned the new STV strategy, which relates to the points that you are making about the reduction in hours and the coverage of news. STV is rethinking its strategy as a kind of internationalisation, which is exactly the point that you are making. It is about meeting consumer needs and being driven by audience ratings and so on, but media news plays a very important role in our democracies and cannot be thought of in that way. It has to be protected in a very different way. Audiences absolutely rely on getting access to local news, such as from the northern parts of Scotland, for travel and what is going on in their local areas. It is also about building trust—the local connection is a key aspect of that.

It is a real loss. It is not just about the hours that are lost, but the role that local news plays in society as a social glue for many groups. It almost provides the communicative core that we cannot afford to lose. It is way beyond the issue of achieving high audience numbers. It is a much bigger question and much more important.

Professor Beveridge: On tinkering with the licence fee or turning it into a hybrid licence fee, I said in my submission that there should be no paywalls in public space. I do not want important democratic news to be behind a paywall or subscription only. That might reinforce what Catherine Happer is talking about, which is a two-tier news consumption pattern.

George Adam: I will continue, convener, if that is okay.

The Temporary Convener: Yes.

George Adam: Thanks.

Catherine Happer mentioned the next generation of journalists and people who will be working in the industry. In my lifetime, there have been opportunities in Scotland, in areas such as commercial radio, news presenting and sport. However, there are fewer and fewer opportunities, as more things are centralised on the commercial side, and as the opportunities reduce in the BBC. At a time when STV is making cuts, it has launched a national radio station, which would be a good thing at any other time, apart from what it is doing in other parts of the organisation. However, there are fewer and fewer opportunities. With something like STV Radio, there is an opportunity, and it will eventually run news.

Is it not to be encouraged that we have more Scottish voices? I do not think that I am unusual in wanting to hear Scottish voices. Whether it be drama or news, I want to hear Scotland's view. That is how I want to distil my news. That might be because of my age group or demographic—I do not know—but surely we should be encouraging more broadcasters to go down that route.

Professor Higgins: I will take that, purely because, for a period, we were, I think, the only

university in the UK to have a national broadcaster on our campus. That was when STV had STV local, which started out as STV local Ayr and, as you probably know, later became STV2. That meant that we had graduates who got real jobs doing local news in Ayrshire. There was a very exciting moment when we had a second channel for local news, and there were real opportunities. The STV strategy completely changed at that point. However, it is vital that we do not forget the cultural role of the public broadcasters.

I want to go back to your point about radio, because my colleagues would kill me if I did not say something about that. The loss of the cultural knowledge around new and local music through the cancellation of the Billy Sloan show and the changes to the Roddy Hart show and the Iain Anderson show is really important. BBC Radio Scotland should not be trying to be a commercial radio station. You said that you want to hear Scottish voices, and that is one of the few platforms on which such music gets out to the world. What you said about news cuts right across the sector—it is the same with documentary.

I would push back a wee bit on the point about young people not wanting to pay the licence fee. Young people will go to the cinema and pay £8 to see a really good Scottish film. That is not dissimilar to what the monthly price might be for the licence. It is about the quality on our channel, and then, more than the quality, it is about the discoverability of that quality. The great lesson from “The Traitors”, putting aside whether the BBC gamed the system in terms of the Scottish numbers, was that people were watching it, and they were doing so because it was being promoted on TikTok and across a variety of social media. The BBC was smart and was at the top of its game in bringing the audience to that programme. It is a good programme, but the point is that the BBC put in the effort.

BBC Scotland does not do enough to flag the quality that it has. It already has some great programmes. “Disclosure” is a great example of that in factual television. As I said in my written submission, we also excel in quality documentaries. Two of the documentaries that won at the Sheffield documentary film festival last year have not been broadcast in Scotland. If people pay money to go to the cinema to watch that, would they not watch it on television? They would, if they knew that it was there.

A lot of what I have to say is about people playing this game better. I think that the BBC is learning but, operationally, it needs crews that distribute and market its products and it needs to change the diversity of what it puts on the screen and the radio.

The Temporary Convener: Neil Bibby wants to ask a supplementary, and then I will come back to George Adam.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I am glad that Professor Higgins raised that example, because I was going to raise the issue of the axing of the Billy Sloan show and the Iain Anderson show. I am sure that I am not the only MSP who has been contacted by a great number of constituents who are concerned about the impact that that will have, not just on listeners but on the opportunity to profile new and emerging artists in Scotland and give them exposure for the first time. That is a retrograde step.

We have just discussed the need for autonomy in BBC Scotland, but those decisions appear to have been made by BBC Scotland about the future of BBC Radio Scotland. Yes, there might be questions about autonomy, resources and so on, but is BBC Radio Scotland making the right decisions in that respect? Your answer just now suggests that you would agree that it is not. Clearly, there are issues about autonomy and decisions that are made on programming in Scotland.

09:15

Professor Higgins: I would go so far as to say that it is an issue of cultural knowledge. The worry is that, if we have playlists that are based on an algorithm, we are not, in some sense, public service broadcasters any more, are we? We have to respond to the locality of our audience. Sometimes that means, as it should, bringing them new music, new programmes and new styles. The BBC has to embrace diversity the whole way down; there has to be diversity in form, diversity in programming, and diversity in the people who make the programmes, and I do not think that that has been embraced enough.

It is happening for cost reasons, because, obviously, it is much cheaper just to put on a playlist than it is to employ a researcher to go out to gigs three nights a week and bring back new music. However, does it benefit our culture? I do not think that it does, at all. Obviously, music is something that Scotland does particularly well and that goes out to the rest of the world. That, again, points to the BBC’s role as a local and cultural catalyst, and it needs to embrace that role far more than it currently is.

The Temporary Convener: Back to you, George.

George Adam: I would not be one to say that Billy Sloan should not be on the airwaves—I have been listening to him since his days on Radio Clyde, too.

However, that was the argument that I was making. I was looking at this not just from the point of view of news broadcasters and so on; I was talking about new bands and new music, too. It should be all about asking, from a cultural perspective, "What is Scotland? What are its various parts?" Are we not losing part of that when we lose these shows?

Professor Higgins: We are. As you will be aware, there has been quite a large petition, and it was interesting to hear Neil Bibby say that he had been receiving communications on the matter. People do feel passionately about music.

That is why it is important to see things as an ecosystem, and not to look at the BBC as just one institution that looks after its own affairs. It has cultural relations across everything that we do in Scotland. I think that that needs to be reflected far more clearly in its remit and, indeed, in its programming.

George Adam: What concerns me is that my grandchildren seem to be more interested in K-pop than they are in anything else, but that is a country that has spent quite a bit of money on culture over the decades. Maybe there is a lesson for us there.

Professor Higgins: I cannot completely disagree. A lot of things have happened in the media industry in South Korea.

Another aspect that I should mention, and which I put in my report, is that there is a lot of media and content out there that BBC Scotland does not broadcast and that it could show for very little money. For example, our short films do extremely well; they play at Sundance and other film festivals. However, unless you went to those festivals, you would not see them. It would not cost a lot to put them on.

It is also important that we broaden our sense of news so that we see ourselves as a small European nation. This is where I would agree with my colleague about MG Alba. "Eòrpa" has, for a long time now, been positioning Scotland as part of Europe, but you would be hard pushed to find that sort of thing in the news reporting on BBC Scotland. It is all about placing us and asking: this is how we do things in Scotland, but how do they do them in Denmark? How do they do them in Sweden?

In fact, it goes the whole way down to European co-productions, which, again, is something that MG Alba does well; it pulls in extra funds from other broadcasters, working with S4C, RTÉ and so on. BBC Scotland could be doing that, too. I have done two European co-productions, and there is no reason why BBC Scotland could not be part of that wider European broadcasting commissioning system in which you take some money from Finland or from Denmark, and create programs that are shown both here and over there. For me, that has a real role—

George Adam: Why does BBC Scotland not do that? After all, that is the modern way, particularly with television production; you get a partner and you make the programme. Why does it not do more of that?

Professor Higgins: You would need to ask BBC Scotland that. It is quite clear that the direction of travel for BBC Scotland has been towards formats. They are cheaper and, in some ways, better for local producers, because they return. However, with regard to what I would see as cultural representation and a sort of sophistication about who we are, the types of stories that we tell and the way we tell those stories, it is disappointing. All those other smaller broadcasters do co-productions all the time. Therefore, it is really a question for BBC Scotland. That is a job that somebody should have.

Professor Beveridge: Of course, there are two significant ways in which the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament could help broadcasting in Scotland. One is to give more money to MG Alba; and the other—I might be punching a bruise here—is to go back to "Platform for Success", the report by Blair Jenkins that was published in 2008. Its recommendation that a Scottish digital network should be set up was adopted unanimously by the Scottish Parliament. My understanding is that there is nothing in law to prevent the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government from setting up a Scottish digital network, getting the approval from Ofcom and going ahead with that investment in the creative industries in Scotland, but that did not happen, and that was a missed opportunity.

Professor Happer: I agree with everything that has been said. Another good example of a successful adoption of an area and making a name for it would be Danish and Scandi drama, which is seen as a global success. Again, it has had an awful lot of investment, and I think that we need to look at the BBC over the past 10 or 15 years as a weakened institution. The mid-term settlement from the coalition Government in 2010 was completely outside the charter renewal process, which is a 10-year process, and was very politically motivated, as it took place in the context of austerity. It imposed a range of new financial responsibilities on the BBC and weakened it politically as well, because it was implemented in response to issues that I do not want to get into involving the history of the weapons of mass destruction controversy, and so on. The BBC has been weakened and has progressively come under attack from successive Conservative Governments. It does not feel like a very confident

organisation right now, and the events of the past month or so have not helped in that regard.

There are questions of politicisation, but the issue comes back to the funding model. The BBC is not looking like a self-confident institution right now, but it also does not have in place the financial structures that would enable it to be one. Again, I come back to the licence fee, which is delivering reduced revenue to the BBC.

All of those things are interconnected. Denmark has really invested in the drama, and I do not doubt for a minute that South Korea has, too, although I do not know the details of that. Where can such funding come from? There has to be an intervention. We must look at the funding structure again. The settlement has to be more generous if we really want the BBC to do all of the things that we want it to do.

The Temporary Convener: Professor Beveridge, you equated the TV licence with public service broadcasting. However, Channel 4 has been a hugely successful public service broadcaster, and it is not funded through the licence fee.

Professor Beveridge: No—it does not receive funding from the licence fee. It is owned by the Government or the people but is funded by advertising.

The Temporary Convener: It is a public service broadcaster, so there are other models.

Professor Beveridge: Yes. However, I do not know of anyone who thinks that the BBC should take advertising, because the BBC's competitors do not want it to.

The Temporary Convener: Oh, well, I should introduce you to some people, because I know that there are quite a lot of people who think that there might be scope for sponsorship in the BBC.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): Good morning. For the purpose of today's meeting and the rest of the inquiry, I draw attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that I am an associate member of the National Union of Journalists.

On charter renewals, all the witnesses have talked about BBC Scotland having a greater level of autonomy—Professor Happer mentioned that, and Professor Beveridge talked about the idea of having a federal BBC. There is a range of scenarios that we could get into. There is a spectrum with regard to the extent to which we want Scotland's distinct identity in the BBC to be expressed and the different ways in which it could be expressed.

I remember making similar points in the run-up to the 2014 referendum—that feels like at least a generation ago now. At that time, I talked about a way of separating the question of the BBC's status from the constitutional debate. I do not think that I used the phrase "federal BBC", but I said that, if decisions about the charter and changes to the BBC were subject to co-decision making by the nations of the UK or of these islands, you would have a multinational broadcaster, even in the context of Scotland in the union, and it could continue to exist and serve the different nations even if Scotland became independent.

If we were to go down the route of having greater autonomy or a federal BBC, would a change to the Scottish Parliament's wider role in relation to media regulation be required? Could we have a federal BBC with Ofcom's responsibilities still being entirely reserved, for example? Does the debate need to be wider than the BBC when it comes to the role that Scotland and its governance structures would have in shaping the media landscape?

Professor Beveridge: The point is well made. When Ofcom was initially set up, it had people on its main board who were described as partners, and the traditional policy of having representatives of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England was not in place. Over the past decade, it has changed that, but I agree entirely that Ofcom should take its responsibilities more seriously.

As I think that I said in my submission, I want to see at least two members representing Scotland on the BBC board and, now that I think about it, on the Ofcom board, too. One should represent mainland Scotland; the other should represent the Gàidhealtachd, so that there is enough attention to inclusion, diversity and a range of voices.

My next point in my submission was that the people at the top of those organisations should represent the citizen's interest, not only the consumer's interest. Let us remember that Ofcom's primary duty under the Communications Act 2003 is to take account of the "interests of citizens". This will probably not go down terribly well with Ofcom, but if I had the money, which I do not, I would be tempted to take Ofcom to judicial review, because I do not believe that it has treated its citizen interest duty as distinct from its consumer interest duty over the decades.

Patrick Harvie: If you set up a crowdfunder for that, I will contribute.

Do others have responses to the question about the degree of autonomy that BBC Scotland could or should have and how that relates to the wider regulation of the media landscape?

Professor Happer: I probably do not know enough about Ofcom's governance structure, but my perception is that it operates quite similarly to the BBC, in that the nations and regions are kind

of an afterthought when it comes to the extent to which Ofcom Scotland representatives feed into overall decision making.

To come at the question slightly backwards, the discussion raises really interesting questions about BBC governance, given the recent controversies about political appointees to the BBC board and the governance structure. In the submissions that I have read so far, we have all talked about that. Those political appointments are based on Westminster politics. I do not know the degree to which MSPs are consulted on or asked whether they want to make recommendations on who sits on the BBC board, but I can guess the answer to that. The way in which that translates on the board is that you tend to have the "Scottish person".

The sense is that we might have to think about a governance structure in the future. I certainly do not know what recommendations will be considered, but some of the recommendations that are suggested in the briefings that I have reviewed involve rethinking the governance structure to bring in members of the public and industry, rather than relying on politically appointed members. Perhaps there is an argument for a Scotland board that can make decisions and be answerable in respect of BBC Scotland as an autonomous institution; that is something to think about.

I do not know the degree to which the BBC governance structure is being looked at. I am guessing that that will happen to some extent, but I do not know how innovative and ambitious such a reworking would be. However, one way for BBC Scotland to engage in more autonomous decision making would be to have a board that was directly answerable to the people who work at BBC Scotland. That would have ripples for all broadcasting in Scotland, because the BBC is at the heart of it.

09:30

Professor Beveridge: It brings us back to groundhog day. Lord Beveridge, in his report on broadcasting, said:

> "There needs to be 'federal delegation of powers' in the form of a Broadcasting Commission for each constituent country".

That was in 1951, and we still do not have that.

Patrick Harvie: A broadcasting commission.

Professor Beveridge: That is what he said—a broadcasting commission. It was a majority report, but, in 1951, the late Lord Beveridge said that we needed to have a different structure for the BBC.

Patrick Harvie: Forgive me, but what would be the role of a broadcasting commission?

Professor Beveridge: It would look at funding. In my judgment, there needs to be an independent commission for funding, but a commission would oversee the management and delivery of Scottish content for Scottish viewers and listeners, and for those across the UK, too.

Patrick Harvie: So it would not carry out some of the functions of the current BBC, but the political decision making by ministers and Parliament would perhaps be separated out.

Professor Beveridge: Yes. If you had a federal structure inside the BBC, it could be a board that sat above the executive. It would be a bit like the BBC Trust, which, if you remember, used to oversee the BBC.

Patrick Harvie: I am thinking about all this in the context of where we are and how the wider landscape has changed. Decade after decade for almost a century, we have been having these debates about the BBC charter, its renewal and so on. In the early part of that period—and certainly through the 1950s and the decades when I was growing up—the BBC was a dominant beast in the media landscape in both its economic activity and its agenda setting. However, that is not the case any more—the BBC is, in some ways, swimming against the tide. I am in danger of mixing my metaphors too much, but its dominant position is, if not over, then certainly ending.

Professor Beveridge: I am not entirely sure about that, if I may say so. If you look internationally, you will see that the BBC World Service is still held in very high regard. As I have said in my documentation, I met a guy at a conference many years ago who said that the BBC World Service should not be trusted to the British, because he thought that it was important. The only thing that I would add is that the BBC World Service should not be funded by the licence fee payer.

Patrick Harvie: I take the point about the regard in which the World Service and the BBC more generally are held. However, I think that we have to see its drama production, for example, in the context of the massive streaming platforms that are putting huge amounts of money into content that they know will have a global reach and a global audience, instead of necessarily telling national or local stories.

The BBC is still a massive news-gathering machine and yet, as with STV, it is not able to provide the local news content in which I think a lot of people would have the trust that you say has been damaged. Indeed, in its news content, the BBC is, in my view, not setting the agenda any more; instead, it is reacting to the context in which it sits, which is dominated by platforms that share openly racist, far-right and conspiracist content

and by algorithms that push that stuff at people rather than any proper editorial content. In fact, the BBC ends up responding to that context to the extent that GB News pundits are being put on as though they were part of the legitimate commentariat, instead of the far-right cranks that they would have been dismissed as in previous decades.

The question that I am trying to get to is this: in looking at charter renewal, are we making a mistake in thinking that we can simply fix the BBC, without fixing the media landscape and taking a more responsible approach to media regulation more generally, including the streamers, the online platforms and the other places where people think that they are getting news content, when in fact they are getting whatever Elon Musk is deciding to push at them?

Professor Beveridge: I would like streamers and platforms to be properly regulated, but that is a wider issue.

This goes wider than just news and journalism. At a conference that I was at last year, the man who was in charge of "Mr Bates vs The Post Office" made the point that it had made a financial loss, because it could not really be sold enough internationally.

Patrick Harvie: I think that he also said that they would not even pitch it now.

Professor Beveridge: That is right. I note that ITV has now picked up a programme about the blood scandal that was rejected by one of the streamers.

You are absolutely right—this is all about patterns of news consumption and changing technologies, and the fact that not only Scotland but Britain is a very small player in the global marketplace. My view is that the Scottish Parliament and Government, and the UK Parliament and Westminster Government, need to get their act together and start regulating and planning for a better infrastructure to support the values and practice of public service broadcasting.

Professor Happer: I absolutely agree with Patrick Harvie's point. Let us be honest: in 20th century media, the BBC in the UK was the hegemon. It was the centre of the media landscape, was pretty unchallenged and was setting the agenda. It was quite a narrow agenda, though, and you did not have access to all the alternative perspectives.

For a brief period in the early stages of the internet—the internet has gone through a range of stages—there was almost a more open democratic space. However, you are absolutely right that what we have seen in the past five years, perhaps, is the corporate capture of the internet and, because it is an attention economy, the very worst of the worst rising to the top. That is the business model of the platforms—it is not an accident that they look like that.

As for where the BBC—or, indeed, other broadcasters, mainstream journalists or whoever—might sit in that, I actually think that, although it might not sit at the centre or set the agenda as it once did, its role is becoming ever more important. My work involves speaking to audiences for news, and I know that people find the environment incredibly confusing and confused, and they do not know where to go for trustworthy information. They are really looking for something that presents itself to them as doing exactly what public service media should be doing. In other words, instead of being reactive, as you have said, it should be proactive in producing the best and most accurate account of information.

I agree with your other point, too. We have already discussed the importance of media literacy programmes, for example, in directing people to particular sources and educating them on the nature of this very constructed and corporate environment that is trying to pull their attention into the darkest of places. However, that is the landscape in which they are immersed. If you were trying to change people's dietary habits, you would not only educate them on the best things to do but look at the food environment and the types of foods available to them, because there are structural barriers there.

Patrick Harvie: It is about supply, too.

Professor Happer: You need a pincer movement—you absolutely have to do both things.

In some of the digital literacy approaches, there is one thing that is probably a problem, which the BBC and other broadcasters and journalists have to think about with regard to fact checking and sending news audiences back to sources that they might trust. If they do not trust the sources that you are sending them back to, because they feel that there is a political agenda, you will have wasted your time. It is not enough just to say, "We need to go back to mainstream news, because journalism has all these different checks and balances that your social media and news influencers don't." People have to believe that news is serving their interests.

The fact is that news has to adapt politically to a changed environment as much as it has to adapt to a changed technological environment. However, I agree completely with your point; we need education on one side and regulation on the other. The two things have to go together, or it is not going to work.

Patrick Harvie: Do I have time for a final question, convener?

The Temporary Convener: Yes, of course.

Patrick Harvie: I want to ask about something a little bit narrower and more prosaic. The submissions contain a number of specific proposals on charter renewal, one of which relates to the BBC selling advertising or using paywalls. I am not immersed in this myself, but as a viewer, a listener and a reader, I would say that my instinct would be to recoil from that a little bit. However, I am curious about whether you think that there are any such models that the BBC could use in ways that do not rub up against the expectations of what it ought to be. Is there any way in which those models could be legitimately used?

There is also a proposal to include in the BBC's remit the responsibility to promote economic growth. In relation to its generation of content, its skills and its investment capacity, there might be an argument for giving the BBC an economic remit, but is there a danger that that would feed into its content and editorial choices instead of its being seen merely as a statement of how it creates and stimulates economic activity in broadcasting?

Professor Beveridge: Well, those are good questions. If I were being asked to place a bet on this, I would say that I think it is likely that the BBC might go down the road of charging for archive content, which would be behind a paywall. Whether that would be good or bad is another matter.

Patrick Harvie: I have already downloaded the classic-era "Doctor Who", so I am safe there.

Professor Beveridge: As for your question about that change to the remit bleeding into the content, I am not sure that that would happen. I do not have a problem with the BBC being asked to contribute to economic growth and spreading the licence fee—its expenditure—out across the United Kingdom, not just keeping it within the M25. It made a lot of progress on that in previous years; it just needs to emphasise and develop it.

Patrick Harvie: Do you think that that sort of thing can be defined in a way that restricts it to the BBC's economic activity, instead of its content with regard to issues around, say, economic growth being affected?

Professor Beveridge: Yes, I think so, because it is about jobs, not just representation.

Patrick Harvie: Do any of the other witnesses have any views on those questions?

Professor Higgins: With regard to the economic model, I think that it is, to a certain extent, a question of quality. The BBC sells its programmes internationally through BBC Studios, and it does well from that; the better those programmes are, the more they will sell.

I am quite against any sort of fee within the UK itself. Internationally, people could pay a subscription for the BBC, but I think that, as my colleague has said, it is like a universal health service. We have just been talking about media literacy, and it is absolutely vital that the BBC holds on to that credibility. The BBC enters into our children's lives through BBC Bitesize and other forms of content from a really early age. To my mind, that is a good thing, but what it then needs to do is go even further into the curriculum—which will be difficult for it to do, I have to say. After all, there are very few media studies teachers in Scotland. It is great that Screen Scotland has supported film making being brought into the curriculum, but alongside film making, which is being proposed as an expressive art, there needs to be media literacy and an understanding of how media can be manipulated. The BBC should be involved in that. In each opportunity arising from young people's educational journey into young adults, the BBC should be present as the honest broker. If that means calling it to account when it makes mistakes—and it will make mistakes—that is fine. The fact is that nobody else plays that role, and I do not see anyone else being able to do so.

The streamers themselves should be paying a levy. They come here and make high-end television—which is great, because it brings money in—but then they leave again. As a result, it is often feast or famine for people in the industry. The streamers should, through a levy, be putting money back in for indigenous productions.

As for regulation and the sort of media hellscape that you have talked about with regard to Twitter—or what one of my colleagues calls "the Nazi bar" that it has turned into—I hate to say it, but we have lost some strength in not being part of Europe in the same way that we were, because you require the European bloc for that kind of regulation. This goes beyond any one individual country; we have weakened our hand in that respect, and the UK—and Scotland, if it can—should be trying to get back to and involved with that form of regulation again.

There are a number of elements to think about, and you have put your finger on the tensions, but the BBC has to hold its ground. It cannot capitulate and become the same as the commercial operators, because that is not its remit, and neither should it be.

Finally, I want to make a point about something that is not very present in the green paper on governance. It opens with a clear statement on the BBC's role in telling "our national story", and I think that it is really important that that is challenged. Its role is to tell several nations' stories—that should be in the plural, and it should be embedded at the

very heart of this. It should be made clear that we are a country—a union—of nations, and that can then be followed through into the other positive things that it is doing when it comes to dispersing the money that is spent, with the new centre in Birmingham and so on. It has to be built into the culture of the whole organisation.

Patrick Harvie: Thank you.

The Temporary Convener: Thank you. [*Interruption*.] Oh, sorry, Professor Happer—you wanted to come in.

Professor Happer: I just wanted to pick up on Nick Higgins's point about younger audiences and a potential role for the BBC, if it is not playing the agenda-setting role that it used to play or if it is not going to be absolutely at the heart of things as it was.

This relates to the point about regulation, too, but I think that all of this has to be seen in a global context with regard to the discussion of the banning of social media for young people, and the real moves to take younger audiences—younger social media users—away from a reliance on those kinds of sources and away from the sort of horrible landscape that you have described.

09:45

I wish that I had caught the discussion on Radio 4 the other day about a new survey of generation alpha, which is the under-15s. Basically, it has done a lot of work with the under-15s, who are now turning away from the digital landscape and reinvesting trust in parents, teachers, carers and all sorts of people in the community, because they have just given up on digital. They do not know who to trust, they are so confused and they do not like it. Of course, every generation reacts against the previous one, which was gen Z, who are so immersed in that area and all the damaging impacts that it has had. There are lots of discussions going on and, in the context of all those discussions, the BBC should be moving into that space, because that is where a public service media provider can play a crucial role by talking to audiences at that early stage.

I think that I can see a phenomenon coming through in my focus groups. It is not well established yet, but there is a slight trend of people in some of the groups that do not trust the BBC saying, "Actually, although I do not really trust the BBC, everything else is so terrible that I am going to go there anyway." People are finding it so difficult to navigate the digital media landscape.

We have not mentioned artificial intelligence much, but I am sure that you will hear more about it as you go through the inquiry. AI is absolutely going to ramp things up. You have probably read about examples of deepfakes. There was a recent example of a deepfake AI-generated video of a Tory MP saying that he was moving to Reform. If something like that is released during an election campaign, it will be disruptive to our democracy.

That is where public service media is more crucial than ever, but there is a bit of work to do to bring people back. Young audiences and their engagement with digital media is an interesting area of discussion.

Patrick Harvie: That is really interesting. Thank you.

The Temporary Convener: I apologise to my two colleagues to my right, because we only have a few minutes left, but I promise that you will be the first in in the next hour. Neil Bibby will go first, and then Keith Brown.

Neil Bibby: We mentioned the tensions regarding what the BBC needs to deal with. Earlier, I raised the issue of axing radio shows such as Billy Sloan's and Iain Anderson's. We have seen a decline in support for the licence fee and for paying the licence fee. Is there a danger that the BBC is chasing a younger generation or a younger audience to the detriment of its loyal listener/viewer licence fee base? Do you think the BBC is going to get that balance right?

I heard Professor Higgins loud and clear when he talked about the importance of audience diversity and programming. When the BBC says that it is changing these programmes because it is going after a younger audience and modernising, does it know best in terms of the changes that it is making? It would be interesting to get the witnesses' thoughts on whether the BBC is making the right choices.

Professor Higgins: I have some sympathy for the BBC's challenge in that regard. It is the same for all the broadcasters. I think that the BBC is trying to have both audiences; I do not think that it is losing one.

One of the most successful things that the BBC did in recent years was the creation of the iPlayer, which allows young audiences to find things without feeling in some sense that they are going to the BBC. They search for and find a programme and they get it on a platform rather than on a linear channel. The BBC was ahead of the game with that and it can do more in that regard.

As I said earlier, one of the biggest challenges for BBC Scotland is the question of discoverability and how it gets to different audiences in different ways. The licence fee-paying audience that you referred to are the ones who are listening to the wireless and often watching the linear television, while the younger audience accesses

programming through the iPlayer and therefore should be engaged with via social media such as TikTok, Snapchat or whatever. The BBC needs to take both approaches. To be fair to it, it is trying to do so, but with very modest means. These are new types of jobs that will be done by people who are familiar with how those platforms work and know how they can intersect with the public broadcaster. Therefore, there needs to be more funding and commissioning power in that regard.

Although there are more commissioners in Scotland now than there used to be, it has long been said that there is scope for us to have more—the commissioners for BBC Four or BBC Three could be here, and with that comes power. It is partly in the green paper, but the BBC must recognise that a lot of its research and development needs to go around that question of discoverability, which will bring the audience with it.

Professor Beveridge: You make a very good point, Mr Bibby. Reflecting on my experience, I was 21 before I discovered Radio 4, and that was a long time before Melvyn Bragg came in with "In Our Time". I would go on record as saying that the BBC, particularly in radio, has educated me more than any university that I have ever attended, so I hope that the BBC continues to be successful in its provision, particularly on radio.

Professor Happer: "In Our Time" is a very good example of the way in which the BBC has tried to tackle that question of discoverability. It is a radio programme that has run for many decades, but it has found a whole new audience through apps on phones, where it is branded as a podcast. I mentioned that issue previously.

I come back to my point about "The Nine" being axed. As one of the small group of viewers of the programme, I thought that it was trying to do something very different. It had Scottish experts engaging with university experts and various bodies in Scotland—although it perhaps did not do as much outside the central belt as it could have done. However, although it was a successful news programme for Scotland, the problem was that it was buried in the electronic programme guide and nobody found it. It was not well advertised. Not as much work had gone into making the programme visible as had gone into making the programme. That was a big problem.

On whether BBC Scotland is making decisions to meet the needs of younger audiences and is taking for granted the audiences that it already has—which are the ones to which I have referred—it is inevitable that it is going to do that, because of the way in which it justifies its existence. When it prepares the consultation papers for something such as the charter renewal—when I worked in audience research, as I have said, we did that many years in advance—it looks at audience numbers. The principle of universality is problematic here, because diversity is a much more important principle.

Professor Beveridge: It is not only about audience numbers, as you know; it is also about audience appreciation.

Professor Happer: It is about all sorts of different elements.

Professor Beveridge: The number of people watching the programme might be small, but those people are very committed to that programme or that service.

Neil Bibby: I will leave it there.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I am sorry that our time seems to be curtailed; in my view, this is one of the most interesting panels that we have had and I do not say that to just any panel. Given what the convener has said, instead of asking all the questions that I intended to ask, I will make a few comments, and I am keen to hear the response to them.

I agree with Professor Beveridge. I am a supporter of public sector broadcasting; I believe that the licence fee has a real role and that educating people about its purpose is important. However, the question is whether the BBC is best placed to perform that function. Two points have come out so far: first, the extent to which the BBC is relevant and, secondly, the extent to which it is trusted. The last point that Professor Happer made was really interesting but also worrying. Indeed, young people these days might be reacting to what the previous generation has done and now look at public sector broadcasting, teachers or parents in a way that they have not done in the past. Most of us talk to school classes, and we hear them say that they are struggling to find out where they can get information that they can trust. They are particularly worried about disinformation. I am not sure whether it is part of the curriculum, but we get asked a lot of questions about that.

On the question of trust in the BBC, I will give a few examples of why there might be a lower take-up of licences in Scotland. We have mentioned the 2014 referendum, when we saw an influx of people from the rest of the UK—the serious people who came up to do the coverage, some of whom were Scottish. The level of ignorance about the situation in Scotland—I am thinking of one very high-profile Scottish journalist, in particular, although they had been based in England for a long time—was appalling.

I have put the point to the BBC on a number of occasions that it continually says, "Scotland has two Governments," and yet it will not scrutinise the

UK Government. Obviously, if there is a budget happening, it will look at that, but I would note as an example that there is a lot of coverage these days about ferries in Scotland—for fairly justifiable reasons—and yet there has been no coverage whatsoever from a critical point of view of two aircraft carriers that were built for double the budget and which came in well over time. Those boats were built in Scotland and the costs were paid for by Scottish taxpayers as much as by anybody else. I have challenged both Gordon Brewer and Martin Geissler on this in the past, and their answer is that no one will come on to discuss those things, which seems to me to be an abdication of responsibility. The question of trust is, I think, very important.

On a minor point, BBC news programmes are meant to stop at a certain time to allow the Scottish version to come on, but they frequently overrun. When I raised this with the BBC, its appalling response was that, "Yeah, sometimes something happens." That is not what I am talking about; the programmes overrun routinely, which shows contempt for the programme coming after. However, the BBC seems unwilling to respond to that.

As for accountability, things got so bad here that the Scottish National Party group in the Parliament invited Tim Davie to come and speak to us. It was quite unusual for someone like that to speak to a political group, but he had done it routinely for Tory and Labour groups at Westminster. He quite happily admitted to us that every day of the week in London, he would have senior Labour and Tory figures banging down his door, complaining about this, that or the other. That does not happen to the same extent in Scotland and, if it did, it would not carry the same weight. The question of accountability is important, and I do not think that the BBC is accountable in Scotland.

It was Professor Happer, I think, who asked about the extent to which the Parliament or the Government in Scotland are listened to. My view is that they are not listened to at all. Of course, the big issue is that, when the devolution settlement happened, it was made sure that broadcasting stayed a reserved matter. There is a reason why that was done, as we have seen over the years.

I really believe in the BBC, and always have done, but we are, to some extent, just dancing on the head of a pin. The first comments that were made this morning were about the print media, which I note is accessed by only 12 per cent of the population. YouTube has also been mentioned; more people—I do not know whether it is more young people or more people in general—will, when they put on the TV, go to YouTube, not to the BBC or any other channel. Therefore, we are, as I have said, dancing on the head of a pin. We are talking about huge trends, and it is hard to see how they can be resisted. The best course of action is to be more accountable, more trusted and more relevant.

Finally, on the point of relevance, something that we are seeing not just with the BBC but with other channels—Sky is probably the worst—is that, when they have a news review, they get in some vaguely leftish journalist and some vaguely rightish journalist in order to have balance. I have seen a couple of examples of this on Sky. Everyone routinely slates the Scottish Government, because all three involved in the programme, including the presenter—Anna Botting is an example—have happily agreed to do so, and there is no right of reply. That is the kind of coverage that we are getting at a time when only 12 per cent of the population read the print media. The emphasis is disproportionate—not only that, but the fact is that broadcasters take their lead from the print media. The longer that the BBC and other broadcasters are not trusted and are not deemed to be relevant, the more dangerous their position gets.

I know that I have made a number of points, but I will finish on this one. Professor Happer, I know that you did not say it this way, but you suggested that young people—or, indeed, teachers or parents—might go more to public sector broadcasters, because there is nowhere else to go. That is really dangerous, because the broadcasters' sense of complacency gets worse. They know that people are guaranteed to come to them because of the absence of a better alternative. That is a really dangerous position.

I suppose that my questions are about credibility, accountability, relevance and the way in which the BBC is trusted. I know that the BBC has made some attempts with fact-checking approaches and so on, but the fact that it is now so London-centric is, I think, driving the disaffection felt by people, especially young people, in Scotland for public sector broadcasting.

I know that there was a lot in there, but I would be happy to hear the panel's comments. Are you stunned?

10:00

Professor Happer: No, there is just a lot there. I almost want to say, "Go and read my book, please," but I will not.

I agree completely with what you say about the BBC setting its norms, its practices and its agenda in London and then that filtering down. There was the recent event at the BBC with the resignation of the director general, albeit that there is a whole discussion to be had about the politicisation of the BBC and the political appointees, but one of the

things that came out of that was the question of what impartiality looks like in the 21st century. In the 20th century, we had the BBC at the heart of it and you had a duopoly in the Westminster Parliament. There was Labour, crudely representing the left, and then you had the Conservatives, crudely representing the right, and impartiality, or balance, as it is sometimes called, was in essence giving both sides of that two-sided story.

Politics looks very different now. We could have Reform replacing the Conservatives as the second biggest party, and it could become the biggest. Who knows what is going to happen? Of course, Scotland opted out of that a few decades ago, but I do not think that BBC journalism has adapted to those changes very well. That is one of the reasons why when Tim Davie was asked about defending impartiality and what it actually looks like, he said that it is about the perception of impartiality. It is the objective fact of impartiality that is the important thing, but it was almost saying, "If both left and right are complaining, we are doing something right." I do not think that that is acceptable. The sense of that London-centric agenda and Westminster politics, even though we have had devolution now for such a long time, still filters all the way down, and I do not think that we have resolved that.

I agree that it would be really good to see whether the settlement could look at that again and that perhaps it is the right time to reassess it. I am thinking that the referendum would have just happened when the previous settlement was being discussed and researched. Perhaps that is a discussion that needs to be had, but I agree with the point. The more that it moves in that direction, the less it speaks to Scottish audiences, but they can go to the hyperlocal media, and to YouTube, Facebook, Instagram or whatever—it is mainly TikTok now, actually—as they are presenting themselves as news alternatives. I will stop there, because there is a lot to say on that.

Professor Beveridge: I know many independence supporters—I use the phrase "independence supporters" rather than "SNP members"—who were very fed up with the BBC at the time of the referendum in 2014. I understand where they are coming from, but I would often say to them, "If the BBC did not exist, or existed without its aspirations towards accuracy, which is more important than balance, can you imagine what the media landscape would be like in that context?" I do not think that there is anything wrong with being a critical friend of the BBC, but you need both, because if we did not have it, we would be subject to propaganda, possibly from Moscow about supporting Reform, blah de blah de blah.

Keith Brown: I agree, but I think that the critical friend has to be listened to sometimes, and that is the frustration that I have.

Professor Beveridge: Yes.

Keith Brown: On the subject of bias, there was a junior researcher in the BBC who had stood for the Labour Party years before. There was a huge hullabaloo when that was discovered, as if it was an example of bias, and yet on the other side, you have Andrew Neil, and the guy—I forget his name—who is on the board of the BBC, who was appointed by the Tories. The bias and the double standards are appalling.

To go back to Professor Happer's point, surely that is the biggest opportunity for the BBC in Scotland. If it can establish the trust and the relevance that it should have, that is its best defence against some of those other issues.

My final question, since we are short of time, is for Professor Higgins. It is about the cultural aspect, which we have heard quite a lot about in previous discussions, from George Adam and Neil Bibby in particular. It is about the impact of what STV is doing and what the BBC is doing in cutting "River City", and the extent to which that has cut off a route for people to get into TV production, apart from anything else. I do not know what the other term for soap is, but it is a continuing thing. It is long term, which means that people can be trained up, knowing that there will be jobs there, so "River City" going is a huge loss.

Billy Sloan and Iain Anderson being given the chop from Radio Scotland makes no sense to anybody I know. It makes no sense for it to do that. It is a question of the cultural impact.

I once revealed to the committee that, as a student in Canada, I was a campus DJ and over there, you were obliged to play a certain number of Canadian songs by Canadian artists every hour, just as the Canadian universities had to have a certain number of professors and teaching staff who were Canadian. The reason for that was what Trudeau called the elephant that lives next door; they wanted to protect their culture. Is there a role for that in Scotland at all?

Professor Higgins: To a certain extent, I think that there is. On your earlier point about coverage of the independence referendum, I want to make you aware that I know people in the BBC who were extremely frustrated about the lack of commissioning power they had at that time. I can be wrong about the figures, so they are sort of anecdotal, but my understanding is that about 80 hours of factual television were assigned to the coverage of the referendum, and within those 80 hours, less than 10 were assigned to BBC Scotland. As you rightly say, the majority of the coverage came from other parts of the UK, and

with that came a level of obvious ignorance that was cringeworthy for a lot of people in Scotland, and it really lowered the level of debate. We should have had a much more mature discussion about the possibilities and I think that the sense of distrust comes from that. However, I just want to point out that that was a commissioning decision, and a lot of people in BBC Scotland were not happy about it.

"River City" is obviously a loss because it is a regular income for lots of people, but it is also a loss in training terms because it is the only studio-based production that BBC Scotland has. Those in the film business often talk about having air miles in a studio, and the loss of "River City" means that there are no nursery slopes any more for new directors coming through. The only other returning series of similar scale is "Outlander" and it is also soon to finish, but very few Scottish directors work on "Outlander". "River City" gave a number of new-talent Scottish directors opportunities and they have gone on to do "Shetland" and become directors of feature films.

For us as educators, those losses are a real concern. I am pleased to see the new series that are being commissioned and some of the individuals that are involved with them, but I am concerned that two of the production companies have a London base. As you mentioned, there is a real concern that the criteria that allow for something to qualify as Scottish are not necessarily being followed sufficiently rigorously to benefit us, so those must be looked at again. There has to be more detail and transparency around those.

I said in my written submission that I believe that there is scope for running a drama pilot season on BBC Scotland. They do it in other parts of the world. It can be low budget. BBC Scotland has to be seen as a place for developing new talent, and it also has to be doing enough of it. It only needs one in ten to hit and bust through and it becomes something that it can sell internationally. However, if the BBC is making only two or three things, it is very risk averse, and that is how it is right now. It needs to take more risks and to share that approach with the populace, because I believe that there is an audience for that.

The Temporary Convener: That concludes the questions for our first panel of witnesses. We have heard some interesting opinions from Professor Beveridge, Professor Happer and Professor Higgins. We will take a short break before we continue with the second panel of witnesses.

10:08

Meeting suspended.

10:13

On resuming—

The Temporary Convener: We continue to take evidence on our short inquiry on Scottish broadcasting. We are joined by John McLellan, who is the director of Newsbrands Scotland, Nick McGowan-Lowe, who is the NUJ's national organiser for Scotland, and Catherine Houlihan, who is the managing director of ITV Border. You are all very welcome.

As is my prerogative as the temporary convener, I will kick off with a broad question, which I also asked at the start of the previous session. How would you describe the current state of broadcasting in Scotland? I will start with John McLellan.

John McLellan (Newsbrands Scotland): Thank you very much. For the sake of full disclosure, so that everybody is aware, I declare that I do some work for Sue Webber.

I am in a bit of a difficult situation, because I am here representing the trade association, and the state of broadcasting in Scotland is really something for the broadcasters to discuss. My interest and the interest of my sector is around how that situation affects us as opposed to around any advice that we might wish to give to broadcasters—or not—as to how they conduct their business.

All parts of the media face severe challenges just now, for reasons that have been explored in previous committee sessions and have been widely reported. My general impression is that media organisations are making as good a fist of it as they possibly can in very difficult circumstances that are extremely hard to control and that we have wrestled with for the past 25 years or so.

10:15

Although the BBC has its many critics, as was very ably illustrated by the previous panel, my sense of it in broad structural terms—its resources and whatnot—is that it is in a pretty good position compared with the rest of us. Compared with other news operations, its news operation is very well upholstered. I do not necessarily criticise that, but nonetheless, from news publishers' point of view, when we hear about the woes about resources at the BBC, we think, "Well, guys, this is where we have been for a long, long time. Good luck, but our sympathies are somewhat limited." STV is also in a difficult situation, but nobody is in an easy situation just now, and no news and media organisation does not face hard choices.

The Temporary Convener: Thank you.

Nick McGowan-Lowe (National Union of Journalists): Thank you for the opportunity to

speak to the committee. First, Scotland has a plurality of broadcast media. As John McLellan alluded to, broadcast media organisations face a number of challenges—some are specific to the broadcast industry, some are specific to news and some are faced more widely across all news media—and they grapple with consistent problems that, having dealt with employers across Scotland's media industry, I would describe as fundamentally centred on putting news where your audience is and finding funding to do so, which means different things to different news media, such as newspapers and so on. That involves discussions around whether to include advertising, paywalls or subscription models for online news, whether to put up the cover price of print editions and whether the markets can sustain that.

STV faces challenges that are largely based around advertising, but it also has a substantial production house that has suffered a slump in studio productions. It has found that it is competing for advertisers that now go to media that they would have perhaps not considered 10 years ago, such as Disney+, Netflix and YouTube. Those are all new markets for advertisers, which is a new challenge for STV to grapple with. It has found itself in a perfect storm, which is partly of its own making but partly due to wider economic problems. STV is going through problems, and—I will make no bones about it—it is looking to produce less news with fewer people because it finds itself in a financial hole.

With the BBC, it comes down to the licence fee. It does an excellent job and produces a wide range of broadcasts. When it goes through cuts in head count, as I believe that it did at the end of 2024 to early 2025, it looks into how news will be produced and puts serious thought into what it can produce with the staff that it has, to a greater degree than any other employer that I deal with.

Overall, BBC Scotland and STV are the two dominant employers in the broadcast industry, and Scottish viewers can benefit from a plurality across broadcast media.

The Temporary Convener: Thank you.

Catherine Houlihan (ITV Border): Thank you for the invitation to address the committee this morning. I speak for ITV Border, so I will perhaps not comment on the state of broadcasting in Scotland as a whole. From our perspective, the industry is going through a rapid transformation at the moment. We face challenging times, and the points about plurality have been well made.

What I can say from dealing with colleagues across Scotland is that we are well regulated and the standard of journalism is in a good place. I feel that ITV Border provides a good, trustworthy service to people in the Borders and in the south of Scotland region. In a transforming market, we are also trying very hard to reach into the areas where we know viewers are going so that we are not relying only on linear programming. We are trying to adapt to the changing world that we all find ourselves in. On the whole, we are doing okay at the moment.

The Temporary Convener: John McLellan, you mentioned the state of print media and said that the situation has been difficult. We have a lot of daily newspapers in Scotland, including the titles that are probably based in London and have Scottish editions, but does the BBC create some problems for local titles?

We have seen a massive decline in the number of local titles during the past 15 years or so. The local democracy reporter scheme was an attempt to stimulate local news gathering, and they do play an important role, but the problem is that people do not buy local newspapers anymore because they can get news online, from the BBC, free of charge.

John McLellan: That has been a constant issue for us as we try to develop a subscription model, which most publishers now regard as the future. It is very hard to build a quality subscription-based service when there is also a quality news service available free of charge. It has its many detractors, but the bottom line is that the BBC provides a high-quality service at the local and national levels. If you want to find out quickly what is going on from a medium that you regard as trustworthy, the BBC is going to be pretty much top of the list.

From our point of view, as a publisher, the offering of a trusted local or national service that the public needs to pay for is quite difficult when there is a free alternative. In the latest Ofcom report, it recognised for the first time that the BBC is part of the headwind that publishers face. It is not the only one—I would not say that at all—but at least Ofcom recognised that there was an issue that needs to be looked at.

The on-going problem, which has come and gone over the years, is the extent to which the BBC extends what it does and what the limits of its remit should be in the ways that it can serve its listeners and viewers to honour the licence fee but without distorting the commercial markets that already exist.

We heard about the need for more diversity—which is fair; I would not challenge that—but the issue for all parts of the media spectrum has always been that if a market is proven and the BBC feels the need to justify the licence fee by going into that market—because if there is an audience, it has to serve that audience—it has to go there. That in turn distorts the market, because there is a quality, free entrant into it.

We cannot row back entirely, but we would like the situation in which we happily co-exist with the BBC to be maintained. The local democracy reporter scheme was a product of that. It was recognised that we need to co-exist, but that public money was going into a system that was affecting the total landscape, so there was a question of how it could be more evenly distributed. The local democracy reporter scheme, in which licence fees are used to fund reporters who provide copy for the BBC and publishers who are members of the system, was the product of that. It has worked well. I do not think that there is any doubt about that. There is now a guarantee of coverage of local council affairs that would not necessarily be there if the LDR system did not exist.

We would like that to be expanded further, but, again, in ways that do not necessarily distort existing commercial arrangements. For example, there is quite a lot of pressure to extend the LDR scheme into court coverage, but that would have an effect on court agencies, and we have no desire to take away the business that the court services enjoy just now, and the very good relationships that they have with the court system.

The LDR scheme has worked well; it had teething problems, but it has settled down and now helps to maintain public access to quality coverage of local news.

I think that the BBC still feels the need to extend its local coverage, and we are at the point now at which, if the BBC were to do that, it would give us significant problems at a time when, for the first time in several years, we are feeling that real progress is being made in building subscriptions.

The Temporary Convener: In national or local titles?

John McLellan: In the middle, really. *The Herald* and its associated titles have now hit 50,000 subscribers, which does not seem like a lot when compared with BBC audience figures, but it is a significant milestone. In fact, *The Press and Journal* and *The Courier* are at 50,000, too, and they hope to reach 75,000 this year. Compared with the old circulation figures of the past, which are now ancient history, those figures feel small, but in this marketplace and digital landscape, it is a really important anchor for us to have such commitment from readers that they will take out a digital subscription for those titles. Despite all the things that you might have heard about the state of our industry, people are still committing to it—and underpinning it is a commitment to quality journalism, which both *The Herald* and DC Thompson have.

The Temporary Convener: But the continuation of the local democracy reporting service is a fundamental part of BBC charter renewal, is it not?

John McLellan: Oh yes, and its extension, too.

The Temporary Convener: At the minute, a lot of local newspaper content, both in print and online, is being driven by one or two people, and a lot of it is now syndicated. When you buy the *Stirling Observer*, for example, you get not just local news but all kinds of news—it is not quite the local newspaper that it used to be, if I may say so. If you took away the local democracy reporting service as part of the reshaping of the composition of the BBC charter, those titles would be gone, would they not?

John McLellan: Not quite. There is, I think, a common acceptance that the subscription model is the way forward. The *Stirling Observer* is, as you know, owned by Reach plc, which is now embracing the subscription model. The *Liverpool Echo* and the *Manchester Evening News* are launching their subscription models for the first time; they persisted with the free-to-access model for good reason, but it has now been realised that subscriptions really have to be the way forward.

I think that the LDR service will be part of a rebuilding. I would certainly like to see a rebuilding of the titles that you have referred to, and there is an opportunity to do that. However, if the LDR were to be removed now, it would cause significant difficulty.

The Temporary Convener: I want to ask two more quick questions before I bring in Keith Brown. Nick McGowan-Lowe, you say in your submission that

"The BBC charter is the only one in the UK that requires regular renewal. The NUJ believes a safer, fairer funding arrangement could be adopted."

What do you have in mind?

Nick McGowan-Lowe: I talk in the same submission about how it is negotiated behind closed doors. We have just talked about the LDR service, which I agree does an excellent job. It puts journalists in places where commercial interests would not be, if commercial interests were intended to reign, and it has benefited journalism in Scotland and across the UK. However, its funding is top sliced from the BBC fee. Two large chunks of money are taken off the top of the funding for the BBC—they are used to fund the LDR scheme and licence fees for the over-70s. Both those things have been allowed to happen for political reasons, and the money for them has been taken out of the funding for the BBC, instead of being provided through a fair and transparent process of charter renewal funding and so on.

10:30

The Temporary Convener: Is it the NUJ's position that you do not think that there should be a 10-year renewal of the charter? Is it that you want something but you do not want that?

Nick McGowan-Lowe: I think that a 10-year period gives continuity. It is similar to the Ofcom channel 3 licences. If you are making commercial investments, that is the sort of timescale that you need to look at for security of funding, but when it comes to the renewal of that funding, there needs to be greater transparency about the conversations that happen behind closed doors, which I refer to in my submission.

The Temporary Convener: Does that presume a continuation of the existing business model for the BBC?

Nick McGowan-Lowe: I am sorry—could you repeat the question?

The Temporary Convener: Does that presume a continuation of the current business model, or funding model, for the BBC?

Nick McGowan-Lowe: Broadly, yes.

The Temporary Convener: Okay—thank you.

I turn to Catherine Houlihan. Linear viewing—particularly among younger audiences—seems to be a thing of the past. There are fragmenting viewing habits across a number of different platforms or different brands, most of which are not British or Scottish in character. People are also getting their news almost in snippets in social media posts. While some things that are being shared are real, others are AI generated. For good reason, people are questioning whether what they are seeing is real and whether it is true. To what extent is that shaping how you approach your job of presenting news coverage specifically, and your scheduling more generally, at ITV Border?

Catherine Houlihan: Scheduling is not something that we have control of at ITV Border, but from the point of view of news gathering, that is massively important. Last year, Ofcom said that 70 per cent of people now get their news online, while 68 per cent of people get their news from television. That is the first time, I believe, that it has tipped into more people getting news online than from traditional linear sources. We must react to that. As a commercial broadcaster, we need to be serving the viewer, and the viewer is now the user, wherever they are. Our priority is to provide trustworthy, impartial and relevant—and, in Border's case in particular, regional and local—news and current affairs for the viewer, so if they are on TikTok or are looking on the website, that is where we need to be.

At ITV, we approach this across all the regions, so there is an economy of scale. We have teams that specifically do social media coverage. There is then the liaison from the local region where we provide the content and the story. We say, "Okay—we think this will work," and the experts within ITV will target that in the right platform. I think that everybody in the industry is currently trying to work out how to be everywhere that we need to be.

With regard to the attention span that you mentioned, you are right that there is very much a scrolling culture, but we are also seeing that there is an audience for quality reports in written and video form and, in particular, for quality reports from specialist correspondents. There is a real appetite for reports from people who have a specialist interest in an area who are sharing their knowledge and giving their take, so I do not think that people are losing a desire not only to know what is going on in the world, in their region and in their nation, but to understand the reasons for that and the surrounding context as well.

The Temporary Convener: So people will tune into ITV Border to hear what Kieran Andrews has to say about what is happening at Holyrood.

Catherine Houlihan: If they have any sense, they will. [*Laughter.*] I know that we laugh, but that is so important. Kieran's online blogs also do well for us, because he knows his subject.

The Temporary Convener: Live events drive people to watch things together at a given time. I can think of very few events that people will come together across communities and across the country to watch, but they do that for sporting events. This is a simple question, but you will probably understand why I am asking it. Are you expecting a pretty great year for advertising revenues around the world cup?

Catherine Houlihan: Advertising is not my department, so I cannot make predictions on what revenues we might make. However, when Scotland qualified for the world cup, it was certainly the lead story on ITV Border, and I anticipate lots of coverage locally.

The Temporary Convener: Lots of people will tune in and consume the adverts along with the live TV.

Catherine Houlihan: Let us hope so.

The Temporary Convener: It has been put to us in relation to other broadcasters that advertising revenues have become weaker, and we were given a pretty lamentable story about what they are expected to be going forward, yet the world cup and the Olympics, which take place every four years, are global sporting events that people

consume together, so they represent a prime time for advertising.

Keith Brown is next.

Keith Brown: My questions are about broadcasting in Scotland, which is the subject of our inquiry. We sometimes get very involved in what is happening elsewhere, such as in the rest of the UK and in print media, but the inquiry is into broadcasting in Scotland.

Catherine, my first question is for you. One of the big sources of frustration for people is when the ITV, BBC or Sky network coverage—in other words, the UK-wide coverage—tells them that the health service is getting a certain amount of money or that something is happening regarding mobile phones in schools, but that has nothing to do with Scotland. You are in a unique position, as you straddle the border. Do you bite back at the bosses in London when ITV does that? How do you cope with it in your area?

Catherine Houlihan: There are two questions there, really. In relation to what the network ITV coverage is like, we work very collegiately across ITV news, both nationally and regionally. If we were to have a view that a network programme was somehow missing out an important Scottish angle or nuance, we would absolutely speak to colleagues in London. We know them and there is an open door. That is not a problem.

More locally, you are right that ITV Border is unique. We cover England and Scotland, and it is a porous border. We have people living on one side of the border and working on the other side, and people travel across the border for shopping, entertainment and so on. It is not as hard as you might think to cater to those two audiences. In ITV Border, it is now routine to say in a report, “This applies in Scotland”, “These changes don’t apply in England”, or “This is only relevant to England”. That was thrown into sharp focus during the Covid-19 pandemic, when we had reports with graphics telling people what they could do if they were in Scotland, what they could do if they were in England, and what the different rules were.

It is our job to make things simple, easy to understand and engaging for the viewer to watch. It would not be right to say that we find that easy, but it is not as difficult as you might think. We accept that that is the situation and we cater to both audiences. It is not just about reserved matters, because, for example, the court systems are different. We are used to saying what applies to people north of the border and what applies to people south of the border, and it is not very difficult to do. It is quite easy to achieve.

I found it interesting when, earlier, you referred to a lot of reporting being London-centric. Perhaps this is a bit parochial, but we feel the same in ITV Border, because if you are in the south of Scotland, things can sometimes feel a little central belt-centric. We pride ourselves on keeping our coverage relevant to people in our local area.

Keith Brown: Given that you seem to find it quite straightforward to make the distinction—I am not contradicting you; I do not know, because I do not live in that area—should we not expect ITV, UK wide, not to say things on its news programmes such as, “This is happening in health” as if it applied to everybody? If you speak to colleagues in London and tell them when they get it wrong, surely that should not be happening, or it should stop happening.

Catherine Houlihan: Well, it depends on what is happening. We are not on the phone every day, because it is not every day that I see it and think that there is something wrong with what we are doing. There is the space for a conversation to take place if I think, “You’ve got something wrong there,” but, if I am honest, I cannot remember the last time I felt the need to do that when watching ITV network news.

Keith Brown: I will have a look and will get in touch if I can find an example.

Catherine Houlihan: Please do.

Keith Brown: More generally, one of the issues that the committee is discussing is the opportunities that exist in broadcasting in Scotland for people right the way from sound engineers to actors, producers and directors, and the impact that, for example, the cutting of “River City” has had or the changes at STV have had.

Given that, very occasionally, we have had big streaming organisations coming to Scotland to do a blockbuster—I will not say, “Is there not a case for this?”, because it seems unlikely that it will happen—it strikes me that there would surely be a benefit to having a standing cohort of people in Scotland who could provide such services, whether camera folk, producers or directors, and a process by which people could get into that cohort through education. In that way, you could sell to streaming organisations the case for doing things in Scotland by saying that we already had such people here.

My question is driven by the fact that, as the committee has heard in evidence, we are losing people as a result of the cutting of “River City”. Because it is a continuing soap, that means that people’s long-term prospects are going. There is also what we are hearing about STV news in the north-east. It would surely be a great selling point if we were to help to establish a block of people in Scotland who were qualified and able, at a moment’s notice, to turn their hand to that kind of work if, say, Netflix wanted to come in and do a story on Kirkpatrick Fleming, to give an example

local to the Borders. Is there no way that such collaboration could happen between public sector broadcasters, the other mainstream broadcasters and the streamers? I put that to Nick in the first instance.

Nick McGowan-Lowe: Thank you for the question. I will be clear on the remit that I can speak to. You mentioned "River City" and so on, which my counterpart in Bectu would be far better able to speak to. You also talked about technical staff. Around a third of National Union of Journalists members are freelance, which I think is what you were referring to there. Having a strong freelance ability gives employers flexibility to cover events. For larger productions of the kind that you described, which would stray into Bectu's territory, it would certainly be a selling point for Scotland to be able to say, "We have this trained workforce."

To come back to news, if we take the example of how journalists get into the industry, news broadcasters currently provide many opportunities. STV makes a great deal of the fact that it has five bases around Scotland—in fact, it has six if you include Westminster—but the BBC has 14 bases in Scotland, 12 of which have journalists in them. That provides great opportunities. If you are a journalist growing up on Fair Isle, there is the ability to work on Radio Shetland. Because it is such a versatile and small station, there is the opportunity to gain a wide range of skills, and it feeds into the BBC elsewhere.

We have members who are graduates from Robert Gordon University, which has an excellent course; it has about 60 journalism students, and the university has a good working relationship with STV. The members who I work with can be mapped across from, say, Robert Gordon University to working at STV to working at the BBC and travelling around the country.

Yesterday, I was on the picket lines with a journalist at STV who had worked in all four of the main STV offices around the country. It is important that we have a workforce and an infrastructure that enable journalists to be fed into media organisations and to have equality of opportunity, wherever they come from in Scotland. We are in danger of losing that as a result of the STV cuts.

10:45

Keith Brown: I go back to my original point that we are concerned about broadcasting in Scotland, but I appreciate that you are coming at this from a journalist's point of view, so perhaps that was not the right question to ask you.

Nick McGowan-Lowe: Journalists also work in broadcasting. I represent members in STV News and BBC Scotland News.

Keith Brown: I understand that, but my point was about staff involved in broadcasting, such as camera people, sound recordists and so on. Perhaps it was the wrong question for you.

My final question is about some points that John McLellan made. I represent an area that includes Clackmannanshire and part of Stirling. In the area, we have the *Alloa & Hillfoots Advertiser*, which has no reporters in Alloa that I am aware of. I think that it is run in Dunfermline as part of the Johnson group and much of its content is done by a reporter who uses AI to generate it. I am not being critical of that, because that is the way that things are going to some extent.

My question is for each of the witnesses. Is broadcasting in Scotland aware of and, as far as it is possible to be, ahead of the way in which AI might impact on it? How is AI being treated?

Although I lament the fact that the *Alloa & Hillfoots Advertiser* has no local reporters, it might well be forward thinking to have somebody use AI in that way. Are there other examples of how AI is being used in broadcasting? I will go to John McLellan first.

John McLellan: I cannot speak for broadcasters because I am not involved in their business.

Keith Brown: I am talking about journalists as well.

John McLellan: As far as news publishers are concerned, AI is seen as a means of producing news quicker, and it can be used for relatively straightforward processes such as producing large numbers of small stories about planning applications and routine things such as making more readable documents that will not make particularly strong news stories but provide good public information. That is almost a basic secretarial task that AI can do, with the purpose of freeing up journalists to do journalism as opposed to essentially rewriting committee agenda items.

It would be remiss of publishers not to look at the opportunities that AI will present to maintain the flow of local information in a readable format, as long as there is a clear understanding that it will still require eyeballs on it and that human intervention is still an essential part of the process, even for something as routine as a straightforward story about somebody's back extension getting planning permission.

Nick McGowan-Lowe: I am familiar with the *Alloa and Hillfoots Advertiser* and its very good journalists, but many titles, such as the *Stirling Observer*, the *Perthshire Advertiser* and the *Lennox Herald*, are all in the same hub of Reach, with very few journalists.

Keith Brown referred to the pressures of AI on broadcasting. When AI was coming out several years ago, I made it my duty to ask every employer who I talk to how they saw AI going. The aspects that they focused on were equally as interesting as what they said. When I spoke to STV, it was not thinking about AI in terms of its workflow; it was thinking about its tolerance to deepfakes of its presenters advocating for commercial products.

In newspapers, where there is growing pressure to find content that costs less, the first of the two main trends is to share as much content as possible, which is why there is much less news about Stirling in the *Stirling Observer* and why so much content is shared across titles. You will find that in many Scottish local titles.

The second trend relates to the extent to which AI is used to summarise things, as John McLellan said. I take a different line from John's spin that AI frees up journalists to do other things. It provides cheaper content, but it is also more dangerous. There was an anecdotal case in England in which AI was set loose on a summary of court reports. The one thing that AI did not know was the statutory reporting restrictions that relate to alleged victims of sexual violence, so a name came through that was not picked up. AI also cannot get into a court or a council building; all that it can do is summarise what someone else has written.

One of the most egregious examples of the use of AI is in Reach, whereby every journalist has access to a rewriting tool called Guten. That tool is ostensibly used so that copy, or a story, can be taken from, say, the *Manchester Evening News* and used in the *Daily Record* or the *Daily Mirror* but rewritten in the house style. That stated purpose is disingenuous, however; the real purpose is to thwart the Google algorithm by making it think that several different stories have been written. That is because, when publishers publish the same story on several different websites, the algorithm chooses not to trust those websites. Therefore, rather than invest in quality journalism, huge leaps are being taken to circumvent the algorithms.

To go back to broadcasting in the BBC, we are starting to see summaries of maybe four bullet points at the top of a story that say, "This summarises the story" and "This has been generated by AI". The summary is properly labelled—it is flagged that an AI tool has been used—and it is looked over by an experienced journalist who understands the story. AI is starting to seep in, and we want to be closely involved in any developments in AI that take place in the BBC. We are also seeing AI seep in with regard to headline writing or summarising stories. As John McLellan said, the fundamental point is that there must be a journalist looking at the copy and taking responsibility for it.

Catherine Houlihan: We do not use AI reporting in ITV News. ITV has an AI policy and there is also a bespoke AI news policy. More generally, AI reporting is not yet fully accurate, so we need to be cautious about moving in that direction. Equally, it would be backward-looking not to lean into the future. AI is here, and my personal feeling is that there will probably be some uses for it in the future, much like the ones that John McLellan mentioned.

I will give an example. I would not dream of publishing an AI report—that just feels too risky. However, if you were to want a generic stock shot of a sunny day but you did not have one in your library, might you, in the future, get one generated by AI? Maybe. That is a personal opinion.

AI will continue to be a tool, and we need to look forward and lean into it. However, ITV certainly does not have any kind of AI reporting, nor would we, because trust with the viewer is absolutely paramount. Trust is an issue more widely across the industry—we have heard that in this meeting. People now cannot believe what were traditionally—and I would argue that ITV still is—credible, believable and trustworthy sources. Therefore, we need to do as much as we can to maintain public trust, and AI is not the direction that we are going in at the moment.

Keith Brown: This is my last comment—it is not a question. In 2002, the Scottish Executive held a consultation on being able to smack your children—it was a big consultation at the time. In Clackmannanshire, people voted to be allowed to continue smacking their children. The headline in the *Stirling Observer* was "Clacks backs smacks". I do not think that AI would give you that kind of individual headline. Anyway, that is all I wanted to ask.

Neil Bibby: We talked a lot in the first evidence session about modernising and advances in technology, and we are also doing so in this session.

Catherine, you talked in your submission about the efficacy of the operation at ITV Border. How do you ensure that further advances in technology taken forward by ITV Border do not result in fewer staff and fewer jobs in your organisation?

Catherine Houlihan: I am part of wider ITV, which takes a more strategic view of head count and such like. It would be misleading if I were to say that I have the control to suddenly halve our staff because we have AI coming in. However, I would say that we need to embrace what is coming and tilt into it. We have embraced new technologies by slightly changing the make-up of

what people do. We have stopped having more legacy—if you like—jobs and roles so that we can concentrate on streaming and on the website and social media. However, the fundamentals remain the same. We are a very lean company at ITV; there was not much fat to begin with. We are now repurposing what we do in order to tailor it to the new platforms that we have. Beyond that, a bigger structural view of head count would be taken at a national level.

Neil Bibby: When we talk about modernising broadcasting, we talk about changing what people do and moving with the times in relation to content and about the ways in which people consume content in terms of technology. Modernisation is definitely happening, and people need to move with the times. Nobody objects to that. The concern about modernisation is about the impact of AI and technological changes on jobs. Both John McLellan and Nick McGowan-Lowe raised issues about the impact of AI—Nick in particular laid out a range of concerns in that area.

Catherine, you said that we have to look at what is coming down the track. There are obviously huge advances in technology and AI. Is the solution to the issues that have been raised better regulation of the use of AI in broadcasting and the media landscape?

Catherine Houlihan: Regulation is important. It should absolutely be there. However, it is about asking what the regulation is for. It would not seem to be the case that any business would simply retain jobs and never change and never modernise; that would not seem to be a good business model.

The issue is two-pronged. Neil Bibby mentioned keeping up with the times, which we have been doing for as long as I have been a journalist. We always try to tilt our content to what is relevant and current. I am old enough to remember when any police investigation that used DNA technology was guaranteed a headline, because it was all new. We are constantly reporting and we always try to stay with what is current.

The question as to whether AI will replace jobs is one for literally every industry and the whole of society. It is probably a bit too big for me right now.

Neil Bibby: There are obviously wider questions and a bigger debate about AI. However, media broadcasting and journalism are a vital link to our democracy and to the need to tackle misinformation, and so it is important that we look at the issue carefully.

I do not know whether John or Nick want to comment on that.

11:00

John McLellan: There are two strands to it. In many ways, the answers are here—we have them.

As far as content is concerned, we have effective regulators for both broadcast and non-broadcast. The regulatory structures are blind to technology, which is a good thing. If, as Nick McGowan-Lowe illustrated, a story is inaccurate, it does not matter how it has been produced—it would go through the regulator. If the regulators maintain a technology-neutral stance, it is about the content. Is the content correct? Is it compliant or not? The issue of how it was produced is for those who have produced it.

The other side of this issue, which continues to be massive from our point of view, concerns scraping and the abuse of copyright in AI's use of original content to generate material for which the creator gets no benefit. Again, the answers are already here. We have a robust and strong copyright regime. It is just a matter of maintaining and implementing it.

We are, therefore, in quite a good place as far as regulatory and legal issues in AI are concerned. However, as you are probably aware, there is pressure to relax things to make it easier for AI companies to come in and use the information that is available, even if they do not own it. The challenge to the Government is to maintain the current regimes, because those are good and reliable, and not be tempted to weaken things because we think that some greater goal is over the horizon.

It seems to me that we are in a bit of a Klondike situation just now, as far as AI and data are concerned, and there is a rush to do something—to get our hands on it, because so much is coming over the hill, and to get in early. In the rush to do that, there is a risk that we will throw out a lot of good stuff. However, I think that we are in quite a good place when it comes to regulation.

Nick McGowan-Lowe: I disagree with John McLellan's point on the copyright issue. It is not the first time that we have disagreed, John. I hate to shock you.

AI models are being fed industrial quantities of books, photographs, images and video in order to create what they do. That is happening on an almost inconceivable scale.

There is a website on which you can check whether certain books have been used. Almost everyone I know who has written a book—at my age, everyone has—has found that it has been fed in.

As an example, let us say that, tomorrow, *The Scotsman* publishes a photograph for which I am the copyright holder. I can say, "That is my

photograph. I produced that. That is my creative work. I want to be paid, because I am the copyright holder." That is easy to do, because there is a linear relationship between the photograph that I took and the one that appears in the paper.

However, when people's work has been fed on such a huge scale to an AI large language model, image model or video model, there is almost no way to track back and prove that elements of your work have been taken. That creates a whole new problem.

We have got around similar problems in the past. I do not advocate for this but, at the launch of audio cassettes, a small fee was paid and went back to creators, on the basis that the cassettes would probably be used to take music off the radio, for example, and copyright would thus be infringed, but it would be almost impossible to track down the copyright infringer. Similarly, if you photograph a textbook in a library, you will find a certificate next to the photocopier that says that a small amount of money will be fed back to the creators of such works.

Those schemes were designed because you simply cannot track back where an infringer is. However, the idea that existing copyright law allows for the eventuality of knowing that your work has been used to feed an AI model that now has huge commercial impact and is owned by billionaires, and that any of that money would come back to creators through the current route, is very difficult.

John McLellan: If I may, I will disagree with Nick McGowan-Lowe disagreeing with me. I actually agree with him to an extent, in that the regulatory environment is a sound one. However, what Nick is talking about is the ability to track where the material is, and that is a technological problem. The technology needs to be sorted out, but the regulatory environment is there to deal with it. If someone can find out who has used their material, the copyright regime is there to be used. It is important that the copyright regime is maintained and not weakened so that, when the technological solutions are sorted out, they are drawn into it.

Those are the two different issues. Nick would probably disagree with me, but that is a different matter.

The Temporary Convener: We may have gone down a bit of a rabbit hole there, given the remit of our inquiry, but it is so tempting to do that, because there is such a wide range of different aspects that are of interest to us all.

Patrick Harvie: I do not think that the Parliament as a whole is adequately debating issues such as AI, intellectual property law and the ways in which they are fundamentally reshaping our society. There is a whole sweep of aspects and we could spend hours on a separate inquiry into them. However, I want to try to put the matter into some context. What we loosely call artificial intelligence, which is not at all intelligent, is only one of a range of ways in which the media, including journalism but also broadcasting, is being disrupted and changed. They include the streaming platforms, the social media platforms and changes to the ways in which people consume what they may call news, some of which will actually be news and some of which will not.

I am curious about, in particular, the NUJ's perspective on that. Although there is potential for new forms of proper journalism and good work including, for example, fact checking to combat disinformation, there are also real dangers that we, as citizens, will end up in a sea of disinformation, with some of us desperately looking for something reliable and many of us not knowing that there is anything reliable to reach for, and that journalists will find themselves in a period of even greater precarity, in terms of their working conditions, than they are at the moment.

You have mentioned the situation that many journalists are already facing. Is there not a danger that, unless we take a much more proactive approach to the regulation of broadcasting more generally—I am talking not just about the traditional broadcasters but about the proliferation of new technologies through which people are consuming content—journalism will become an even more precarious and insecure line of work at the very time when it is most needed?

Nick McGowan-Lowe: If we consider the big platform of the BBC, any link to a story that has a BBC web address or is on a BBC app brings with it the implication that it is trustworthy, because it comes from one of the most trustworthy news organisations in the world. The BBC owns the platform of channel 1 in the same way that ITV and STV own the platform of channel 3, and a lot of credibility comes from a news organisation having such infrastructure, in the same way that a news organisation can print newspapers and so on.

We are seeing two things at present. First, there are changes to the platforms through which people consume news. Secondly, it is now far easier for anyone to produce news on an equivalent basis to the BBC. For example, YouTube is widely used, but the BBC has no more prominence than any other content provider as a credible source of information on that platform.

If you consume the BBC's content on YouTube, you will see more of it, but that is not the same as what Ofcom achieved in, I think, 2024. On

connected digital televisions, you will see, as soon as you go in, the five BBC channels next to all the streaming services and links to their respective streaming services. Ofcom made sure that public service broadcasting was prominent and up there, that it was not dominated by or put behind the streaming services and that it was seen as equivalent to Netflix, Amazon, Disney and so on. I simply want to highlight, within the news media, the change in the platforms that are being used and the struggles that are being faced by broadcasters in appearing prominently on those channels alongside everything else.

I think that that addresses the first part of your question. Have I missed the second part?

Patrick Harvie: There is a wider question about the implications for journalism with regard to the service that it performs, as well as the experience of being a journalist and the precarity involved, and about the change in the relationship between who produces what people think of as news and how it is consumed. If people think of social media influencers in the same way that they used to think of journalists whom they trusted, that fundamentally changes the nature of what is going to be produced and who is going to be producing it. If we do not regulate the broadcast media more generally in a way that has not been done to date and go beyond the traditional broadcasters, is there not a danger that we will see not just the challenges that we are currently facing with regard to disinformation and the lack of trust from viewers and listeners, but the lack of any kind of secure career path for journalists? Those problems are going to be compounded, so surely we need to look at regulating broadcasting in a more robust—and, I should say, multiplatform and 21st century—way.

Nick McGowan-Lowe: It will be argued, perhaps by STV management or by the BBC, that they face certain regulatory hurdles when it comes to the quality of their news, what they produce and their output. Streaming services, perhaps, do not fall within the same remit; it is certainly something that individual podcasters, TikTok streamers or whoever do not face and, indeed, I think that it would be impractical to set out how that would be applied to individuals as opposed to anyone else. I would point out, though, that certain laws such as defamation are platform and individual neutral.

The argument is that the BBC has to produce quality news and still get it out there fast, but the checks that it has to go through mean that it will always be slower than, say, the news going out on Twitter or X. Of course, the news on Twitter or X, or whatever might be posted there, is probably going to be wrong the majority of the time. So, there are various things to think about. Who produces the news? What are they regulated by? At what point does Ofcom extend its regulation to other people appearing beside the BBC on different platforms and so on?

Patrick Harvie: I worry that we are still understating this. Can any of us imagine the furore that we would be in the middle of at the moment if the BBC were creating non-consensual sexualised images of people, including children, in the way that X and xAI's products are creating them? The gulf in the way in which we regulate the different parts of what is now a single media landscape is just extraordinary.

John McLellan: That is really a question for Ofcom rather than for us, but you are not wrong.

On the issue of influencers, I will just put on a different hat and say, as a member of the Committee of Advertising Practice, that I know that the Advertising Standards Authority is wrestling with the question of how to regulate influencers. It is a serious problem, and it is addressing it just now. In future, I recommend that the committee brings in the Advertising Association, if it is not already planning to, because it underpins a lot of the landscape that we face, which is the same one that ITV and STV face. Ofcom is at the heart of all the things that you are talking about, so you probably need to hear from it rather than us.

11:15

The Temporary Convener: Ofcom is coming in next week.

John McLellan: Excellent. I am glad that you are on to that, Stephen.

The Temporary Convener: I am only the acting convener.

George Adam: Funny that you mentioned Ofcom. Next week's meeting will be interesting, because it is as useful as a chocolate fireguard most of the time.

My next question is for you, Nick Lowe-McGowan; it is on STV North's position. Your submission mentions that the share price has halved in the first 12 months under chief executive Rufus Radcliffe. It is a talent for someone to manage to do that during the early days of being involved with a company.

You also said about the ITV-Sky takeover talks, and this was mentioned by Professor Beveridge, that

"in the event of such an approved takeover one outcome could be that Sky/Comcast also look to secure the remaining two licences with a takeover of STV, especially at the reduced price of (currently) £55m."

That is a perfectly realistic scenario. It could happen once it gets over the hurdles of the CMA, and it would probably have a similar process to go

through if it made a bid for STV. However, if we are talking about Scottish broadcasting and Scottish voices in news, that reality is that it will be worse than the STV North thing—I mean, we will be arguing about whether there will be an STV in Glasgow. How realistic do you think that prospect is and, if it happened, what would be the future of broadcasting in Scotland, particularly from the NUJ's perspective?

Nick McGowan-Lowe: I am grateful for the chance to talk about my members at STV without wearing thermals, as I was yesterday on the picket line in Aberdeen.

I am glad that you picked up on the situation that we are in. The proposed takeover of ITV by Sky and Comcast can be seen in two ways. One is that it is a reaction to the consolidation of media giants. However big we think ITV is, it is not as big as Comcast, Netflix or the others that it is campaigning about, so there is an argument that the survivability of public service broadcasting can come only within a larger organisation, given that there are fundamentally different economics in such organisations.

Our belief, which is based on talking to colleagues in the NUJ and others in the industry, is that the proposed ITV-Comcast/Sky takeover or "merger" could be considerably more advanced than has been put into the public domain, and it could happen soon. The timeframe we are looking at overlaps with the current dispute that we have with STV. You are absolutely right that that puts everything that we are fighting for into a sharper perspective, including the continuation of great local coverage by STV in the north and north-east of Scotland. All of that could be taken over by this much wider issue.

It is entirely feasible that, having spent £1.6 billion for 13 of the licences, a company the size of Comcast will not even blink about paying an extra 3 per cent to acquire the remaining two, particularly because of the economies of scale that that would create.

I happen to believe that, where we have public service broadcasting, it must be sustainable. In the longer term, STV is a sustainable business. It is going through a financial crisis at the moment and it is making some rather bad decisions and it is experiencing a very bad knee-jerk effect of trying to cut its costs, particularly in public service broadcasting, which it signed a contract on only a year ago.

Those are my concerns. In ITV, we looked at the possibilities for what would happen if STV were to be subsumed by ITV. I appreciate that that is a different question from the one that you were asking.

With Ulster Television, a certain amount of autonomy was maintained. STV is part of an ITV empire that is owned by an organisation outside the UK. I cannot help but look at that with a great deal of trepidation and wonder whether decisions that are made thousands of miles away will be in the best interests of the viewers in Scotland.

George Adam: The bizarre thing is that, until all this started, Comcast meant nothing to me, except for through some of the brands that it owns, such as NBC and Universal. It is a massive organisation and this will be a tiny part of what it is doing. What is important to us will not necessarily be important to it.

Nick McGowan-Lowe: Absolutely. My experience in the newspaper industry is that the further away the management sit from Scotland, the worse the decisions they make about the coverage of local journalism.

George Adam: Catherine Houlihan, does it affect you as well?

Catherine Houlihan: As I said earlier, I speak for ITV Border. There are two prongs to the issue: there is the situation at STV—it is not ITV's position to comment on STV—and, equally, in relation to the proposed takeover, ITV has confirmed that preliminary discussions are under way. There is not much more that I can say about that at this time, as I am sure that you can appreciate.

George Adam: I can hear the arguments that will be made when the CMA starts talking about ITV—they will be about the plucky Brits trying to fight the big international streamers. The problem is that, as Nick McGowan-Lowe rightly says, it is an America-based company that will be taking over, so it is part of the internationalisation of the media.

Professor Beveridge said earlier that he was concerned that anything that might have been influenced by President Trump might be of concern. Looking at the news in America automatically gives us some concerns about whether we will go down that route as well. No disrespect to ITV, but ITV's morning show, "Good Morning Britain", is very Americanised and it is completely different from other such shows. It would be concerning if we were to have that format throughout news in the UK. Nick, do you have anything to add on that point?

Nick McGowan-Lowe: I do not.

George Adam: John McLellan, is there anything that you want to add?

John McLellan: Not particularly—it does not really affect us.

George Adam: Since we do not have much time, I will leave it at that.

The Temporary Convener: Okay—we had a few more minutes if you wanted to take them.

Thank you to each of our witnesses--John McLellan, Nick McGowan-Lowe and Catherine Houlihan—for their interesting contributions this morning. With that, I conclude the meeting.

Meeting closed at 11:23.

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