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START AUDIO

Chair: Right, okay everyone. If you can take your seats please, thank you, for our second plenary, and on to Zoe in a couple of minutes, but first the usual housekeeping before we start. The most important part is the conference dinner, so that’s at 7:15 over in the Manchester Museum, which is literally across the road. If you’re not sure if you have booked, because you did that some time ago, and memory has moved on, if you pop to the registration desk, they have the details of everyone who has booked, and also, if you’re interested in going to check if there’s any space available, then also feel free to do that.

The other piece of housekeeping is after the plenary talk and Q&A, we’re also going to then be doing the Philip Abrams Prize, so please stay with us for that, and we’ll make sure we finish on time for the moving on to the conference dinner. So, I’m very pleased to be chairing the session for Zoe Williams’ talk, very kind of excited to hear what’s coming next. One of the plenaries last year, one of the speakers asked people to put their hand up if they read The Guardian, and there was a wave of hands. So, it probably means Zoe’s the most read person in the room, which we’re not jealous of at all.

So, as I’m sure many of you who put your hands up know, Zoe is a columnist in The Guardian, but also in the New Statesman, but has worked for a long time in different areas of broadcasting and media, including radio and television as well, but somehow has managed to squeeze in some books alongside, too, so we have ‘Get It Together: Why We Deserve Better Politics’, which is the most recent book that came out in 2015, but also ‘The Madness of Modern Parenting’ in 2014.

So, we’ve seen the abstract, and we’ve discussed some of the things that Zoe’s going to talk about, so I’m hoping it’s going to be a very lively session. Usual thing, that Zoe will talk for about 40, 45 minutes, and then we’ll open up for Q&A. We have the mic, so please put your hand up and we’ll try and identify you in a somewhat Question Time manner. But hopefully, we’ll get into that interaction at that point, so over to Zoe, thank you.

Zoe Williams: Okay, hello, hello everybody. I’m actually going to wander around the stage like I’m at a TED Talk, just because it’s more visually interesting, and I’m going to put that down for a second. So, I guess the point… \_\_\_[0:02:27] the point in the abstract, I slightly changed my thinking in the intervening 12 hours, sorry about that. But, the point in the abstract was how we reframe a media narrative, how we reframe a narrative about people which is the \_\_\_ or social bit that’s nasty.

Now, I’ve been writing the same shit for 22 years, and I haven’t internalised the Daily Mail’s world view, I’ve just been doing the same thing, and it’s not working. You know, at some point, you have to have an honest conversation with yourself and say, “This isn’t taking.” So, there’s something that we’re doing. I don’t think we’re failing to be repetitive enough, I’m not. Polly [Point 0:03:10] isn’t. Sorry, that was a joke, but if you don’t laugh, then she’s going to be cross, okay?

You know, we are saying the things that we say more recently, and they’re sort of getting ever, ever looser and more precarious purchase on the consciousness, so we have to kind of rethink how we’re doing it. I thought I’d start by rethinking about a year before the Referendum, was 2014. Does anybody remember 2014? I went to Uxbridge to do some vox popping on Boris Johnson, and at this point, he had declared, obviously, which side he was on, because he doesn’t care, and you know, he hadn’t yet seen which would be the most advantageous to himself.

What was interesting, going to his constituency to find out what side people thought he should be on was that they didn’t really care. They tended not to like Europe, but they also liked him so much that if he decided he was pro-Europe, they wouldn’t have cared. That’s the part \_\_\_[0:04:19]. The \_\_\_ obviously a sociologist, you do or should deride the vox pop. Journalists have absolutely no standards. We take all of our own views to the conversation, we leave with all of our own views, we enforce by whoever we were talking to, or we decide that they were mad.

I’ve got no defence for the vox pop, you know? If you think it’s bad when young journalists do it, it’s terrible that a middle-aged journalist would have to go up to strangers and ask them things. They always think I’m from the council. Anyway, it was quite… So, when I say… The only defence of it, really, is that the alternative is not to do it, and not ever to ask anybody what they think about anything, and only ask the people on your desk. I think that would probably be narrower, but how much narrower, I can’t give you a reading on.

Anyway, even thought people think I’m from the council, I think I’m really good at it, because people tend not to be intimidated, and I seem to get quite frank answers. I don’t \_\_\_[0:05:24]. So, I went to Uxbridge, and I spoke to the guy, and I didn’t really want to leave the station, because I was in a rush, so I spoke to lots of people who were on their way to or from somewhere. Everybody was very anti-immigration. It was very much the kind of thing that you hear was with the kind of engine of Brexit.

You know, ‘it’s a flood, there are no jobs for anybody else, they’re dragging down the wages, my daughter can’t get a house, my son doesn’t know how many hours he’s going to get next week’. You know, so it was all the kind of issues that you’ve heard associated with Brexit came out in Uxbridge, which actually is close enough to London to be a surprise result, like it was, overwhelmingly remain, so these [aren’t the 0:06:13] typical London views, but they’re very typical Brexit views.

Obviously, in the interest of balance, I wanted somebody who didn’t think this. So, this guy was coming along, and I have to admit, I actually chased him, because he could see me wanting to talk to him. He crossed over, and I crossed over too. What made me want to talk to him was because he as wearing this tweed suit. He looked like Mr [Tumnus 0:06:40], and he looked very eccentric, so I didn’t think he would just splurge back lines that everybody else was saying. I couldn’t tell anything about his affluence or lack thereof, because tweed suits, you know, you can get them in Oxfam, whichever way you put it.

But, I could tell that he wasn’t a kind of rule taker, and I thought he might have an interesting or, kind of, lateral, oblique perspective. Anyway, so I went up to him, and I said, “What do you think of Brexit/immigration or the world?” or whatever I asked, I asked it. He said, (in Canadian accent) “You know, I think it’s out of control. I think there are way too many foreigners here.” I said, “Okay, you don’t sound like you’re from England.” He said, “No, I’m from Canada.”

I said, “Okay, okay. So, which foreigners again, which?” He said, “Well, you know, it’s not all foreigners. Some foreigners are fine. It’s just the ones who come over here, they have a bunch of kids, they have no intention of getting a job, they just come for the benefits.” I said, “Hang on, wait a bit, are you under the impression that having any children, let alone a bunch of them, is easier than working?” He was like, “Well, I don’t have kids,” and I was like, “No, you bloody… Obviously you don’t.”

He said, “Well, you know, okay, so maybe it’s a bit unfair on kids, but they never try to get a job.” I said, “Where do you think they’re from?” and he said, “Somalia.” I said, “Okay. Do you think they’re refugees or economic migrants? Have you ever met any?” “No.” “Are you absolutely sure they exist?” “Well, you know, you read it in the paper, you don’t know what to believe.” I said, “Well, no, you don’t know what to believe, so why do you believe this?”

He was like, “Okay, well, I don’t know. Maybe I’ve got it wrong, I don’t know,” and then I could see how confused he got, so I started to be nice. I just asked him about himself, and I said, “What do you do?” He said, “I’m doing a PhD.” I said, “What in?” He said, “The early music of the Oman.” I said, “Oh wow, great. How’s that going?” “Oh, it’s taking a long time. It’s taken about seven years.” I said, “Okay, I guess there’s a lot of it, right?”

He said, “Well, no, actually, I got non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma in the middle of it, and what really bothers me is that I only got £200 of leave while I was ill, and these people on disability benefits are getting a lot more than that.” I was like, “But, you were on disability benefits. That’s what you would’ve been on. Why do you think they’re getting more?” “Well, you know, you see them, they’ve got these amazing houses,” again and again, right? More and more of the kind of fantastic ‘benefit claimant as criminal’ narrative that you read in the middle ground tabloid press all the time, constantly.

The things that struck me, listening to him, I \_\_\_[0:09:56], even though I’ve been slagging him off in panels ever since, were that basically, this stuff is [invidious]. It is everywhere. All my thinking before that was always that these narratives take hold when people who are in this position that’s already very precarious, are told to blame people more precarious than themselves. So actually, what you need to address is the sense of precariousness, and you kind of bolster shared systemship, compatriotism.

You know, a kind of communal sense of care for one another, and people wouldn’t feel so precarious that they needed their sense of insecurity, eventually \_\_\_[0:10:41] on to hatred for somebody else.

That was always what I thought, but then I started to think, “Actually, these narratives have kind of taken hold among everybody who isn’t directly, critically involved in politics all the time, everybody who’s not quite concentrating, everybody who’s not really that interested, everybody who doesn’t, for some godforsaken reason, read The Guardian, people who just have their own interests, people who are more interested in the early music of the Oman, people who have maybe been a little bit ill, people who are probably perfectly civilised, people who probably do think very deeply about other things, people who do think imaginatively, and people who think in all kinds of different and lateral ways.” Nevertheless, faced with a kind of barrage of this narrative, they just buy it. In the end, they just buy it. It’s come quite far.

I mean, I should’ve known that day what the result was going to be, because it wasn’t really obviously, statistically, very robust, but there was a sense of the reach of that argument, from the completely atypical profile of this guy. You know, he was not the person who you’d see in a saloon bar slagging off single mothers. He wasn’t that person, and yet, he was effectively in a saloon bar slagging off single mothers. That’s the first thing that struck me, was we need to get a lot better at this, because they’re a lot better at it than we are. They’re really tearing strips off us.

They’ve got into our territory, they’ve got into the academics, they’ve got into the immigrants, they’ve got into the tweed wearers. They’re tearing strips off of us. The second thing that struck me was that no argument against what he heard worked. All it did was make him feel stupid. So, I could say, “You were disabled,” or, “You’re an immigrant,” or, “What do you think the Daily Mail thinks about the early music of the Oman?” You know, I could say anything to this guy, and it would do is attack his sense of self, and all he would do is just withdraw from me, to the extent of trying to cross the road again.

Obviously, he didn’t get away with that. So, this is something that they’ve been on about forever, is that you can’t attack their narratives, you have to make your own narratives. I know I had it as, kind of, visibly brought home to me, was him trying to argue that position with somebody who I don’t even think was particularly [well into 0:13:29] it, but the more I tried to contest it, the more well into it he became. I think that is as true…

There’s part of me, there’s a sense in which you think, “Well, maybe just being in his grill, he didn’t really want to talk to me. Maybe that didn’t help.” But actually, even writing, you write, you talk on the radio, you talk on television, you talk to somebody’s face. If you make arguments that make them feel foolish, you just don’t [win 0:13:56]. They just stop reading, or listening, or engaging. So, there’s absolutely no world in which any of this works, any of the stuff we’ve been doing. This is been kind of useful \_\_\_.

All the stuff that we’ve been doing and thinking, this will really contest and challenge that narrative. There’s no world in which it works, so whether you’re Jonathan [Portes 0:14:24], telling people about the ‘love of labour’ fallacy, or God, I mean, it’s actually hard to pick a pro-immigration voice now, Ken Clarke talking about being pro-European, there isn’t a challenge that you lodge on a factual basis that works with people. All you make them think is that thing you’re worried about, you’re stupid for worrying about it. That doesn’t actually stop people worrying.

So, you know, then you think, “Well, the answer is to have your own narratives, which is what we should’ve been doing for years, and years, and years.” In a sense, just haven’t been coordinating enough. There is definitely, even though I said to begin with that we were perfectly happy being repetitive, there’s a very real problem on the pro-social side. I’m going to probably use ‘left’ as a shorthand, even though I think the left and right shorthands don’t really function at all at the moment. There’s a problem on the pro-social side of not wanting to camp on the same territory for a long time.

So, it’s not about not being repetitive as such. It’s about staying in one place, and there’s a huge kind of intellectual resistance to it, which I think is completely warranted. You know, you think that progress looks like moving from one idea to another idea, and if you’re still in the same place, saying the same stuff 20 years in, then something’s gone wrong. You know, I would love it if that were true, but the fact is that this has been building to the pre-Brexit crescendo of xenophobia and, kind of, Little England isolation zone, that had been built on since Michael Howard.

I mean, it had been building very, very solidly and networked, coordinated in a consistent way ever since those awful handwritten posters, kind of, whisper it, “Does anybody else think it’s not racist to talk about immigration?” Since that, there have been, kind of, coordinated attempts. Until you build your own coordinated frames, you’re not going to take it on. Now, I feel kind of fairly foolish for saying that, because in 2005, when those posters came out, I thought they were the most ineffective, pathetic things I’d ever seen.

You know, so dated, and so unimaginative, and kind of, so pre-1997. You couldn’t believe anybody would buy it, and I was right in 2005, but wrong in 2015. So, you do have to camp on the same territory, and you do have to be repetitive. I think probably, the only kind of pro-social morality you can come up with is kind of ironic or humorous. I don’t think relentless positive news stories actually work. I don’t think they’re sexy, but we’ll come back to that. You know, the humour has typically been the only thing in which the left has ever excelled the right, and we kind of lost that. I think we lost it in 1997. I’m not sure what happened, but I think that’s when the fuel went out of the progressive side.

Moving on, it’s two years later. It was yesterday. No, yes, this morning in fact, obviously things have moved quite a lot. All those narratives, the anti-immigration narratives given after Brexit, and the anti-Muslim narrative in America, as given as Donald Trump, now, what’s extraordinary about that whole thing and how much of it relies on the demonisation of Muslims in America is how coordinated that was as a media action.

So, if you look at 2001, after 9/11, how many Americans had a negative view of Muslims, it was, I think… I mean, it was quite high. It was quite high relative to civilised humanity, but it was about 32%. If you look 10 years later, it was 67%, and that was the result of an absolute [streaming 0:18:45] of anti-Muslim propaganda, basically, generated by seven think tanks, funded quite manifestedly…

I mean, the money’s all traceable to a number of various rich elites: You know, the Koch brothers, the guy whose name has obviously gone out of my head, who \_\_\_[0:19:04] with Monica Lewinsky. Big money interventions not into politics, but into the framing our politics, gave the kind of anti-Muslim narrative framework into which Trump just stepped, and it worked, right? It completely worked. So, it’s the \_\_\_[0:19:25] is quite \_\_\_.

You’ve probably heard of it, I don’t want to explain to people who already know stuff. But, Eric Scholl, he’s, kind of, a major, major American philanthropist. I have huge problems with philanthropy. Really, I hate those kinds of conferences where you’ve got the mega rich on one side and the social entrepreneurs on the other side, and then there are journalists who have to sit there and watch them blow smoke up each other’s arse.

The philanthropist going over to the social entrepreneurs, “Oh, you guys are so amazing,” and the social entrepreneurs are trying to pretend that they’re not being bowled over by their money. Really, really not my scene. But, the focus has very obviously moved, and it should’ve moved last year or the year before, but it’s very obvious that it’s moved on to the kind of fake news, the generation of those \_\_\_[0:20:12] [patriot]. Basically, the kind of [folk] we’re talking about, the ones that have changed politics here and have changed politics in America, and have changed politics across Europe.

Because, when you look at the kind of media environment, it has become hostile in exactly the same way. Not all of it is fake, some of it is just nasty, and not all of it is… Well, actually, no, that’s not quite true. Yes, all the fake stuff is nasty, not all the nasty stuff is fake. But, it has become a kind of defining characteristic, and the old media has been uniquely bad at taking it on, challenging it. Now, the question is, I guess, the question in the first instance, is around what kind of frame we want to kind of persuade people on a world view other than the one that’s so readily taken up, and has been so readily taken up.

But actually, what became clear at the \_\_\_[0:21:11] Conference was that you can spend your life figuring out what kind of frame might work, but actually, you need a kind of adaptive system to generate your own stuff. Instead of all focusing on exactly the right message and exactly the right conduit for it, you need to fight… The systems are more important than the messages, in a way, because actually, there’s been anti-Muslim propaganda that hasn’t worked.

You know, for every story that The Express has run about the four-year-old refugees and ‘death to Christians’, there’s been a story that somebody at the Daily Mail has run, which just fell flat on its arse. They don’t coordinate their messages, they get the apparatus in place to disseminate the messages, and then just chuck as many of them at them at you as they can, and see what sticks. That is very much the… So, sorry, I forgot where I was. I was in the Scholl Foundation with the philanthropists, so you’re sitting in a normal room like this, except there are only, like, 30 people in it.

The one guy on the panel says, “Okay, I’m going to announce a £100m fund for the combat of fake news.” You’re like, “Okay, philanthropy annoys me, everybody annoys me, but £100m is quite a lot of money.” You know, so if that kind of movement is coming from somewhere, then you do have to start thinking, “Actually, hang on a second, there is a fightback going on, it is worth thinking in a practical rather than a theoretical way, about how you do create your own news, and your own media environment, and your own media structures that will create the world that you want, and the [mass voting 0:22:57] that you want.”

So anyway, I \_\_\_, that is quite sudden, you know, the \_\_\_, the \_\_\_[network], that’s £100m, as a fund to combat fake news. Somebody immediately said on Twitter, “I hate this, I hate this. What’s going to happen? What’s the point of that? Who are they anyway? I bet they’re really evil. How did they make that money?” I was like, “Okay, you may be right,” but I thought, “That is something we have to get better at, which is taking any allies wherever we can find them. Because, kind of, the left-wing purity is yesterday’s tactic. We’re too screwed to be pure at the moment, and whatever network it is, or wherever they got their money, if they have $100m or pounds, then you have to take it, and that’s that.

The second person… So, it’s kind of allowing in the money and allowing in the allies, because actually, a lot of us, certainly in the Guardian world, got used to our position being quite niche, and we got quite comfortable, we got in a niche position. I didn’t mind at all being the only one of 5% of people who disagreed with David Cameron. But now, I’m like, part of 80% of people who disagree with Boris Johnson, and it’s a bit discombobulating. I think, “Well, I don’t really want that person as an ally.”

Well, we’ve just got to accept allies, we’ve got to accept that we’re in a more popular place at the moment, and not revel in the kind of isolationism of opposition. The next thing is that the fake news kind of industry… I’m, kind of, putting the benefit-claimant mother who had a bunch of kids because she didn’t want a job into the category of fake news, even though there probably is somebody somewhere who has a bunch of kids and doesn’t want a job. I’m still putting it into the category of fake news, because I think the presentation of something as a trend which is really an individual is in itself a fake.

The generation of fake news is part of a complicated propaganda machine which is only going to get worse. You know, it’s going to get more persuasive, and it’s going to get more pervasive. It’s going to get better at what it does, because that’s what computational structures do. If, at the moment, algorithms are really, really good at disseminating a story from Sweden into Donald Trump’s inbox, in six months’ time, they’re going to be much, much better at that. So again, it’s about, kind of, taking allies and taking technological allies where you find them.

The sad thing is that the idea of, kind of, fake news as being something you combat is a little bit like taking an argument a position as something that you argue. Actually, you can’t really combat fake news. You can’t say to somebody, “Please stop believing that there was a mass sexual assault in Frankfurt Town Square, because in three months’ time, that’s going to turn out not to be true, you have to feel more internal resilience against the fake news to begin with. You have to build more internal resilience around your networks.

So, it sounds quite lame, but you know, this stuff is built on sharing, and if a huge number of things that are fake are being shared, more things that are not fake are going to be shared, and people have to be more engaged with their media usage, and people have to be more… I don’t know, robust, kind of, rigorous about sharing things that are important. People need to support one another in calling things out. You know, already I’m choking myself with how saccharine this is, but it’s true. It is a machine, there is a machine out there for the generation of hostility.

The machine for the generation of non-hostility has to just get a lot better. I know I said I wouldn’t [hector 0:27:06] anyone, I’m not. So, it’s kind of about building our own news system, rather than fire fighting. There are more lessons for that in evolutionary biology, really, than there is in old school news production.

But, the [lessons of 0:27:24] multi-news production is that old money built old media, and new money has to build new media, because as long as new media is done on a shoestring, it will always be done as click bait, and as long as anything’s done as click bait, it will always tend towards the generations of unpleasantness, rather than the generation of everything else. There’s a kind of sense in which the adaptive challenges that we’re looking at, we either mistake them for intellectual conundra, so you know, “This is a misconception that people have. How do we relieve them of their misconception?”

Or, we look at it as a technical challenge, that, “Their stories are spreading faster than our stories. How do we get hold of their algorithms?” But really, it’s kind of [an adaptive 0:28:16] challenge, because they have a massive head start on us in the kind of solidity of the community, and the solidity of the community that really sad stuff…

You know, for some wacky reason, the right wind world view just got its head down and used the internet a lot better than anybody on the left did, because we were too busy saying, “Oh wow, I wonder what this means for jobs in the future,” instead of, “How can we use this challenge to relentlessly push our very simplistic message?” Finally, to come back to the thing which I said I would come back to, even though I don’t have any of the [chances 0:29:00] that I did then, I thought it might come to me in the intervening time…

There is this kind of Alain de Botton line about constructive news, and everybody’s really picked this up. The Guardian’s got this thing called ‘glass half full’, the BBC has got their constructive news partners. There’s a kind of sense that we need to spread good news stories, and that will somehow build the alternative narrative frames that will persuade people that they’re not alone, that they’re not in an individual, hostile world, that they don’t need to be suspicious of every stranger, that they can trust their fellow man, that one man’s welfare is [one man’s 0:29:38] business. You know, as long as we can make positive news stories, then we can retake the \_\_\_ [horse].

Now, whenever I hear it, my immediate problem is ‘that sounds really boring, that sounds incredibly boring’. It doesn’t just sound boring, it sounds really unsexy, and it doesn’t sound like anything I want to read. So, if somebody said, “I’ve got a really great story about somebody who’s…” Well, what would they be doing? They’d be going to tell people in tornado-struck areas how to build their houses better next time so they didn’t get struck by tornados, I wouldn’t want that story.

If somebody said, “I’m going to teach people how to have small holdings in small holding farms so that they don’t have to undertake really dangerous refugee voyages in which they’ll probably die,” I would be… Okay, if we could get the traffickers in I’d be interested. I wouldn’t be interested in the small holdings. If somebody said, “I’ve got a really great clinic in Liberia, and at the moment they’ve only got 51 doctors per 21m people, and I’ve got a way to train up 17-year-olds to be health workers,” actually, yes, I’d be quite interested in that.

The truth is, though, that drama makes conflict. So, I’m really not interested in a story unless it has an enemy, and if somebody said, “I’ve got a really great story about people trafficking, where I’ve divided people trafficking into 25 different [methods 0:31:10], and I can find you 25 different genres of bad person,” and they tell you what each of those genres is like, and an example, then I’d be interested. So, the other side of drama makes conflict, and then the conflict is the, kind of, leeching underclass, but we are our own conflicts.

We do not need a media environment in which everybody’s really, really nice, because it doesn’t talk to the world that people are living in, and it doesn’t interest anybody. It just isn’t… The generative power of news is that it makes you want to do something, even if it just makes you want to spit at somebody in the street, it makes you want to do something. Whereas, the nice story about some nice people being nice doesn’t make you want to do anything.

I think we need to be honest about how much the, kind of, building of the socialist self is about building up the building of the social self against the threat which is combatable. The threat isn’t the weather, the threat isn’t an abstract, the threat isn’t inequality. The threat has a face, and all of the kind of narratives \_\_\_[0:32:21] from this point on, I think, is around ‘how do you make this dramatic?’ It can’t simply be social, it has to be social and dramatic, and in order for it to be social and dramatic, it has to have an element of the antisocial. Anyway, questions? (Applause)

Chair: Okay, so we’ve got a good time for questions now, so can I have hands raised so I can point mics out to you? Okay, there’s one over here.

Female: Hi, \_\_\_[0:33:05] really interesting stories, and very good and insightful. I study Chinese society, and as part of that, I have looked a little bit at China media [ethnology]. Something which jumps out immediately in your talk is, in my mind, the Chinese government a way of trying to cut down on spreading rumours, which is the Chinese government equivalent of fake news. Because there’s much stricter media control, obviously, in the Chinese context, it’s sort of more straightforward, because you can just get \_\_\_[0:33:44] news stories which are [proper] news, and they can be ‘genuine fake’ news, if you like, or \_\_\_ news.

But, it actually doesn’t make [me feel right]. So, structural solutions to your, sort of, \_\_\_ [statement], how to make nice stories about nice people also interesting. That’s, sort of, a counter example. The Chinese news press is generally not terribly exciting.

Zoe Williams: Yes, yes, yes.

Female: [Crosstalk 0:34:14]. So, I suppose that’s a counter comment, and it’s interesting that that Chinese case is also happening alongside the fake news discourses that we get in the US. So, that’s more of a comment I guess. \_\_\_[0:34:27] [as a] question, it’s about the uptake, the rise of sales for Private Eye, and how you fit that in your commentary about the media humour on the left, and also how subconsciously satirising news articles fit within your generation of \_\_\_[0:34:45].

Zoe Williams: Thank you. I really like all of that. Shall I answer that and then...? Okay, great. It’s really interesting, isn’t it? Because actually, if I’d heard 10 years ago about the Chinese government having a kind of policy on spreading rumours, it sounds like the most authoritarian thing ever. Now we’re in this kind of situation where we’re basically saying the same thing, you know? ‘You’re not allowed to spread rumours’. I think we used to kind of trust in our own resilience, socially.

We used to trust that people wouldn’t believe stupid things, or people might believe stupid things, but they would just be disabused to them, sooner or later. Or, maybe they wouldn’t believe stupid things, but those people wouldn’t have any friends. We, kind of, trusted in a huge number of gating off mechanisms, where the rumour could be spread, but it wouldn’t spread very far, and it would be contained.

There is a part of me that worries maybe whether we’re going at it the wrong way, that there’s a kind of supply side fetish with fake news, that we’re worrying too much about who’s making it, and not who’s believing it. That actually leads into the next point, because I think the way to stop people believing, let alone disseminating fake news, is to laugh at them. You know, they need to be laughed at. People are taken way too seriously at the moment. People with their anger and their concerns, you know, I’m very happy to listen to people’s real, actual concerns, the actual problems they want to talk about.

But, if their concern is that a hairdresser they’ve never met is Jamaican and doesn’t put her children to bed before midnight, I just don’t want to listen to that anymore. I don’t want to have to dignify people’s angry narratives with respectful, active listening. I think, you know, it’s time to be a little bit more robust in one’s response. I think that’s part of humour, is that with the kind of humourlessness, has become this earnest… You know, it’s not even respect, is it?

We’re bending the knee to a kind of rage that we think we don’t understand, but actually understand perfectly easily. It does feel like if we could kind of rediscover some of that ludic self-parody, that we did have pre-equal Britannia, you know, when it was cool, before you had to say it was cool, then I just think that would be a better solution than the rabid policing of things that aren’t true. Sorry, that was like me doing another talk all over again. (Laughter)

Female: One question I had within that was what then might be the role of us, of academics? If it’s not about correcting the falsehood-

Zoe Williams: Yes, no, that’s a really good question.

Female: What is it that we should or could usefully be doing, and maybe are, in many respect?

Zoe Williams: Yes, no, that’s a really good question, because yes, you don’t want all academia to turn into a joke. That would be a disaster. (Laughter)

Female: Hate to tell you. (Laughter)

Zoe Williams: This sounds a bit annoying, I feel like academia doesn’t lobby hard enough on its own behalf, so it’s really, really good at talking about root causes of poverty, but it’s not very good at talking about conditions in its own industry. It’s really, really good at talking about, kind of, working conditions, but it’s not very good at talking about its own working conditions. It’s really good at talking about marketisation, but it’s not very good at resisting marketisation within its own institutions. It’s really good at… Should I go on or just stop? I should stop, right?

Female: (Laughter) This is therapy, it’s [crosstalk 0:38:46].

Zoe Williams: (Laughter) And, I kind of think, over time, lobbying on other people’s behalf is less good than fighting on your own behalf, because there’s something about kind of fighting for the Troubled Families unit, or against the Troubled Families unit, that it makes you ignorable in a way that you’re not ignorable if you’re fighting for the fact that you shouldn’t be on minimum wage when you’ve got a PhD. I mean, it’s ridiculous. You know, I think we’re all the same, you know? Journalists are exactly the same, nobody will really talk about a kind of systemic problem in…

Nobody will talk about… I mean, some people will talk about a very, very broad ‘us and them’, but most people still talk about the problems in society as a kind of small cadre at the bottom really struggling, and the rest of us doing really, really well but really caring about them. I think that kind of has to stop, and we have to start talking more personally about how things are for us. Because actually, everybody under 40 is sort of in the same boat, and some people over 40 are.

Chair: Over here, up there, long hair, in the slightly greyish jumper. Yes, you.

Female: Yes, thank you.

Chair: Wait for the mic to come to you, sorry.

Female: Hello, and thanks very much for this. Really, it’s been [top 0:40:19]. I want to talk to you a little bit [provocative 0:40:21].

Zoe Williams: Yes, go for it.

Female: Say or ask how you might think about the media as a whole, as an industry, not just the left media versus the Daily Mail. So, including The Guardian, including even alternative mainstream news sources, has a lot to answer for in terms of the follow-up with Trump and Brexit. I think it’s precisely, I might suggest, this emphasis, as you were saying, on the drama, and the conflict, and the spectacle, so it’s getting far too much airtime. Like, no matter what the narrative is.

Zoe Williams: I know.

Female: No matter whether it’s fake or not.

Zoe Williams: I was thinking this about Brexit this morning, that actually, it’s so boring, most of it, that I’m only interested in Easter eggs in Gibraltar. I’m really not interested in the difference between a negotiation mandate and a negotiation guideline. I’m just not interested, and it is the flattening out of complexity, is a huge problem. But, I mean, I think we’re talking about two different things, right? There is, on the one side, a studied agenda towards a particular point of view, and it has had an impact on what is considered mainstream.

So, the very, very persistent anti-immigrant, anti-Europe message has turned the BBC, because it gets so much of its own agenda from the printed media, it’s moved the position from which they try and seek their balance. So, their balance would once have been here with a Europhile here and a Europhobe here, and their balance has moved here, with Nigel Farage there, and a moderate Europhobe opposite him.

Actually, it has shifted really, really significantly, and I don’t think that is about thinking about drama being conflict. I agree, though, that there is a kind of… Again, like, the drama is conflict, and the spectacle are two different problems. Because, the spectacle thing is just stopping people just moving on, and I think that’s a kind of internet thing, that everybody says that they don’t do click bait, but everybody does click bait.

The kind of headlines that would’ve been really commonplace when I started in journalism would just be laughed out of town now, because they’re 17 words, multiple punctuation marks, not a single interesting word amongst any of the words. You know, that just wouldn’t make it. That wouldn’t cut it anymore, so there is a kind of search for brevity and simplicity which is damaging. That’s for sure, and that’s a kind of modern environment thing. But, the drama is conflict thing, I kind of won’t accept that this is a bad thing. I think that you do need to…

You know, the whole human storytelling is about generative emotions, and you generate emotions when you pick one side against the other and you fight the bad side. That’s what it’s all about. I’ve literally never read a story in which something hasn’t happened, or in which only good things happen. I’ve just never read that story. But, I mean, I’d love to see it. You remember that book where they never use the letter ‘E’? I would love to see a book in which they never use the concept conflict, and see if it actually worked. But, the fact that I never have suggests to me that it’s not possible.

Chair: Mic down here.

[Break in audio 0:44:10 – 0:44:22]

Male: Thanks for an interesting talk, Zoe. Just two quick questions: One, what about the generation issue, the younger generation in particular? It [was 0:44:29] a very nice time for \_\_\_, and \_\_\_ to talk about Brexit as \_\_\_ and so and so \_\_\_. My son, “Don’t worry, in 10 years they’ll all be dead.” So, it’s a fairly flippant remark, but he’s [full of] \_\_\_ which he believes that, a generation issue.

So, one thing \_\_\_[0:44:49]. The second is, talking about villains and the people looking at tax and whatever, \_\_\_ is so unimpressed seeing exactly when Farage dismisses the whole of the European Parliament and \_\_\_ Europe, institutions of Europe as being like the Mafia, to which the Italian [crosstalk].

Zoe Williams: (Laughter) Did they mind that?

Male: He said, “Okay, you’re all gangsters.” Now, he can get away with that, Farage. I think, in terms of his [attack 0:45:15], is that he can encapsulate, in one word, an institutional attack against Europe and European Parliament, [or] institutions \_\_\_, despite drawing a salary in that context. Is there an institutional villain that one can then mobilise on the other side \_\_\_[0:45:35], that would have the same type of resonance? I doubt it can [be], we should castigate the Daily Mail on it, [crosstalk].

Zoe Williams: No, no, no. We’ve been castigating the Daily Mail since forever, and they never-

Male: They wouldn’t have it. People don’t… I wonder whether there’s something as a sort of a equivalent to the ‘Faraga Mafia’, in institutional terms. So, generation one, institution the other.

Zoe Williams: Yes, the generational question, the problem with your son’s point of view is that he’s correct insofar as it was mainly a generational vote. He’s wrong to think they’re going to be dead in 10 years. It’s going to be years. It’s going to be 20 years at least. I mean, imagine how much damage these people can do.

Male: I said that to him himself, my own [crosstalk 0:46:14].

Zoe Williams: (Laughter) That’s the thing, it’s the young people. They’ve just got no idea how long we’re going to live. I mean, something’s gone wrong in the social contract, because I’ve got friends whose parents said, “Well, you know, this is your future and your children’s future. You say how you want us to vote,” but I don’t know any… My parents didn’t say that, and most retired people didn’t say that. Something’s gone wrong in the fact that, you know, the classic remark about Brexit was people saying their parents voted to restore sovereignty, and they’d never heard them say the word ‘sovereignty’ in the previous 42 years.

It’s true, I’ve never heard my mother say ‘sovereignty’. I mean, fuck’s sake. I think there was a kind of spurt of malice, there was a kind of strange, sadistic failure of symbiosis between the generations in this vote, and I cannot account for it. It’s really strange to have, you know, thousands and millions of people over 65 voting for young people not to be able to travel freely across a continent. It’s kind of beyond anything I would’ve expected, and I can’t account for it. So yes, that’s a really not helpful answer at all.

What I would say about the institutions is that if you look at the Scottish Referendum, they did exactly what Nigel Farage did about Westminster, and they very nearly swung it, and I think they will swing it next time. I’m not sure that I think that’s a good idea either, but I kind of respect their… You know, the day after their Scottish Referendum result, I said I felt the same as I did after my first marriage: Relieved not to be alone, but sad for him. (Laughter) You know, they managed to create quite an ambitious architecture for the society they wanted, and they stuck that on Westminster being corrupt, Tory and bastards.

They didn’t get what they wanted, but they did remake the narrative for who held the future, and kicked the Labour Party, ironically, out of Scotland, I think forever. Now, I think it took a demonisation of Westminster. I don’t think they could’ve done that without pinning to those institutions a load of values that they despised. I think that’s where Farage is so smart. You know, you take these institutions that none of us really understand, and say, “This person wants your bananas standardised, and wants you to not be able to employ your own son-in-law,” and all these kinds of ancient rights that we’ve had, to eat bendy bananas and nepotism.

You have to be able to pin something on these institutions, otherwise it doesn’t stick. On the left, we often try and do it on to a kind of corporation, or we try and do it on to the Daily Mail. For some reason, it doesn’t work, and I think it’s because it’s not ambitious enough. I think it’s because we think it’s just too audacious.

Who could possibly say the Council of Europe was kind of malign, when all they try and do is foster peace? Who would do that? Then Nigel Farage does it, and everybody believes it, and you go, “Oh right, that’s how they do it.” So, I think we kind of lack audacity, and we lack simplicity, but I don’t know which institutions I’d single out, to be honest. You know, maybe the Troika.

Chair: We had a question over there, black jumper.

Zoe Williams: I feel like I’m at a dinner party and I’ve been, like, really talking over everybody, and I’m going to leave, and as soon as my cab arrives, everybody’s going to go, “Thank God she’s gone.” (Laughter) Sorry.

Chair: Just going to the dinner.

Male: Thank you very much for that talk. I just want to clarify that you say that the people that started these racist views against immigrants, they need to be laughed at. Is that what you said?

Zoe Williams: Well, they don’t need to be laughed at for their entire personalities. If they say, “I am worried about my wages,” or, “My daughter’s flat,” or, “My kid can’t get into nursery,” or, “I can’t get on to a waiting list for a hospital,” then no, don’t laugh at that. But if they say, “There’s a Polish family next to me who never intended to do any work,” then yes, for sure I would laugh at them. Just, you know, there’s no other way.

Male: Yes, but, I don’t know, I think I would disagree with you there. As a social scientist, we should not laugh at these people, even though we disagree with what they say. So, I have to say I disagree with you on that. I would try not to laugh at these people if I was a social scientist, I have to say, because I think if we do that, it will discredit us to these people. I think our job is not to persuade them, to \_\_\_[0:51:41] directly, but rather to [plunge] \_\_\_. I think our \_\_\_ is to understand these people as well as possible in the scientific sense.

Zoe Williams: Yes, no, for sure.

Male: I have to say, I disagree with you on that one.

Zoe Williams: No, no. That’s fine, but listen, firstly, we have different jobs, right? You’re a social scientist and I’m a journalist.

Male: That’s right.

Zoe Williams: So, it’s true that you probably wouldn’t be able to do the work that you do if you went around laughing at people. (Laughter) But, at some point, I truly believe that if you have values which involve not making up nonsense about a family you’ve never spoken to, and pinning all your economic problems on them, if those are part of your values, you’ve got to be prepared at least to assert them in a robust and human way. Because, I don’t think… You know, I think, in a way, there’s something a bit patronising about that whole phrase, ‘we’ve got to try and understand these people’.

Well, you know, if an uncle of mine said, “I’m going to vote UKIP to kick Nadine Dorries in the eye,” then I would laugh at him. That’s an example from real life. You know, that doesn’t mean I don’t love him, that doesn’t mean I don’t try and understand him. That doesn’t mean I won’t listen to why he hates Nadine Dorries. That doesn’t mean I don’t care about him, or think of him as my peer, but precisely because I think he’s my peer, I would laugh at him for saying something illogical. I mean, I think you’ve got to pay people the respect of thinking they can take your scorn for a stupid remark. (Laughter) But, you know, you’re welcome to laugh at me. It’s quid pro quo.

Chair: We’ve got some questions over here, so over here we’ll take… Yes, the woman first, and then we’ll take both questions together, so the woman and then the man in yellow.

Zoe Williams: There are two men in yellow. (Laughter)

Chair: That’s true.

Zoe Williams: Only at a sociology conference.

Chair: Greg was pointing at the \_\_\_[0:54:00].

Female: Thank you very much. He was actually saying, “Would you behave more vigorously \_\_\_?” Following on from the gentleman’s question, you use the words ‘us’ and ‘them’ quite a lot. ‘They’, ‘they’re gaining on us’. My first question is, who are ‘us’ and who are ‘they’? The second question I have is do you think now, \_\_\_[0:54:28] accepts money from alt-right financiers, the French National Front, she’s trying to get money because the banks won’t lend her any, from the left, from the right, from anyone who will give it to her?

Zoe Williams: Yes, yes, yes.

Female: But, there are problems in terms of accepting that money, because both symbolically and financially, it gives purchase to a certain type of political force. That is very problematic. So, when you say, “We need to take solidarity where we find it,” you really mean, “We need to take money from people that \_\_\_[0:55:02] is taking money from.

Zoe Williams: Well, can I answer the first question second? I think, realistically, the chances of anybody alt-right offering us money are so slim that I’m prepared to take that as a risk, you know? It just doesn’t… We have a problem with elite over-production. We have a problem with there being too many rich… You know, this is an inequality function. There are too many rich people for the number of rich people jobs there are, and as a result, there are people like Arron Banks trying to influence the process from the sidelines with a lot of money. They do incredibly well. Now, those people probably aren’t going to be our people.

If Arron Banks has a rush of blood to the head and thinks, “It will really subvert the political process if I give The Guardian a load of money,” and he’s played it out as a kind of great big chess game in his head, and The Guardian brings down the Daily Express, but then that just unleashes a many-headed hydra underneath the Express, and he’s got it all mapped, I still don’t care. I’m still having his money. I can see that’s gone down really badly, but I’m going to have it. (Laughter) I don’t think it’s going to come up, but I’m going to have that money.

‘Us’ and ‘them’, this is an absolute classic. I’ve seen it expressed in various degrees of \_\_\_[0:56:19] and robustness, whether or not if you say ‘them’, you mean ‘everybody in Stoke’, or you mean ‘everybody who voted leave’, or you mean ‘everybody who reads The Mail’, or, you know, who exactly you mean. Now, A, I don’t believe in that. I do believe in the concept, in the idea of bi-conceptualism.

I do believe that everybody can have their social self appealed to and their activistic self appealed to. I do believe that everybody could be persuaded to a different view if they were spoken to as equals and respectfully. I do believe that, you know… I actually don’t believe that there’s, kind of, any huge difference between the South and the North, or between the old and the young. I don’t believe there’s a huge difference in the way of seeing things. I think people are just taking different messages.

But, there is definitely an ‘us’ and ‘them’, in the sense if you look at the kind of consistency of the message from Nigel Farage, to Isabel Oakeshott, to Dan Hannan, to Dominic Cummings, to Michael Gove, to every single poisonous Katie Hopkins figure anywhere in the media, to every single awful kind of… Eugh. Sorry, that wasn’t very articulate.

There is a very consistent message across politics, and the media, and the kind of civil society, in inverted commas, sort of ‘Katie Hopkins’ sort of motor mouth stuff, which is, I think, slightly imported from America, and the kind of success of that [shop jock 0:57:55] genre, which spawned not just a handful of very, very right wing radio DJs, but a whole generation and class of people who thought it was very cool to talk like Rush Limbaugh.

This voice is loud, and strident, and very strong. I certainly wouldn’t step away from calling it a direct opponent of the values that I believe in, and that I think most of us do believe in. Now, if anybody wants to… You know, I say ‘us’, and there’s a kind of sense of ‘why would you be so cosy?’ ‘Why would you think that everybody in your elite bubble thinks the same way?’

Now, I’m sure there are things that we could disagree about, millions of them, thousands of them. I mean, Christ… Sorry, I won’t… Anyway, but, I think there are very serious values at stake here, about, you know, universal human dignity and rights. The other side doesn’t believe in them, the other side doesn’t particularly… The Daily Mail ran a cartoon today in which some refugees being picked out of the sea were depicted as monkeys. There’s a very serious battle going on, and if we’re too lame to say ‘us’ and ‘them’, then we’re going to be in trouble.

Chair: We’ll have the man in yellow.

Male: \_\_\_[0:59:19].

Zoe Williams: (Laughter)

Chair: The more attractive yellow.

Male: It’s a nice yellow. Yes, thanks Zoe. You’ve raised the most interesting questions about how we go about combatting this stuff, one of which is the kind of \_\_\_[0:59:39] voice that you talked about, and there’s this danger that there’s this search for the authentic, you have the authentic \_\_\_[0:59:47] voice that-

Zoe Williams: Yes, yes, yes.

Male: [Crosstalk] [John Lewis] and the politicians on the left are trying to find. I think that’s a function of the fact that it is John Lewis and the politicians which are seeking to represent people, because we’ve got a systemic problem in terms of the production of media and the production of culture, which is one where minority voices, working class voices have been choked off in terms of the production of knowledge. I’m just interested in what you think and The Guardian, dare I say it, is maybe an example of that.

Zoe Williams: Yes, yes, yes.

Male: What’s the responsibility of The Guardian, which has become really important [crosstalk 1:00:33]?

Zoe Williams: Yes, that’s true.

Male: [Crosstalk] laugh about what The Guardian is, and it’s [now the] only mainstream thing that is [thought about], really. So, what is its responsibility in terms of that wider system of knowledge production, which after all, these narratives, when you’re talking about [neat 1:00:54] voices, bodies, and lives, and experiences, \_\_\_ and reacting to that.

Zoe Williams: Yes. I mean, you’re absolutely right, and I think The Guardian has a… I’m probably allowed to say whatever I like. I don’t think anybody watches… I mean, I’m sure they do, but not The Guardian. I think The Guardian has a real problem, in that they basically… They, kind of, have a diversity policy, where they’ll get some diversity trainees under a diversity scheme, and then that will be their diversity representation. There’s a huge sense that it’s really just a kind of…

It hasn’t been internalised, nobody really believes in it. I mean, I don’t know. I don’t work in the actual office, so I don’t know whether that’s true or not, but it’s very noticeable, what you say, that it’s all very white, middle class. Where there is a kind of diversity element, it’s because they’re the kind of new digital trainees. One wonders, from there, how much they’re going to progress and how much difference that’s going to make. I think the main… I mean, my problem…

There’s that, that is a problem, but what Paul Mason talked about is the ‘othering of the North’, this kind of sense that the North is a completely foreign country. Anywhere not North, where they think a bit like people in the North is like ‘honorary North’. So, in Luton, they think a little bit like people in Sheffield, therefore Luton is in the North. If you were to say, “Well, that thing they think, that’s wrong,” then you’re not allowed to say that, because you’re not paying enough respect to the people of the North.

But, there’s a kind of in-built disrespect that you kind of write them off as all the same person. I think there’s a definite… It’s not just the diversity within news organisations that’s been choked off, it’s also that there’s no diaspora. There’s no kind of dissemination. There’s no mutual production of news across the country, so people are allowed to get away with the idea that bits of the country are completely foreign to other bits, and we could never understand one another.

The best we can hope for is just sympathy. That, I think, is a problem of the production of news. Actually, Dan [Hynde 1:03:31] had an idea, which I think is the BBC’s domain in the end, rather than The Guardian’s, which is that if you’re going to justify still having a licence fee, then it should be used to have citizen-produced journalism coming from everywhere, with a purpose, and not being filtered through the white Oxbridge filter that you’d be put through to get a job in the BBC at the moment.

I mean, it does need something really significant. I don’t think you can say, “Well, let’s have four candidates a year and make sure they’re not all of one type,” is going to cut it, because it hasn’t cut it yet.

Chair: Thank you. I think we’ve got a lot to, sort of, think about and ponder, not just what’s journalism’s role in responding to these times, but our own role. There are very different kinds of academics as well as citizens. So, I’d like to thank Zoe for generating a lot of discussion. (Applause)

Zoe Williams: Thank you.

Chair: If you can stay seated for a little bit longer, I’m going to hand over to [Lynne Jameson 1:04:48] for the Philip Abrams Prize, thank you.

Female: Okay, so, moving on seamlessly, I’m sitting down so that I’m in front of the microphone. I’ll stand up again in a minute. The Philip Abrams Prize, you’ll remember, is awarded for the best solo-authored book that is the first book of an early career sociologist working in British sociology. Near the front of your programme, you’ll find all of the nominations and the shortlist. This year, we shortlisted six books, and I have to tell you that every one of these books is an absolutely fantastic read.

They are about something that is worth reading about, they are delivered well, they’re well written and they are engaged. It was an incredibly difficult job to choose a winner, and as last year, we partly copped out and have got two winners. Even that was difficult, so we’ve got a joint top prize. I’ll just remind, Philip Abrams died very young. He was an empirical sociologist, a historical sociologist. This prize is, sort of, in a way, honouring him, and the books all, I think, live up to his tradition.

So, I’m going to tell you who the winners are, and I’m going to just briefly say something about each of the two books, and ask the prize winners to come down and get their prize, okay? So, the winners are Paul Campbell and Amy Chandler. (Applause) Paul Campbell’s book, ‘Football, Ethnicity and Community: The Life of an African-Caribbean Football Club’ is an excellent piece of historical sociology.

It traces the relationship between experiences of racism, racialised ethnic identity, sport, sense of community through this particular history of an African-Caribbean football club. He demonstrates the, sort of, historical brevity of a unifying black identity that’s community-based as a kind of peak of social exclusion and racism, and does a very good narrative of complexities of social change. So, it’s an excellent piece of work. Amy Chandler’s book, ‘Self-Injury, Medicine and Society - Authentic Bodies’ also successfully brings together bodies of work that are often not brought together: The sociology of the body, the sociology of emotions, the sociology of medicine.

But also, issues about selfhood and authenticity, how it is that people achieve a sense of authentic self. It has a very moving account of self-harming that is not stigmatising, and is something much more subtle and sophisticated than the way that people who self-harm are often treated. So, again, an excellent piece of work. So, I’m going to ask the prize winners to come up and get their cheque, which sometimes I’ve forgotten to give, and certificate. (Applause)

[Applause, some inaudible chatter 1:09:15 – 1:09:53]

Amy’s… There’s someone 10 weeks old with us as well.

Male: \_\_\_ in the middle.

Female: In the middle, right, okay. Sorry, I’m trying to get out of the picture but I’m not allowed. This way?

Male: Yes, perfect. Thank you.

Male: Thank you.

Female: Well done, both of you. Well done.

Male: \_\_\_ focus.

Female: Fabulous work, both of you. Really, it’s a pleasure to read these books. It really is.

Male: I’ll just get \_\_\_[1:10:23] picture [a little bit], \_\_\_.

Female: Right, you alright?

Male: Okay, [crosstalk].

Female: Yes, \_\_\_.

[Continuing to take photographs, background chatter 1:10:33 – 1:11:02]

Chair: Okay, you are now free to go. It’s 7:15 for dinner, thanks very much.

[Background chatter 1:11:07 – 1:11:20]

There’s a prize draw for books, and if Ricky [Gee] and Emma Jackson are here, I can give them to you. So, that’s Ricky Gee and Emma Jackson. Okay, so we will make sure they get to them.

[Background chatter 1:11:51 – 1:12:07]

END AUDIO

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