Damian Collins:
Thank you very much for that generous introduction. I'm pleased to be here as Chair of the Culture, Media & Sport Select Committee, an honour I enjoy until midnight on 2nd May when the committee along with parliament is dissolved. And I will then throw myself in to the task of defending my parliamentary seat and working to secure a majority for the government. So I hope that I will be back and the committee will be back in probably June or July when the committee reforms and the parliament reforms after the election on 8th June.

I principally wanted to talk this morning about one of the suspended inquiries of the Select Committee which is the inquiry on "fake news". The work of the committee stops because of the election campaign but, unlike programmes of legislation, the committee can just pick up again its work after a General Election and continue with inquiries that have been stopped. So that the work of the committee isn't lost, and inquiries aren't lost simply because an election has been called.

But before I talk about that in this short parliament, this two year parliament that we have had it has actually been a very busy time for broadcasting. Today we will complete the Digital Economy Bill which should receive royal assent by tomorrow. So that has not been lost because of the early election being called. We've also had this small matter of a sort of within government: consideration of the future of Channel 4 and a consultation on the future of Channel 4 too. I'm pleased that the government has decided that Channel 4 will not be privatised. I think it's quite clear that Channel 4 is not a problem that needs to be solved. It's not been the case, as it was in the past where the government has looked at a privatisation programme, where a body that is owned by the state needs a big injection of capital to really get the organisation moving again. And privatisation is presented as the solution to that problem.

Channel 4 doesn't have that problem, despite many people predicting that the advertiser funded model of broadcasting was in terminal decline. Channel 4 continues to be very commercially successful, very competitive and an award-winning producer or commissioner of content. So it's clearly not a problem that needs to be solved. But I think if the government's consideration is that the Channel 4 remit will be protected and Channel 4 will remain publicly owned, but to consider what, beyond what it does at the moment, could Channel 4 do to justify being a state owned broadcaster. And clearly the commitment to broadcasting in the regions, commissioning content in the regions and from regional production companies is part of that.

There is a debate of course about physically where Channel 4 is located. I think that's important and I think to have a bigger footprint, physical footprint for Channel 4 in the regions, would be a really good thing. But I think the bigger prize is looking at Channel 4's commissioning of programmes. The idea of moving Channel 4 to Leeds or

Birmingham or Manchester is very different from the BBC relocation to Salford Quays. We're not moving production facilities, huge numbers of production staff. Channel 4 is a relatively lean and small organisation.

So I think the bigger prize is to consider how a bigger Channel 4 footprint with a regional hub could support a greater focus on commissioning from broadcasting companies and production companies in the UK regions. And I think that is something Channel 4 could do within its remit. And that would be, I think, the right direction for Channel 4 to take. But we will wait until after the election to see what the results of the government's consultation on Channel 4 are.

There was also of course the small matter in this two year parliament of the BBC White Paper and then the Royal Charter. In the debate we had in parliament where parliament approved the Royal Charter I sort of addressed the question of distinctiveness, which was one of the key questions that John Whittingdale had already inserted in the process, to ask, 'Is the BBC distinctive enough and Ofcom should have a role in determining distinctiveness.'

And I drew my inspiration from the famous Kenneth Clark series Civilisation and used his opening remark from Civilisation in which he said, "I can't define what civilisation is but I think I recognise it when I see it". I think many of us feel the same way about the question of distinctiveness at the BBC. It's very difficult to define what it is but we recognise it when we see it. But I think if we were to put that in sharper focus I think what I would say is, what distinctiveness is, is creativity. It is a mark of creativity in all of the BBC's output. And using its privileged position to be able to take creative risks that other broadcasters might not take.

So I think when we apply the rule of distinctiveness and when Ofcom is in front of the Select Committee in the future and questioned over whether the BBC is distinctive enough, I think what we should be clear about is this: is it being creative enough, is it taking enough creative risks or is it being too generic in the programming that it commissions? And I think it's right as well, and the questioning we've given Ofcom so far seemed to be trying to address this, we need to strike a balance between not adjudicating on individual items in the schedule. Not to say, is the BBC distinctive at 7.00pm on a Saturday night. But not also to take it in the complete round either. So we don't just look at total output and say, well the total output of programming is fairly distinctive. But we have to have a balance because you might find if you take Radio 1, that Radio 1 plays more music from more artists than any other radio station. But if most of that distinctiveness takes place when not many people are listening and at peak times it's fairly similar to what you get everywhere else, then that's not distinctive enough. So a balance has to be struck.

And one of the most interesting things when parliament comes back and we look at the work of the BBC and Ofcom we'll be looking at how they manage to get the balance right on looking at distinctiveness. But I'm quite clear that I think what distinctiveness means is creativity and being creative and more creative.

I wanted now to say a few words about the committee's inquiry on "fake news" because, you know, part of the debate on the BBC Royal Charter has been looking at also Ofcom's new role in assessing the impartiality and quality of coverage of the BBC. And I think whilst we often have heated debates about that, just as we do Section 40 and regulation of the press, the bigger issue I think facing the news agenda today and the distribution of news today does not come from the traditional broadcasters and the newspapers. It comes from the external threat of "fake news" which is effectively spam news that is infiltrating the system. And recognising that the distribution channels for news, be it broadcast or what we would call print journalism and the written word, for many people it's not through the main channels themselves but it is content that is shared and distributed on social media platforms like Facebook.

And the Select Committee decided we would take a big interest in this because we were concerned that the proliferation of "fake news" had reached such a point that there is often more "fake news" out there than real news. And in the investigation done by BuzzFeed looking at the US Presidential Election that showed that the top 20 stories shared by people on Facebook about the US Presidential Election were fake and were more widely shared than the top 20 stories that were real.

And therefore you reach a point when you say actually the level of this of "fake news" and also the use of technology to distribute this so widely and so quickly has reached a point where it is a threat to democracy. And that has to be taken seriously.

It you want an example also of the way "fake news" or misinformation around major events is spread very quickly you only need to look at the Westminster terror attack last month. Shortly after the attack took place Russian broadcasters were showing footage of a man dressed in Afghani or Pakistani dress holding a knife. And they were saying, this was the attacker, he used the knife to attack. But actually that was not a picture of the attacker. That was a picture of a man who had been tazored outside Buckingham Palace in 2013 but it was being presented by Russian broadcasters to immediately identify the man as being from an Islamic country, wearing Islamic dress and being the perpetrator of the attack. But that information was not only untrue, it would have been very easy to check whether it was true or not.

But you see an interest from broadcasters, you know, this case of Russian broadcasters and Russian broadcasters and news organisations have been very much in the firing line in the debate on "fake news". To get news out quickly and first and often, that news can be misinformation and incorrect. And I think when we look at "fake news" we have to determine what it is exactly. And what it is, I think, is news that is known to be untrue, where the entire premise of the story is false or the key fact that makes it news is based on a lie. What we can't do is seek to arbitrate between different forms of opinion based journalism.
We have a proud tradition of a free press and a free media and the obligations of impartiality and balance that exist with broadcasters don't exist in the creative media. But the right of people to have a strong opinion and to express it, is one that is clear and is part of being in a democracy. What is wrong and pernicious is where you take misinformation and seek to spread that as news.

So why would people do that? And I think there are two core groups. The first of which is potentially the most sinister and the most concerning and that is propagandists. Propagandists, and the concern is that many of these are linked to foreign governments or foreign political organisations, that are doing this for their own political ends. And that they use "fake news" to undermine confidence in public institutions; undermine confidence in the media to create so much spam "fake news" around reported new stories, but it confuses people online. It makes it harder to distinguish what is real and what is true.

You can see the motivation for some foreign governments and foreign countries, particularly countries that are not particularly democratic, in seeking to use this tool to demonstrate or paint life that in another country is less fair, less free, less open, less honest than people might have believed. So that living in the country that they live in, they're not living in a bad country and other countries are good, but seeking to use this tool of propaganda to make everyone look bad and to undermine confidence in the public institutions of the country where the "fake news" propaganda tool is being directed.

The other key group would be people, if you like, who are gamers of "fake news". They're principally doing it to make money. They're just using and exploiting the tools of virality that make the Internet work. Google and Facebook are set up to drive traffic. They make their money by getting people to use their sites and services and therefore they're set up to encourage and promote the distribution of popular content regardless of its quality. And people who game the system know they can make money out of distributing content like this.

Of course, I think the role of the propagandist is of more greater concern because in some ways there's a more sinister motive behind their actions.

I spoke about this at the Oxford Media Convention. I am pleased to see there has been some progress, although it may be small progress, made since that time. There's clearly been a focus now on the role of advertisers. As I said at Oxford I think this is really, really important. "Fake news" stories exist online and advertising for major brands, I mean even the government has been found against some of these news stories on some of these sites. And quite rightly these advertisers are now saying, we will not pay for advertising, be it through preferential rankings and searches, next to content if that content is "fake news" or messages of hate or other inappropriate material. And that is undoubtedly forcing the social media companies like Google and Facebook to act.

Facebook have taken some very small and early steps in trying to promote education and awareness amongst users of the risk of "fake news". And Google yesterday announced changes to its search algorithm to try to down grade "fake news" in its searches. Now I think these companies can go a lot further than they've gone. But what this shows is, rather like the debate around pirated content, it is often the initial starting point of these companies in these debates is to say, 'We can't possibly regulate the entire internet. You know, we cannot take down pirated content from every website

that seeks to promote it.' But then when they get in to the debate and they can see there's a huge public outcry and pressure from media and government and parliament to take action, they find ways of trying to take steps towards addressing it. So I think those steps are welcome.

But even though the Select Committee Inquiry in to "fake news" is paused and therefore we won't be able to resume that until the committee has reconvened and parliament is reconvened after the election I thought I would take this opportunity to announce what I think is my sort of manifesto for the war on "fake news". And it's really based around four key areas.

The first is responsibility and the responsibility of the social media platforms to manage better the content that is distributed through their sites. Now, obviously, for social media platforms content is usually generated and shared. This is why it makes such a fertile breeding ground for "fake news" because footage of a broadcast news story or a news story found on a blog or a newspaper, when shared between friends, adds a degree of trust. Even though the source of that story might not be an organisation you've had contact with before, if you trust the person that shared the link with you, you may be more likely to believe it.

The Channel 4 investigation on "fake news" showed that people find it very difficult to distinguish between stories that are real and that are fake. And there was a recent survey done by one of the teaching unions that showed that a third of students had submitted work which contained stories that were actually "fake news" stories but had been taken onboard and regurgitated by the students compiling their work. So this first area of responsibility I think is based around the responsibility of the social platforms that act against known sources of "fake news" to block or take down or downgrade "fake news" stories being shared.

They can do that from user referral which means they need to have enough physical resource in place to deal with user referrals and act upon the information that they receive. They can also do that by looking at the way their own platforms work. The platforms are set up to identify spikes in traffic and virality behind stories. And when they see a sudden spike in interest in a particular story they should act against it.

I think in an election period this is incredibly important. We have to recognise that the threat of "fake news" has not been satisfactorily addressed and that spam "fake news" from propagandists, in particular, could be used during the election period to undermine democracy. And big pushers in "fake news" around polling day, which people might find hard to address quickly enough to act against them before people vote, could be used to try to persuade people to vote based on information which is untrue.

So I believe companies like Google or Facebook have a social responsibility to act against "fake news" just as they have a social responsibility to act against messages of hate and illicit content too. And I think something for consideration in the next Parliament should be, as the German government have considered, is whether there should be an offence or failure to act if companies do not act against material that's been posted.

The second key area is education and clearly more needs to be done and probably through schools, as well, to educate people using the net to check the sources of news carefully, to be more questioning about the information that they receive; to learn about and understand what "fake news" is, just as they have to learn about and understand issues around cyber bullying and inappropriate contact online as well. The understanding and knowledge of "fake news" should be seen as being a major piece of people's digital education. And it's important to our democracy as well that people are informed in this way.

Of course, there's also a responsibility for the platforms to look at creating tools that make it easier for people to spot whether something is fake or not. Could these stories have a verification tag that show a story has come from a legitimate news organisation? Could Google do more? I believe they could do more to make sure that the organisations which are included in the search for Google News are organisations that are known to employ fact checkers or whether there is a clear route of redress if a story is untrue.

The third I think is really on sanctions. I think that we should look particularly at broadcasters and foreign broadcasters that have a license from Ofcom to broadcast in the UK. If we believe they're in breach of good practice and they are guilty of spreading news that is known to be untrue or dubious we should look at what the sanction should be against them. The ultimate sanction with Ofcom is of course to remove a broadcasting license. So far we've seen successful complaints against broadcasters like Russia Today but at a level where Ofcom doesn't feel that the ultimate sanction is in place. There should be a scale of sanctions that could be imposed against broadcasters.

I think that's important, not because a financial penalty would necessarily worry a company like Russia Today, but the reputational damage of being sanctioned by a body like Ofcom for distributing news that was known to be of dubious quality and not properly fact checked, is a power that should be more liberally exercised.

And the fourth and important area I think is about the backing of good content. We have to realise is that "fake news" is in many ways, ... we're fighting a way against the people that distribute it. There are tools that we can use around alerting users to its content, placing responsibility on the social platforms. So the way it's distributed. Looking at sanctions and fines of people involved in doing it.

But the key weapon in the war is good content, reliable content. And this is where public broadcasters in particular come in. I think maybe one of the reasons that Britain has been less vulnerable to attacks by "fake news" has been because there is still a residual amount of trust in news sources in this country and the diversity of news sources that we have. It is easy to check, you know, online or through a trusted broadcaster whether a story is being covered by them. If it's a breaking news story that's not being covered by the BBC or by another news organisation the chances are it may not be true. So people have that choice.

But I think what we have to be careful of here is that the business model of companies like Google and Facebook is increasingly dominating the media landscape. They are the biggest recipients of advertising. More money is spent on advertising with online platforms like Google and Facebook than is spent with other broadcasters and news organisations. It is increasingly difficult for news organisations to make fair recompense for their investment in their content through the way that it is distributed on these online platforms. This is taking value out of the system and ultimately value out of journalism.

So whilst part of the solution to fighting "fake news" is sanctions against the perpetrators, more responsibility for the platforms that distribute it and more education for users, the key fourth point here I think has to be is backing content and backing journalism. And that's why I think it's right that we, you know, through the Royal Charter reviews of the BBC, through the work of Ofcom overseeing public broadcasting for impartiality and fairness in public broadcasting of the news and for the debate on Leveson the responsibility of the press.

I think what we have to be mindful of here is the real issue is not necessarily the behaviour of these organisations, although we expect them to behave properly, but it's the world in which they have to exist where increasingly value is being taken out of their organisation by the online platforms they have to work with. And the proliferation of spam news and "fake news" which is gumming up the works in the system. And is leading to misinformation being spread very widely.

And that's why I'm just turning briefly to this issue of the debate on Section 40. I believe it's clear and this was the position that the Select Committee struck. We submitted our own response to the government's consultation on Section 40 and 'what next after Leveson' and we said we should be respectful of the fact that the press doesn't believe it should be regulated under the Royal Charter. But nevertheless, self-regulation of the press has to meet the principles and standards that Lord Leveson set out in his report, and the principal amongst those should be that ordinary members of the public have some fair right of mediation or redress or arbitration when they have a complaint. That has to be available. It has to be industry funded. And the industry have to think about how that can be deliverable and sustainable and affordable for them but, nevertheless, should be provided. And if that can be delivered then I think we should allow self-regulation of the press outside of the press Royal Charter to exist and be supported.

And I think the idea of punitive sanctions against free journalism in a world in which they are increasingly fighting what seems to be a losing battle against the distribution of free news on social media platforms is the wrong battle to fight. We have to recognise that supporting the content creators and journalists is important, not just for the health of public broadcasting the news but also to winning the war against "fake news". Which I think in an election year we have to recognise is a threat to free speech and our democracy and the institutions of this country.

Thank you.