

Speech: Speech by Minister for Asia and the Pacific: disinformation – democracy and social stability at risk?

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, it is a pleasure to welcome you to Westminster – not just the heart of my Parliamentary Constituency, but also the beating heart of political life here in the United Kingdom.

Some might say that heart has been having some palpitations of late: I'll come back to Brexit later.

Thank you to Alex, Vincenzo and Rytis for the warm welcome and for setting the scene for today's seminar.

The Club of Venice has been bringing Government communicators together for more than 30 years.

Over that time, wave after wave of technological innovation has opened new lines of communication that have transformed how governments talk to their people, and how people access information.

We have lived through a communications revolution that has brought the people of the world closer together, in a web of online networks, encrypted groups, and bulk data sets; connected to one and other by common interests and common causes; and speaking a new universal language punctuated with 'likes', emojis and retweets.

It has been a revolution that has democratised and accelerated the spread of information.

It has moved at a pace that has seen our libraries, our newspapers, and our broadcasters challenged as never before.

In the process, they have found themselves ceding ground, influence and users to unmoderated online chambers of social discourse.

For those of us in this room with an interest in getting messages across to the public, this revolution has required us to rethink what we do, and how we do it.

Without doubt it has been a time of unparalleled opportunity.

It has put politicians just a finger-tap away from putting information directly in the hands of the people we represent.

The challenge

Of course it is not just those of us with a keen interest in government, democracy, and society that have been given these new opportunities.

The same opportunities have also been made available to those who wish to chip away at the truth, at the strength of our democracy, and at the cohesion of our societies.

They too have learnt to harness new technologies for their own ends. We saw an example of the deliberate, mal-intentioned distortion of facts in the aftermath of the Westminster Bridge terrorist attack last year.

Genuine images were circulated with misleading commentary, asserting that a woman wearing a hijab was callously ignoring injured victims.

In fact, she was texting her family to let them know she was safe.

Disinformation is not a new threat. As far back as 1688, Great Britain's Privy Council released a proclamation against the spreading of false news.

Disinformation may be as old as the hills, but the ongoing technological revolution has built a new stage for it; and for those who wish to use it to attack our democracies and our alliances, and to corrode the respect for diversity that binds our societies together.

Designed to deepen divisions and cast doubt on truth, disinformation uses social media algorithms to identify susceptible targets and amplify false information.

It seeks an audience looking for confirmation of their worst fears and views, crowding out new voices and distracting from alternative perspectives.

Governments across Europe have been subjected to disinformation, sown on distant computers, by those intent on fanning discord and division within our societies.

We have suffered at the hands of certain states that routinely use disinformation as a tool of foreign policy.

We have seen time and time again how easy it is to spread false or manipulated information to people around the world.

There are countless examples of how the Kremlin has done this to destabilise its perceived enemies, and disguise its own actions.

Disinformation accompanied Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea; their destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine; and their response to the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime against innocent civilians.

And more recently, in the aftermath of the Salisbury attack in March, when we repeatedly asked the Russian Government to account for what had happened, they responded with obfuscation and lies, spewing out dozens of ludicrous so-

called explanations.

Whether in Ukraine, Syria or here in the UK, disinformation is being used to undermine the rules based international system and to attack our liberal democracies.

Protecting ourselves from it is one of the most pressing international issues of our time.

As our Prime Minister recently said “The threats we face do not recognise the borders of individual nations or discriminate between them.”

We want to work with industry, civil society, academia and our international partners to detect, disrupt, expose and refute disinformation.

This shall continue to be a central part of our cooperation with European partners long after we have left the European Union.

Responding to disinformation

Countering hostile state disinformation demands a concerted response on many levels, and the UK is at the forefront of a growing international consensus on the need to take action against it, regardless of source or intent.

In the UK we are taking a ‘whole of society’ approach to tackling disinformation, drawing on the experience and lessons learned of our Nordic and Baltic partners.

We shall focus this work around three key objectives:

First; to deter the use of disinformation by exposing and disrupting those who use it against us.

Second; to increase transparency and accountability online to make it harder and less rewarding to spread disinformation.

Third; to make people more resilient to disinformation through education and empowerment.

To achieve these objectives we are working with tech providers, tech users and academics, to better understand the impact of disinformation, and to improve education and digital literacy programmes. We are also considering regulation.

Internationally we are investing £100m in countering disinformation. This work includes providing important capacity-building support to independent media. One of the best antidotes to disinformation is a robust, free, vibrant and varied media landscape.

There is less space for disinformation to take hold where there is trust in a wide and robust national and local media.

Independent media and investigative journalism have a crucial role to play in

challenging disinformation when it occurs, and helping to educate audiences to make them more resilient to disinformation.

However, journalists need more support from us, because in too many parts of the world their work puts them in great danger.

Globally, threats to journalists are at the highest level in 10 years.

Last year, 78 journalists were killed, and over 300 imprisoned for no other reason than doing their job. Speaking in 1949, Sir Winston Churchill said,

“A free press is the unsleeping guardian of every other right that free men prize”

Building on our proud history of a vibrant and independent media, our Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt has announced that he will make the promotion of Media Freedom a priority over the coming year.

We commend the work of our international partners, those of you represented here today, to counter disinformation.

We want to work with all of you to put this issue at the forefront of international discourse.

We shall host a major international conference next year to mobilise a global consensus behind the protection of journalists.

We shall support Media Freedom projects and we shall expand the number of journalists receiving training, including in newsrooms here in the UK.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, faced with these threats to our democracies and our freedoms, we must come together to protect our shared values.

As our Prime Minister has said, “The fundamental values we share – respect for human dignity, human rights, freedom, democracy and equality – have created common cause to act together in our shared interest.”

All of you, as communicators, play an important role – not only in shaping the public’s view of what governments do, but also in informing government policy. You are needed now, more than ever.

Let us come together to combat the threat of disinformation, to build public trust in our democracies and our values, and to strengthen independent media, as the guardians of those values.

Thank you.