

Speech: Jeremy Wright – Paley Center for Media speech

It is a real honour to be here at this prestigious conference.

The Paley Centre for Media has done so much to set the agenda for developments in US and international media, and continues to support the growth of creative industries on both sides of the Atlantic.

And I am delighted that we are able to welcome this event back to the UK.

And in fact, William Paley, in whose name we gather today, lived and worked right here in London during the Second World War.

The exchange of talent and ideas across the Atlantic has lasted for as long as broadcasting itself.

Downton Abbey was the highest rated season premiere in the history of PBS.

And American shows, from Will and Grace to Westworld, have been a staple of UK TV schedules for many years.

And these trends are only intensifying as the digital revolution makes content even more global and more accessible.

These trends bring new challenges too, some of which were unheard of a decade ago. And they have turned many established business models on their heads.

I want to talk today about how we can navigate these changes, as media professionals and policy makers.

And how we can seize the opportunities that this new media landscape presents, and maintain a healthy media sector that remains free and prosperous in the digital age.

Because the media landscape is changing beyond recognition.

In the UK, British teenagers recognise the name YouTube more than they do the BBC.

And in 2021, it will take more than five million years to watch the amount of video that will cross global online networks each month.

This proliferation of content is in many ways a good thing, but as content moves online it does make it harder to get value from high quality journalism.

UK newspaper circulations have halved since 2001, and local newspapers are finding it especially hard to adapt.

We have seen over 200 titles close since 2005 in the UK and I know that there

have been similar issues in the USA, where hundreds of local newspapers have had to either merge or close.

This should concern us all. Newspapers help to bring together local voices and shine a light on important issues – in communities, in courtrooms, in council chambers and in state houses.

And while specialist blogs and websites can sometimes fill the void, they might not have the time and resources to do the investigative journalism that can explain complex issues, provide new insight into national and international affairs and – dare I say it – hold the powerful to account.

Lawmakers across the world need to see this as a policy challenge, and not simply a media challenge.

And they need to make sure that the structures are in place so news organisations can fairly monetise their content.

After all, media business are built on clear protections for intellectual property and its value, a principle shared by the UK and the US.

Politicians might not always get the coverage we'd like. But we would do well to remember that a healthy media is the beating heart of any civil society.

So the question of media sustainability is a particularly important one.

In the UK, we see it as so important that we have commissioned an independent review to look at how the production and distribution of high-quality news journalism can be sustained in the digital age.

It will look at what innovation and intervention may be needed to keep the press sustainable and vibrant.

And Dame Frances Cairncross, who leads the review, visited the USA to look at and learn from your media landscape.

Just like newspapers, in the UK our public service broadcasters have a vital role to play in our public life.

These PSBs – the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 – work for the public benefit to foster shared experiences, stimulate learning and inspire change.

And these PSBs are joined by many other diverse and vibrant broadcasters who inhabit the same ecosystem and share their essential values. And I take Sky and Sky News as a particularly strong example.

I have been heartened in recent years to see broadcasters and platforms, including the likes of Sky, BT, and Virgin, investing in new, innovative technologies and formats to reach new audiences.

This includes catch up services, video on demand and streaming to mobile phones and tablets.

The UK and US are clear leaders here in terms of consumers adopting these new services.

Because now more than ever it is vital that a choice of high quality news and programming is accessible for all parts of society, wherever they want it.

And we have seen a lot of success here – for example Channel 4 News in the UK gets sixty million views per month on Facebook – the largest of any British news programme.

It is the nature of the news media to be difficult, challenging and to stray across boundaries in the search for news. In free societies that is inevitable but also essential to our democracy.

As Hannah Arendt said in one of her last interviews “What makes it possible for a totalitarian or any other dictatorship to rule is that people are not informed; how can you have an opinion if you are not informed?

If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer.”

Without a free and vibrant press we would be much less informed, less inspired and less able to hold those in power to account.

And we see Government’s role as an enabler – creating the right conditions for high quality journalism and broadcasting to flourish.

There is another emerging trend that should concern all of us that care about democracy and our public discourse.

Over the past few years, we have all witnessed an unprecedented assault on truth and accuracy.

Yes, news has always been a fast paced business and mistakes have always been made.

But we are currently witnessing an avalanche of disinformation online, with a corrosive effect on democracy and public institutions.

Some of the problem is state-sponsored. We know that the Russian state persistently deploys its state-run media organisations to manipulate democratic institutions.

And some of it is commercial. It is a sad fact that on many platforms, it is now more lucrative to post lurid and fake news than news based on the truth.

There have been a number of examples of well meaning bloggers who later discovered that the way to draw a revenue from Facebook or Google is to make up sensational stories.

This is a toxic cocktail that can have truly dangerous consequences.

I am sure many of you are familiar with ‘pizzagate’, a conspiracy theory

circulated that some officials working on the Clinton campaign were running a sex trafficking ring from a pizza restaurant in Washington DC.

Despite the story being widely debunked, including by the police, the story was shared millions of times online by fake news websites.

Workers received abuse, suppliers were threatened and one man went to the restaurant and fired a gun inside.

And we have had our own cases over here, notably after the Manchester terror attack, where false reports made life far harder for our emergency services.

This is not a trend that is likely to be reversed any time soon.

A study from MIT showed that falsehoods are 70 per cent more likely to be retweeted than stories verified by fact-checking authorities.

The threats here are considerable. For democracies to succeed and for elections to be fair, we need to have ground rules that allow us to debate the issues, as far as we can, free from deliberate distortion.

And those with authority and influence need to be held to account when they deliberately stray from the truth – especially when they seek to gain a political advantage or seek to divide our society.

And most of all we all must fight back hard against those who seek to sow discord and distrust.

We as leaders have a vital role. To examine our own behaviours and how we approach the way we debate and communicate with the public. To set an example.

And media organisations too a critical role to play.

Let us not be afraid to say what is true and what is false. Blessed be the factcheckers.

And let us not put expertise, based on firm evidence and provable facts on an even footing with baseless conspiracies on the pretext of editorial balance.

I am proud that the BBC World Service for example is playing its part.

It is the world's largest international broadcaster, providing impartial news, analysis and discussion in over 40 languages – including the Persian and new Korean service – to 249 million people every week.

As well as this, there have been some excellent projects from other news outlets in recent years to promote media literacy.

Governments and lawmakers from across the world should build on this and help people get the skills they need to separate fact from fiction and think critically about what they watch and read.

I am mindful of arguments about state control.

But that is why the American Founding Fathers were such visionaries. A clearly defined and safeguarded role for a free press, as the USA has enshrined so boldly in the First Amendment, is vital in uncovering truth.

A free press was at the heart of Western ideals of freedom and citizenship and also at the heart of debates – such as those between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson – that were instrumental in shaping America's approach to Government.

And as online disinformation becomes more and more sophisticated, Governments need to think about the next frontier.

How governments, together with a free press, can help create a body of informed and confident digital citizens who can use debate constructively to advance society.

These are fundamental challenges and there is concerted work underway to tackle them.

But I don't want to paint a bleak picture. There is so much to celebrate in this great industry.

The quality and diversity of content is as rich as it has ever been.

We are in many ways in a golden age, with Netflix and Amazon amongst those leading the way with vast new investments in content and with established broadcasters finding strong markets for high quality drama and documentaries.

And there are so many opportunities for nations who are willing to work together and cooperate on new programmes and productions.

After we leave the EU, we have no desire to pull up the drawbridge and try and go it alone.

We will remain a creative and outward looking country that wants to partner with like minded nations all across the world.

We already work closely with the USA on so many issues, from protecting world heritage sites to combating common security challenges.

And the media sector has been no exception. There have been so many successful ventures between broadcasters and publishers across the Atlantic.

The USA is the UK's largest export market and we have many US firms with a presence here, including Viacom, Disney and now Comcast.

Indeed the recent bidding war over Sky was a clear vote of confidence in UK broadcasting and in our cutting edge technology in advertising and audience technologies.

The BBC and ITV have worked together to launch the Britbox player in the US, which has secured over 400,000 subscribers in just 18 months.

We have seen masses of successful co-productions like Downton Abbey and the Night Manager.

And one of this year's most critically acclaimed BBC dramas, Killing Eve, was produced for BBC America and aired in America before the UK.

It has been an exceptional year for UK media and we want to go even further and faster.

Our media and broadcasting sector is thriving and is well and truly open for business.

Total revenues from our international programme sales in 2016-2017 were almost a billion pounds.

Hit shows like Sherlock and Planet Earth are being sold to over 230 territories across the world.

And as the line between the big screen and the small screen becomes increasingly blurred, our film and TV industry has been the fastest growing sector of the UK economy over the last five years.

The Government is determined to keep supporting these industries and to keep creating the best possible environment for them.

Last year, we made available almost 850 million pounds of tax relief.

This support has powered growth and created tens of thousands of jobs the length and breadth of the UK.

We have world-leading talent not just on screen but behind the screen from visual effects to carpenters, from animation specialist to sound engineers.

For the recent blockbuster film, Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald, Warner Brothers were able to recreate the romantic streets of Paris at Leavesden Studios in Watford.

Work like this has cemented Britain's global standing as world leading for talent and production facilities.

And since the birth of TV and film, our creatives have been at the forefront of acting, journalism and production.

From David Frost to Christiane Amanpour; from Alfred Hitchcock to Christopher Nolan; and from Laurence Olivier and Vanessa Redgrave to Daniel Kaluuya and Tilda Swinton, UK talent has shaped and defined these mediums.

The landscape and the technology might change but, like the USA, we will always be a nation whose energy and creativity shapes the world.

And we will always be looking to join together with your best and brightest to continue this great and unshakeable partnership.

Over decades and centuries, our nations have joined forces to address some of

the world's biggest challenges and to smash creative boundaries.

We are facing new challenges, that threaten the nature of liberal democracies and the civil society that underpins any healthy community.

High quality media and broadcasting remain some of our strongest defences against these dark forces.

They are the keystone upon which our freedom and discourse is built.

The Paley Centre's work in bringing us together to preserve this has never been more important.

So let us act together to keep this thriving sector strong and sustainable in this digital age.

Thank you very much.