

VLV SPRING CONFERENCE

Wednesday 26 April 2017

Alternative facts and public trust in broadcasting

Panel:

Matthew d'Ancona, journalist and author of *Post Truth: The new war on truth and how to fight back*

Jane Martinson, Head of Media, *The Guardian*

Stewart Purvis CBE, former Chief Executive of ITN

Chaired by: **Roger Bolton**

Colin Browne, Chairman, VLV

So carrying on with the theme of the fame of fake news we've now got a panel of highly relevant experts in this subject. Once again I shall leave the Chairman of this section, Roger Bolton, to introduce the panel and I will introduce Roger himself by saying he's as you well know an extremely distinguished journalist, broadcaster, probably best known to listeners as a presenter of Radio 4's *Feedback* programme. So Roger over to you to introduce our panel.

Roger Bolton:

Thank you very much indeed. An ageing hack is a better way of describing me increasingly ageing. I'm very pleased indeed to be here to Chair this because it's an absolutely vital issue and I really was impressed by Damian Collins. I rarely ever say that but I should say I was really impressed by his breadth of understanding and concern about the issues.

And what I hope we will be able to do in the next hour is three things really with the title of this, it's just been altered to Alternative Facts and Public Trust in Broadcasting. So we're going to try and do three things.

First of all we're going to try and define, see if we're happy with the definition of alternative facts. We're also going to try and assess if we think that it's increasing how widespread it is. The second thing we're going to look at is public trust in broadcasting and whether there's some evidence that that is diminishing and the dangers of that. And the third thing we're going to do is then look at remedies: if there are any, what we can do.

We're extremely fortunate to have someone on the panel on my far left and I make no comment about his politics, the journalist and author Matthew D'Ancona who is about to publish later in May *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back*. And we'll certainly be asking him about that fight.

Next to him is Stewart Purvis, former Chief Executive of ITN and on most regulatory boards that have been in existence in this country and now a Non-Executive Director of Channel 4. So I'm sure he was listening very closely to the previous speaker.

And then with me is Jane Martinson who is Head of Media at *the Guardian* and indeed it's the example of *the Guardian* that Jimmy Wales when he set up this week or

announced the setting up this week of the Wikitribune which we might discuss points to the Guardian's alleged success in subscriptions and so on.

Jane Martinson:

Alleged?

Robert Bolton:

I want to find out if that's a fact or not later on in this discussion because, you know, there just could be an alternative one. But anyway we'll explore that and see how significant that is. But let's start with this thing *alternative facts*. It came in to the sort of public arena I suppose for most of us when it was used by the US Counsellor to the President Kellyanne Conway during a press interview. I'm sure you'll know this but just in case.

She was defending White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer's false claim about the attendance at Donald Trump's Inauguration as President of the United States. She was claiming of course or supporting the President's claim that it was the biggest crowd ever. When pressed during the interview to explain why the Press Secretary, Sean Spicer, had "Uttered a provable falsehood", Conway stated that Spicer was giving "alternative facts". And the interviewer responded, "Look alternative facts are not facts they're falsehoods".

During the week following her comments she discussed alternative facts and she substituted the phrases "alternative information" and "incomplete information". And two days after the interview she defended Trump's travel restrictions by talking about a non-existent Bowling Green massacre. She later said she was referring to the arrest of two Iraqis in Bowling Green, Kentucky for sending aid to insurgents in Iraq and by falsely claiming that President Obama in 2001 had banned visas for refugees from Iraq for six months. Her false statements were described as having taken alternative facts to a new level.

So let's ask, is there such a thing as alternative facts or are we simply talking about lies? Matthew D'Ancona.

Matthew D'Ancona:

No we're not. And I think one of the really important things in this incredibly important debate is to kind of get our terms of trade right at the start. People have always lied, politicians have always lied, newspapers have always made errors, broadcasters have always made errors and corrected them with varying degrees of efficiency and speed. So there's nothing new about that at all. And there's been a slight slippage I think recently to call everything that's wrong or incorrect instantly "fake news", but I thought Damian Collins made a very good point by saying the really distinguishing feature of "fake news" was the desire of the person propagating it to knowingly spread a falsehood, not an error but a knowing falsehood. And I think that's a very important point.

Alternative facts and the Kellyanne Conway moment was a very revealing moment in history of the Trump Presidency and also the kind of populace revolution that's still

sweeping the world. And I think the point to make about it is that she wasn't just saying, 'You've got it wrong and Sean Spicer the White House Press Secretary got it right', she was saying there are two variable realities here and you can choose from them as from a buffet. And the problem with that is that it rather matches the world of the digital revolution where people tend to ... I mean the digital revolution is an incredibly important engine of global co-operation, alliance and interconnection. I think we mustn't lose sight of that. But it has also driven people in to their own silos, what psychologists in their quest for jargon call homophilous sorting and echo chambers.

And so the risk with alternative facts and I think it is something that is worth pursuing as an idea for journalists, broadcasters and people involved all aspects of creativity and power is that it is to do with an undercutting of the notion of truth as it were the reserve currency of democracy. To quote Nietzsche, "There are no such thing as facts there are only interpretations". And I think that's the problem that lies at the heart of this. And that's the problem that we need to see if there are solutions to.

Roger Bolton:

Jane, can I ask you, do you accept that distinction between false true alternative facts?

Jane Martinson:

Yeah. I think it's really important to get the definition of "fake news" right because it has been used now for anything. And to me it's clear that "fake news" is a deliberate, viral spreading of misinformation, normally for commercial but also for political aims. I don't think it's just something you don't agree with which is often used by Trump who says anything the BBC does must be "fake news".

I also don't think it is mistakes. You know, I think there's a slight tendency to sort of say, well, you know, unverified facts. There's a debate about whether tabloid newspapers in this country over the past several decades were actually the first promulgator of "fake news". I think it's different because for me. I think it's very much about a sort of natural consequence of the digital advertising model which means that click bait, you know, people are paid per click. So we get 100 teenagers in a town in Macedonia who are literally putting this stuff up in order to attract click bait. I think that's a really different thing and I think last year what we saw with the big political events is a spike because of the realisation from politicians, from those in power, that they could be incredibly useful to gain power. So I'm sure we'll get round to talk about not only last year's Referendum but also Trump and now June 8th.

So to me why it's so important to get the definition right and to take it so importantly is because I think it's the biggest threat to our democracy actually. I think once you allow "fake news" and the way that it's funded online to take hold we will lose all trust. I mean the Edelman Barometer of Trust in journalism, in news, was actually really worrying in terms of people just don't trust what they read and see, although broadcasters are in a slightly different position which I also hope we'll come to discuss. You know, once you lose trust, how on earth do you tell the truth about democracy and the people in power?

Roger Bolton:

Stewart, is this definition adequate to cover somebody like President Trump because we've heard false news is news which the person knows is untrue but promulgates? And we're looking at a president, the leader of the Western world who is either lying or is putting forward a view of the world which doesn't correspond to reality but whether he knows that or not is difficult to understand. If the stories are true, when he gets up at 5 o'clock in the morning or whatever it is, it's straight on to Fox News, he won't look at CNN and other things and he repeats things that are stated almost without a concern for whether they're true or not. And not understanding that if he repeats them he's giving them, as it were, a support. So how do we categorise Trump in the middle of all of this alternative facts, false news? What is he doing?

Stewart Purvis:

Well he's just being selective. He's being tactical in putting out stuff there that he appears to have the ability to disclaim. So we have a number of occasions we're now having appeared to vouch for something, he will then when pressed say, look all I ever did was to quote what somebody else said. Now it's not unusual for politicians to quote things that they've seen on television. I can think of a couple of things in my own career when I was really quite flattered that we put something on the air and the next minute the President of the United States said something should be done about it. So, you know, we quite like it when it kind of works for us.

Where we get wary about it is when we see something being said on a channel which let's say has a mixed compliance record, to use regulatory jargon, and we feel that it is being picked up by a politician for his own use. But I do want to caution in a sense of seeing this as black and white. Let me give you an example. You will remember that the idea that it was GCHQ which had followed Obama's orders to bug Trump during the campaign. This came from a contributor to Fox News. Somebody who regularly appears on Fox News as a legal expert. He went on the air and said, "You know, Trump has been saying that Obama had him bugged. It wasn't done by the CIA, it wasn't done by the FBI, it was done by GCHQ". Everyone in Britain says 'It's outrageous, completely untrue. GCHQ says it's untrue. Boris Johnson says untrue.' This man is suspended by Fox News, actually goes back on the air on Fox News unsuspected by Rupert Murdoch shortly afterwards and said, "I stand by my story and I will be proved right".

So we have a kind of conventional thinking that this story is "fake news", actually in truth we don't really know the outcome of that.

Roger Bolton:

Hold on a second. What we know is that the claim was that the President Obama had asked GCHQ to bug the President. Right, we're pretty sure that's untrue. What we do know is, I think we know as well, is that in the general trawling activity that GCHQ does, it picked up details of contacts between people involved with the future President of the United States and the Russians and automatically forwarded that information and the distinction being: this came in the general activity conducted by GCHQ and the general exchange of information between intelligent services, but the central claim that deliberately Obama was targeting the president is not true.

Now, it's complex but it's not difficult.

Stewart Purvis:

But Roger I don't disagree with that. But you're applying a level of certainty to that which actually is quite difficult to do. When you've got a politician saying, look there's a claim being made out there that needs confirmation.

Roger Bolton:

No, you work on the basis that if they make a claim they have to produce evidence. But the claim is that Obama asked GCHQ to do something. There's no evidence that has been produced for that at all. On the basis of no evidence and denials what do you do?

Stewart Purvis:

Well, I am just pointing out that we have not reached the end of that story. And any regulator would hesitate towards saying that this was an untrue story but I totally accept there's no evidence for it. But I do feel that for all the reasons that Matthew has said, for all the reasons that Damian has put forward, there is a situation out there which we have people putting out material.... Let me give you another example. If a broadcaster reaching over a billion people every day, making billions of pounds every day distributing material which had multiple mistakes in it was called to account and its answer was, 'I'm going to send out ten tips to spot "fake news"', the broadcaster would be laughed out of court.

If a broadcaster transmitted video which we learn this morning happened in Thailand of a man filming himself murdering his own eleven month old child and when called to account said, 'Well I did stop showing it as soon as I realised I was showing it.'

Jane Martinson:

Twenty four hours later.

Stewart Purvis:

That's what is actually going out. That's what's happening on Facebook at the moment. Because they say they have no editorial control.

Roger Bolton:

Let's come to that in a moment. But I think ...we've got a sort of agreement on what alternative facts are, the distinction perhaps between false news perhaps. Let's go on and look quickly at this third aspect before we come back and look at potential ways forward. And that is something which Jane mentioned which is this drop in public trust which I think you referred to was from the Edelman 2017 Trust Barometer report. It shows a decline in public trust of key institutions. Jane, do you want to develop how worrying you find that?

Jane Martinson:

Well I found it kept coming back to me and this was a really sort of personal anecdote where ahead of the referendum I talked to a family member who said that they were

thinking of voting to leave. And it's my older sister who, you know, didn't go to college, has always talked to me about politics. And then I said, 'This is ridiculous, how could you do this?' I'm very much on the remaining side and I tried to argue. And I said, you know, everybody is saying this is what the statistics are, you know, this is what the economists are saying. And she said, 'How do you know that they're right? How do you know anything?' And I was completely taken aback because it's my personal relationship. It seemed that's what a lot of people think about the media. How do you know John Humphrys on the *Today* programme, Nick Robinson, Matt D'Ancona, the *Guardian*, how do we know? And I suddenly thought, and you can't say, well because we have statistics, because we have that. Because, well you can say it, obviously I did say it, and will continue to say it until I die. But if that trust has gone, if that sense of, I don't trust you anymore. That's gone. That sort of compact is the most precious thing about the media and the role that we have which is to hold the powerful to account, to find the truth to the best of our ability: sometimes mistaken, sometimes wrong headed, sometimes biased but, you know, to the best of our ability. If the trust in anything you do has gone then I think you've lost everything.

Roger Bolton:

Well, Matthew your forthcoming book is entitled *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back*. Will you tell us how to fight back?

Matthew D'Ancona:

How to fight back. Well just to start by echoing Jane really because I think at the heart of this is the kind of pincer movement of the digital revolution and a collapse of trust. Not just in the media by the way but there was a kind of tsunami that went through all the pillars of institutional life. I think the global financial crisis in 2008 played a massive role in that. Then we had the parliamentary expenses scandal in 2009, the Savile scandal in the BBC, the Leveson Inquiry and on it went and on it went. And all these pillars have fallen one after the other. And added to that is, Eric Raymond uses the famous metaphor of the Cathedral and the Bazaar, that the old hierarchy had been flattened by digitalisation so that peer to peer recommendation is now much more important to people than the fact that someone said it on a particular programme.

And so the whole notion of where we identify authority is changing, irrespective of the fact that a series of scandals have rocked trust. Now what do we do? It's something I could go on about all day and I certainly don't intend to do that. But the first thing to say is that trust can be recovered. There's some fantastic psychological work done particularly by a guy called Stephen Coverley in the States about how you do recover trust. It's a slow process and one that has to be approached with great realism because it involves transparency and accountability and a readiness to admit that you've done wrong which the people who inhabit institutions are not habitually inclined to do. But there are steps you can take, particularly when you're talking about public service institutions including public service broadcasters. It's not the same as when you discover that Perrier has benzene in it and you decide never to buy Perrier again. There are routes back to it.

I think on the general front about the post-truth “fake news” issue, Damian Collins put his finger on it earlier when he said that the tech giants won’t do anything serious until they think that there are sanctions in prospect which is not an argument for sanctions or regulation because I’m naturally inclined, as someone of the centre right against those things. But I do agree unless they think there are going to be serious consequences, and I think they are starting to, none of this will change. It’s very interesting, you can just see journalist initiatives being taken by all of the key players. You know, Google announcing journalist initiatives, Facebook taking all sorts of steps. Sheryl Sandberg saying the other day that she’s been looking at ways of demonetising “fake news”, you know, no detail yet. But there it is. Snapchat producing new rules for its Discover Channel and so on and so on.

But I think that we kid ourselves if we think that this is going to be resolved by the action of others. I think that we have to educate ourselves and our children rigorously as we’ve educated them in the past how to read books. They need a new kind of digital literacy that is simply not being taught yet in schools.

And the other thing is we need to make demands. And I think that the best model for this is something like Occupy Wall Street but a kind of cerebral sort. We need to actually demand the truth. And that may sound a very vague and woolly statement but I don’t think it is. What you’re starting to see ever so slightly is a recoil from 2016. The only way to reinstate truth is to demand that people cleave to it. There’s a wonderful quote from Benjamin Franklin after the second constitutional convention in 1787 when he came out and he was asked by a woman ‘What sort of government have you bequeathed us Mr Franklin’. And he said “A republic madam, if you can keep it”. That, “if you can keep it” is the key words here because unless we can keep the truth it will go. It is in absolutely serious existential jeopardy at the moment. This is the moment when people have to decide and in this election campaign we have the clear opportunity to broadcasters and journalists to keep people to high standards. But the public too has a role. This is not a passive experience. It will not just correct itself.

Roger Bolton:

I’ll come to Stewart in a moment to talk about public service broadcasters, but I want to come to Jane now and ask her about this Jimmy Wales initiative. Because he says he’s created Wikitribune, well he hasn’t created it, he’s about to, he’s in the process of creating it in what he says it’s to help combat the rise of “fake news” in Donald Trump’s America. The basic concept, he said here, is to have a community driven news platform, so very much like other Wiki communities, like Wikipedia. And he says recent reports of subscription growth at the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* made him confident Wikitribune’s model could work where paying members will also be able to influence what the site covers.

Two questions to you Jane. First of all just tell me about is there a significant subscription growth of the *Guardian*, there is I think of the *New York Times*, and secondly what you think of the Jimmy Wales initiative? First on subscription.

Jane Martinson:

Well firstly we don't call it subscription at the Guardian, an important distinction, but our membership programme has risen by 200,000 members since the referendum and the election last year, particularly the Trump election actually. From November the spike in membership was phenomenal. And I do think that in this world of enormous uncertainty, and I completely agree with Matt actually, that we have to look at education. I think we have to look at politics. I'm much more of the line that I think intervention would help. So in Germany, in France, in other places in Europe, Google and Facebook actually are being forced to pay, to sort themselves out quicker than they are here and certainly in America where there is obviously a complete hatred of any sort of government sanction.

But I think mainly it has to be down to us as individuals, not only ourselves but our children, we have to teach people that if you believe in proper journalism you need to pay for it. Don't share stuff just because it's funny or outrageous, because it's a lie.

Roger Bolton:

But does this mean you think that Wikitribune, for which you won't pay, won't work?

Jane Martinson:

No. I mean the idea, he's only just announced it obviously yesterday. The idea is to take the principle of Wikipedia which is community based. And what I think is really interesting in this is that when the internet, you know, the sort of democratisation of the internet came in we all thought this was going to be the most marvellous thing for democracy because of the wisdom of crowds. So where you have, you know, journalists actually don't have the answer the person dictating down, you know, my sister's right, really of course I don't know everything. But it's the wisdom of crowds. It's the wisdom of people who actually you hope know their stuff.

So the principle that you can take that and then turn that in to a journalistic exercise is really interesting I think. There's lots about that that's also interesting. He's sort of done away with the idea of himself as an editor. So you'll get a sort of journalistic Tribune, which is a very old fashioned title, you know, Wikitribune which he has sort of said, you know, because of the number of people in the community which will include some professional journalists, will decide which are the important stories, which is the news.

So it's a sort of reversal of ... We've had the wisdom of crowds where media knew nothing and it's all about the people and ourselves and sharing with our friends on Facebook or other social media. And then "fake news" has sort of made people think, 'Well hang on a moment because actually all that means is that you share nonsense and outrageous lies, or cat videos' to I think this part of what Jimmy Wales is doing is almost the next iteration which is saying maybe we can take some of that and now what we need to do is make it in to a more professional organisation with, surprise horror, journalists who are professionally trained to get facts, to get sources, to try to check things.

So I mean it's really interesting. The finance of news, the financial model of news is in a mess, so, you know, anything that can be done to help is going to be a good thing.

Roger Bolton:

Stewart, will you have a degree of control over our public service broadcasters? And we've heard obviously be second rather than first, which I'm sure Channel 4 News would wish they had been on a recent case. But do you think the broadcasters, you talked to me earlier when we were just having a word outside, about the broadcasters thinking perhaps or some broadcasters thinking, they could make a distinction between what is broadcast on air and what's online. And you were worried about some tendencies that were developing there. Would you like to develop that thought?

Stewart Purvis:

Yes. I think all of the above this morning tells us that this should be and indeed is a good moment for public service broadcasters because the values that they hold are the values that I think are the most important at the present time. We see that in ITV News ratings, I mean ITV's gone to elaborate trouble to prove that people want news at 10 o'clock by showing entertainment which was ... so we used to say, well you can get news from everywhere what we need is entertainment. Now we're saying you can get entertainment from everywhere what we really need is news and long be the case. And there are many other examples of this.

But what I pick up with broadcasters is somehow that they think there is a two tier system operating here. That there's what you say on the air and there's what you write online. And I'm sorry to quote Nick Robinson, for whom I have the highest regard, but there was a moment when he last week Tweeted after Jeremy Corbyn's very opening address at the start of the campaign, "No one should be surprised that Jeremy Corbyn is running against the establishment and he's long on passion and short on details, story of his life".

When there was a small kaffuffle on Twitter he then said "I will read my Tweets twice to check they don't read as if I mean something I never intended". To which I would say, I agree with Nick.

Roger Bolton:

Is there any ambiguity at all in his Tweet? I can't detect anything.

Stewart Purvis:

His argument was all he meant was that Corbyn has always been passionate. But the phrase is short on facts, you know. For instance if you look at Theresa May's opening address that was similarly, actually it wasn't that long on passion, but there was some passion there. She was also similarly short on facts because we haven't had the manifestos. That's what you would expect at that time. So I understand.

So first of all people misspeak or misTweet. And why do they do that more often than they do it on the air? There's probably something to do with state of mind. There's also a sense I see, for instance, Sky News runs a site called *Sky Views* on which correspondents say things they wouldn't say on the air. And my view is quite simple, you

cannot have separate brand values on air and online. If you believe in impartiality and accuracy do them on both.

Roger Bolton:

Could I pick up another point here then which is that actually incumbent on public service journalists to be more interventionist. Those who've worked for the BBC for a long time know the cringe that sometimes occurs during elections and referendums, where the primary concern is to get the institutions through and as long as you've quoted both sides, that's it. You don't have to do anything else. Well, which of course you do. And at certain points we are now seeing more than ever, I think, it's necessary for journalists to intervene where they say they think something is demonstrably untrue or factually inaccurate.

Well that depends upon two things doesn't it? One is having the knowledge and that raises the question of whether BBC, ITV public service journalists need to be in the process of continuous education and I don't think that the broadcasters have thought that through. A continuous process of education. The second, giving them the confidence to intervene which most of them are very reluctant to do.

Let me take an example, and maybe it's contentious or not. When Ken Livingstone made his statements about what he says he never said that Hitler was a Zionist. But he expressed his views in the ways that most people would interpret in that way. For a public service broadcaster you'd have expected, or should, two responses. First of all, making clear that from the year dot on whether Hitler has ever expressed his views, they were anti-Semitic to a large degree and indeed in the middle 1920s he wrote *Mein Kampf* in which it's all laid out and therefore subsequently his attitudes to the Jews was simply, 'Get rid of them, out of the country any way possible' and later on when the industrial mechanism was available he would kill them all. Of course in that process he'd collaborate with people who wanted to move Jews to Palestine because his concern is just get them out.

Instead the interviewing has been, well here's somebody who takes a different view. We ask to profess or you move on and so on. What there has been an unwillingness of the journalists to do is to actually take Livingstone on themselves on that situation. Now am I overstating this? Should I have expected that or not?

Stewart Purvis:

Well on that particular example I was frustrated. I heard quite a long interview with Livingstone on Five Live the night of the action or inaction as some would see it. And it was frustrating in a sense that they did not go through it systematically, Roger the way you've just done. They were arguing about what he had or hadn't originally said. Now that must be on the record. So sometimes possibly people who are doing three hour phone in shows and there's somebody asked to do an in-depth interview on that subject had not got the knowledge to do it.

But to your wider point I have welcomed over the years the increased intervention, as you call it, by those who are qualified to do it. And I put that in a range, you know, some

specific interviewers who have a background, who have the knowledge and experience to do that. I once had a session at Nuffield College. I had a big stand up row with Philip Gould, the late Philip Gould who was saying, it is not the role of broadcasters to point out inaccuracies by politicians. I said, 'What? You can't say that'. I think Andrew Marr on one of the interviews said to a politician, 'That is not true'. And he strongly objected, you know, this was a kind of broadcasters getting too big for their boots.

So we've seen a gradual process. I know at the BBC they're always trying to think 'Is this grounded in evidence?'. They're trying to work out what is a rationale when you can and can't do that. But to my other point, I pointed out during the referendum campaign that the reality check online, on the BBC website, did not use the same wording as they did on the air. And so, for instance, online they were more decisive. They were more interventionists. They were saying 'This is wrong'. But I don't think, correct if I'm wrong, Andrew Scadding from the BBC, did I ever hear a BBC broadcaster on the air say, 'This is wrong'. I don't think so.

Roger Bolton:

Andrew, do you want to just? I think it's an interesting point here because you do have, for example, on Radio 4 programme More or Less which if you listen to you sometimes think 'Why is the news organisation not blushing deep crimson?' But it's as if the BBC thinks, 'Oh well it's there, so that's alright if you go for it. Or you can go online and you can get it'. But when it actually gets to broadcast news, oh it's a bit more dangerous and nervous.

Matthew, do you think they are dangers of this? I mean in which on broadcast news journalists, and they have to be right of course, but say 'This is not true' as opposed to say, 'The opposition says or the government says this is not true'.

Matthew D'Ancona:

Well first of all I think, I just want to echo what Stewart said about public service broadcasting being more important than ever. I mean, you know, if ever there was a case, particularly for the license fee and for other public service broadcasters. It's interesting a lot of American friends I have, have been saying, 'Thank God for the sites of Channel 4, BBC because they provide them with reliable information'. So I think that that is kind of something you can't say too often.

As to the whole question of, you know, how far broadcasters intervene? It goes back to this very interesting point that was made by a lady earlier about the twin pillars of accuracy and impartiality.

Roger Bolton:

The BBC would say due impartiality.

Matthew D'Ancona:

Due impartiality sorry. I think to be fair, public service broadcasting finds itself under insane pressure at the moment which is the print media is in a decline financially that we very much hope it's not terminal and we're doing our level best to ensure that it's not.

Online is growing exponentially and is generating all sorts of things that are completely new in our kind of epistemological universe. And we are just emerging from the wild west gold rush era of the internet age into what may be something like some kind of stability. But the rules aren't even clear.

Public service broadcasters are being expected to keep up with things that are changing by the nanosecond. And whatever people say to the contrary, everyone knows that an editor will be wanting to be first as well as right. And I don't blame them because having been an editor I remember what that was like. Because it is the toughest call to make. I don't want to cut the public service broadcasters too much slack. I want to cut them some because I think this is a learning curve and they need support in this as well as constructive criticism.

Of course, the BBC should intervene. And of course, it's right that public service broadcasters should not go too far online or indeed any further than they would broadcasting, but I understand why they are because to get any kind of traffic online you have to be more shrill. Because the web amplifies the shrill and amplifies emotion. And these are working people.

Now that's no excuse. We have to bring it back to the kind of high road of fact, impartiality and evidence gathering, but let's not pretend that we're at the end of that road. We're at the very beginning. We're at the absolute foothills of this mountain. This is back to school, it really is.

Roger Bolton:

Now Stewart I want to pick up on one other thing. Is there room for broadcasting, we talked about news but also for the current affairs aspect which would say, for example, a year after the referendum let's now make a programme which looks at the claims that were made and see how, over that year, they panned out, what can we now say about that campaign. Because when you look at the campaign a year on it's awful? And both sides, because I have to say this. But also in terms of the journalist's job of probing it doesn't look very good a year on.

I mean, for example, if we said there wasn't a programme which said not whether immigration is good or bad, but simply asked the question, 'So you want to control immigration. What are the options? Can you? What are the options?' That sort of programming would just help people through. When we look back it doesn't look very good.

Stewart Purvis:

I know and I have to say I took part in one debate during the Brexit coverage about how it is going. And I did say, look 'This bloody stopwatch thing'. I mean years ago I said at ITN we are not going to observe the stopwatch during a General Election campaign. The reason being, the memory I have is of Michael Foot stumbling around the country, tripping over election platforms, etc. etc. And somebody saying, 'er well he got equal time'. I said what, 'So you had Margaret Thatcher delivering beautifully crafted speeches

and Michael Foot stumbling around, he gets equal time.' That's equal time he could have done without.

And what we saw sometimes was actually a confusion by broadcasters about whether they were or were not applying equal time during the campaign. And I think there's one piece of, because I've just Chaired my final year Chairing the RTS Journalism Awards and in the Network Presenter of the Year there's a sequence where Tom Bradby is sitting in the back of that famous bus with Boris giving Boris bloody hell about this statement. And I kind of think, that's the only time I think I ever saw it done as vociferously as that. Now was that because other broadcasters felt they couldn't be so direct, they couldn't be so interventionist? There's sometimes a cultural difference between broadcasters about what they think is appropriate.

Roger Bolton:

It's a matter of self-confidence. It's a matter of two things. One is organisational self-confidence, severely dented in the BBC as a result of a great many pressures, but there's also the individual's unwillingness.... What astonished me when I became an editor at various points, and shouldn't have astonished anybody, is how little I knew about certain areas. And the realisation that I'd better bone up very hard, very quickly. But the realisation actually that's a continuing process throughout one never should stop.

And so when you look at the BBC and say, for example, where is that process? I put editors and so on, this continuous process of education giving them time to actually brief and travel and learn about things. Oh no, no, no, it's not necessary. And somehow broadcasters have got to learn, have got to understand themselves if they're going to intervene, if they're going to distinguish between things, they have to educate themselves continually and also understand that there are alternative agendas, because the big worry about the alternative facts is for me is that people believe therefore that there's almost just one agenda. And you can argue that the agenda is too narrow. So how do we negotiate a way where we have to have alternative agendas and make sure they're representative, but not get caught in this territory of alternative facts.