The New Political Communication was founded in 2007 as the UK’s leading centre for research on digital politics. This written evidence is compiled by three members of the New Political Communication Unit: Professor Ben O’Loughlin, ex-Specialist Advisor to the UK Parliament’s Select Committee on Soft Power, Dr Joanna Szostek, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research Fellow, and Dr Cristian Vaccari, Reader in Politics.

---

THE CONTEXT

*Some* kinds of communication, on *some* kinds of issues, brought to the attention of *some* kinds of people under *some* kinds of conditions, have *some* kinds of effects. (Berelson et al., 1954: 356, italics added) ¹

The context for this enquiry is alarm that a certain kind of media content will have significant effects on public opinion and the functioning of democracy. We begin with a note of caution. Since the birth of political communication research with Paul Lazarsfeld, Berelson and colleagues in the US, the idea of mass effects has never been supported by evidence. As the quote above indicates, persuasion is fine-grained and tricky. And as the former British diplomat Robert Cooper once said, “Influencing foreigners is difficult.” This written submission focuses on the threat of Russian disinformation within the former Soviet space and across Western democracies in order to define exactly how vulnerable the UK is to the threats and risks of fake news.

---

SUMMARY POINTS

- Russian fake news is primarily targeted at the Russian domestic audience to sustain the appearance of legitimacy for the Russian government. There is no evidence that Russian fake news is intrinsically appealing to those without a linguistic or cultural connection to Russia and even many Russian-speakers regard it with scepticism. Audiences outside Russia turn to propagandistic Russian news sources when they feel dissatisfied with mainstream news in their own countries, and when they feel that their Russian-speaking population is facing unfair economic hardship or discrimination from their government. In other words, the failures of domestic politics may push citizens towards seeking alternative sources of news, whether from Russia, Islamic State, or any other alternative source of ‘facts’.

- In the UK, older, less educated, and less politically interested British internet users are substantially less aware of the problem of false information on the internet, less confident in their ability to overcome this problem, and less likely to adopt defensive measures, such as checking different websites, to protect themselves from those risks.

---

• Compared with internet users of seven other Western democracies, British internet users are not particularly sceptical of the quality of search engine results and not very keen to check the accuracy of the information they find on a website by comparing it with other websites. This may be because they are used to consuming information from the British media which is relatively independent from the state and politically impartial. However, their lower levels of scepticism about information accessed via search engines and relatively lukewarm approach to online fact-checking may leave British citizens more exposed to the negative effects of false and misleading information online.

• Paradoxically, Western democracies whose media systems generate greater audience trust may leave audiences more vulnerable to misinformation, lacking the knowing ambivalence and wariness of audiences in former Soviet countries or newer European democracies. Media systems that exhibit more desirable qualities, such as politically independent news media, strong public service broadcasters, and high levels of internet access in the population, result in citizen-users who are more likely to take the credibility of information as a given.

• We have evidence that those charged with regulating media and communication in UK elections have been asleep at the wheel for many years. Electoral law must be brought into dialogue with information policy regarding matters of privacy and data protection.

---

EXTENDED EVIDENCE

• The term ‘fake news’ is used (inter alia) to describe media reports based on deliberately doctored or fabricated evidence. Such reports have featured repeatedly on TV channels and websites funded by the Russian state, particularly since the conflict in Ukraine broke out in 2014.

The use of fabricated evidence in Russian news reports has been extensively documented by the Ukrainian civil society organisation StopFake and by the European Union’s External Action Service which produces a weekly ‘Disinformation review’. Examples of Russian news stories based on fabricated evidence include the alleged crucifixion of a toddler by Ukrainian troops, and multiple far-fetched theories of how Ukrainian forces might have brought down the airliner MH17. Some observers argue that the Russian government is supporting the production of this kind of ‘fake news’ in order to undermine and destabilise both Ukraine and democratic societies in the West. However, it is important to bear in mind that most fabricated Russian news stories originate on channels aimed principally at Russian domestic audiences. The Russian leadership believes that Western governments and Western media are working hand in glove to ‘undermine the sovereignty, the political and social stability and the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation’. Therefore, the


The highest priority of the Russian government’s media strategy is to reinforce support for the authorities within Russia against the perceived ‘threat’ of Western criticism; foreign policy goals are secondary.\(^6\)

Unsubstantiated news stories from the Russian media do spread, however, and reach audiences all around the world. Russian-speaking audiences outside Russia consume such stories via satellite or internet versions of the same news platforms used by Russian domestic audiences. For other international audiences, including in the UK, the Russian government funds production of news and current affairs content in multiple languages via platforms like the Sputnik news agency and the RT television network.\(^7\) News stories on Sputnik and RT contain tendentious opinions and speculation more often than entirely fabricated pseudo-facts. However, RT has been sanctioned by Ofcom on more than one occasion for broadcasting ‘highly serious’ unsubstantiated allegations about events in Ukraine and Syria.\(^8\) Overall, however, there is no evidence to date that the international diffusion of propagandistic Russian news has impacted on audience opinions in the UK.

- Russian state-controlled media use unsubstantiated allegations to support a consistent pro-Kremlin narrative which contradicts anti-Kremlin narratives in the ‘mainstream’ media of other countries. Recent audience research suggests that engagement with and support for the pro-Kremlin narrative, including tolerance of its unsubstantiated or ‘fake’ elements, is partly a function of alienation from ‘mainstream’ news narratives among people who feel that issues which matter to them are not being addressed.

People in the UK have access to a wide range of news sources which convey diverse viewpoints about domestic and international politics. From this range, an individual will form a personal ‘news media repertoire’, i.e. a set of sources which (s)he uses regularly. The composition of an individual’s news media repertoire depends on both motivational factors (the perceived utility of the content or its cognitive consonance) and situational factors (such as ease of access and social circle).\(^9\)

Recent research in Ukraine found that individuals incorporated propagandistic pro-Kremlin sources into their news media repertoires when they were dissatisfied or aggravated by narratives in Ukrainian ‘mainstream’ media.\(^10\) Mainstream news narratives are hard to avoid; people did not live in ‘filter bubbles’ from which mainstream views were entirely excluded. However, some individuals reacted angrily to mainstream news media because they felt that the real problems and concerns of their everyday lives – particularly economic hardship – were being ignored to protect the agenda and interests of the political elite. In this context, pro-Kremlin media narratives which

---


\(^10\) This is a research project in progress, for details see the project website www.stratnarra.eu, or contact Joanna.szostek@rhul.ac.uk.
criticised the Ukrainian elite elicited approval, even though a pro-Kremlin bias was recognised. Indeed, there is ambivalence as some people (particularly the younger generation) view Russian ‘soft power’ policies as propaganda, despite agreeing with Russian criticism of the Ukrainian elite.11

Clearly, the UK and Ukraine have very different media environments so one must be cautious in drawing conclusions about British news consumers on the basis of a Ukrainian audience study. However, it is important to bear in mind that distrust in the mainstream media can precede exposure to ‘fake news’ sources, being rooted in experiences of everyday life rather than the doubt that unscrupulous news providers try to sow.

Economic and political dissatisfaction as a possible ‘push factor’ towards Russian news can be found across the former Soviet space. Public opinion research by the Latvian National Defence Academy in 2016 showed that while Latvia is polarized, those parts of society more oriented towards Russia do not necessarily want Russian influence in Latvia and look at events in Ukraine as a warning.12 In a recent roundtable discussion among journalists from the region, one journalist from Lithuania summed up the situation: ‘I think the main thing behind this pro-Kremlin mood is a lack of [Lithuanian] government policy on integration and dialogue with those social and ethnic groups who are least loyal to Lithuania and the west in general’.13 Citizens in the region would rather that Lithuanian or Latvian political leaders worked on overcoming social polarization. In an interesting parallel, Russian-speakers across the North Caucuses who express similar dissatisfaction to those in Lithuania and Latvia are turning towards another kind of ‘alternative facts’, those from radical Islamic groups – they too feel the push away from their domestic mainstream politics but choose Islamic State rather than Russian Today.14

If distrust in mainstream media and politics can push audiences towards alternatives that include fake news, let us look in detail at UK audiences and how they sit within Western political and media systems comparatively.

- Is there any difference in the way people of different ages, social backgrounds, genders etc use and respond to fake news?

To address this question, we rely on custom-built surveys, conducted under the supervision of Dr. Cristian Vaccari and Funded by the Italian Ministry of Education (www.wepoleu.net). Respondents were asked two questions which gauge the extent to which internet users trust and verify the information they find online.15

---


15 The percentages are based on a survey fielded by IPSOS in the United Kingdom between May 8-29, 2015,
Since search engines have been considered a potential gateway to fake news, the extent to which their users believe in the accuracy and reliability of their results is another important barrier to the impact of false information accessed via search engines. In our survey, we asked British internet users how they evaluate the truthfulness of the results they get via the main search engines. As the results show, 14% of British internet users always trust the websites they access through search engines, and 20% do not think about the truthfulness of the websites they are directed to by search engines. The rest of the British online public is aware that some search results may be accurate and some may not, with 33% feeling confident they can tell the two apart and 33% not feeling such confidence.

**Figure 1 – Perceptions of the truthfulness of search engine results among British internet users (“Don’t know” excluded)**

Even if citizens have developed a healthy scepticism towards the news they find online, such scepticism would not isolate them from the potentially adverse effects of false and misleading information if they do not also develop corrective habits enabling them to verify the accuracy of the immediately after the 2015 general election. A sample of 1,750 respondents was constructed via online panels where respondents were offered non-monetary incentives to participate. Invitations were sent in each country until the sample achieved the target size and was representative of the population with internet access aged 18-74 for age, gender, region of residence, occupational condition, and educational level. The survey completion rate was 19.4%. The surveys were collected as part of the webpoleu.net project, coordinated by Dr. Cristian Vaccari. Technical information on all surveys is available upon request.

16 It must be noted that answers to the questions discussed in this report may have been somewhat inflated by social desirability bias, i.e. individuals’ desire to answer questions in ways they believe to be more socially acceptable. For instance, some respondents may have claimed to check information accuracy by comparing different websites even if they rarely or never do this in reality. To the extent this bias exists, however, it should manifest itself similarly across the different countries covered in this study. Within each country, it is likely to be more pronounced among respondents who are less educated and who come from lower social classes.
sources they may be sceptical about. To understand the extent to which this is the case, we asked the following question: “Which of these things do you usually do when using the Internet? Comparing different websites to verify if some information you came across online is true (yes/no)” (don’t know responses are excluded). This is an important barrier against the undue influence of false information, as various sites exist (such as snopes.com) that identify false news stories and provide authoritative information on their veracity, usually within days, if not hours, of the news becoming popular online.

In our survey, 72% of British internet users claim they compare websites to check their accuracy, while 28% of British internet users have not developed the habit to be their own online fact-checkers, but rather tend to be content with the information they encounter in the websites they visit.

To establish how false information that could be accessed online may impact different subgroups in the population, we examine how responses to the two questions presented above vary among British internet users of different gender, age, education, levels of political knowledge, interest in politics, and ideology. Table 1 at the end of this section provides summary data for all the questions and variables. The starkest differences are related to age, education, and interest in politics. Differences related to gender, political knowledge, and political ideology are less remarkable.

Older internet users are the least confident in their ability to identify false information and the least likely to protect themselves from false information, while younger internet users show both greater awareness of the problem and higher levels of digital skills to correct for it. Whereas 14.4% of respondents aged 18-24 claimed to not worry about the truthfulness of search engine results, as many as 32.6% among respondents aged 55 years and older did. Conversely, while 42.3% of our youngest respondents claimed to be aware that not all search engine results are accurate but felt confident they could tell accurate and inaccurate results apart, only 20.8% among our oldest respondents felt such confidence. By contrast, 39.8% of our oldest respondents claimed they could not tell true and false search results from each other, while only 28.8% among our youngest respondents did. Respondents aged 55 and older were the least likely to say they compare websites to ensure they have accurate information (63.1%), while the percentage was 74.9% among those aged 18-24 and 81.1% among those aged 25-34.

More educated internet users are substantially more aware of the problem of accuracy of online information, confident in their ability to deal with it, and likely to take measures to address it compared with respondents with lower educational levels. Among respondents who did not go beyond middle school, 26.9% do not worry about the accuracy of search engine results, as opposed to 16.4% among those who acquired a first degree, a master, or a higher degree. While only 25.6% of those with lower levels of education feel confident they can spot accurate and inaccurate search results, 39.6% of those with higher education do. Importantly, only 64.2% of British internet users with a middle school degree or less check different websites to ensure they have accurate information, while 78.6% of those with a university degree do.

The more politically interested internet users are, the more confident they are in their abilities to evaluate the accuracy of search engine results, and the keener they are to compare websites for accuracy. 40.4% of respondents who claim to be “not at all interested” in politics understand that search engine results may not always be accurate, but do not always feel confident they can identify
valid results—as opposed to 31.4% among respondents who claimed to be “very interested” in politics. The proportions flip when we examine respondents who are both aware of the unreliability of search engine results and confident that they can solve the problem on their own: whereas only 26% of uninterested voters feel this way, as many as 38.7% among the highly interested do. This is not surprising if we consider that **79.6% of the highly politically interested respondents claim to compare websites to establish their accuracy, while only 53.2% do among respondents who claim not to be interested in politics at all.**

British internet users who are politically more knowledgeable are more likely to be sceptical about the quality of search engine results, but not necessarily more likely to be their own fact-checkers online. While respondents with higher levels of political knowledge are less likely to always trust search engine results and more likely to feel confident they can separate true and false results than respondents with lower levels of knowledge, there is no clear relationship between levels of political knowledge and the probability to compare websites to establish the accuracy of their contents.

Although in the United States most of the discussion around fake news has centred around their role in helping the election of Republican President Donald Trump, and there is evidence that most fake news in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign was slanted to favour Republicans, we find **ideological differences do not substantially affect the extent to which British internet users may be exposed to false information online.** Respondents who locate themselves closer to the right of the political spectrum are slightly more likely than those who place themselves to the left to compare websites to establish the accuracy of their information (79.3% vs 72.5%). Left-wingers are also more likely to doubt their ability to differentiate between true and false search results (38.8% vs 30% among right-wingers) and are twice as likely to always trust search engine results than right-wingers are.

Finally, **none of the differences related to gender are substantial.** Females are slightly more likely than males to always trust search engine results (14% vs 13.1%) and to not think about their accuracy (21.4% vs 19.2%). However, among respondents who believe that some search results are truthful while others are not, females are less likely than males to believe they can tell the difference (35.5% vs 30.1%), while males are keener to claim they can tell the difference (37.6% vs 29.1%). Men are also slightly more likely than females to compare websites for accuracy (73.3% vs 70.6%).

These findings have important policy implications: **older, less educated, and less politically interested British internet users are substantially less aware of the problem of false information on the internet, less confident in their ability to overcome this problem, and less likely to adopt defensive measures, such as checking different websites, to protect themselves from those risks.** If exposed to some fake news, these groups are likely to be more vulnerable to its undue influence because they are less likely to doubt the quality of the information they find online and to take steps to establish its accuracy.
Table 1 – Opinions on the accuracy of search results and tendency to compare websites among different groups (percentage values)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion on the accuracy of search results</th>
<th>Accuracy of search engine results</th>
<th>Compare websites</th>
<th>All sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not worried</td>
<td>Trusting</td>
<td>Sceptical/not confident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>30.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>35.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>28.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55+</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>39.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>34.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>35.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political knowledge</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 correct answers</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 correct answer</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>33.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 correct answers</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 correct answers</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>39.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 correct answers</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 correct answers</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interest in politics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all interested</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>40.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly interested</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately interested</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very interested</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideology</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>38.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>31.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: online survey of a sample representative of UK adult internet users conducted within the webpoleu.net project, coordinated by Dr. Cristian Vaccari; see footnote 1 for details and methodology.
Are there differences between the UK and other countries in the degree to which people accept 'fake news', given our tradition of public service broadcasting and newspaper readership?

To answer this question, we compare the British online public with respondents in seven other important Western democracies—Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, and the United States—where we surveyed representative samples of adult internet users between 2015 and 2016 using identical sampling methods and questionnaires as we did in the United Kingdom.17

As regards attitudes towards search engine results, we start by looking at respondents who express little doubts or little concerns about the truthfulness of search results—answering that they either believe that information to be truthful or that they do not think about this problem. These users can be considered more exposed to false information because they are less likely to doubt the quality of search engine results.

As Figure 2 shows, the 20% of British internet users who claim not to think much about whether search engine results are truthful is the third highest percentage among our eight Western democracies, as is the 34% of British internet users who either believe in or do not care about the truthfulness of the websites they are directed to by search engines. Only in Poland and Spain are these percentages higher.

Figure 2 – Respondents who claim they consider search engine results to be truthful or to not think about their truthfulness

---

17 Data for the other countries were obtained using the same sampling and survey methods as for British respondents, as specified in footnote 1, and were also collected by Ipsos. Apart from Germany and Italy, the surveys were conducted immediately after each country’s general elections.
Internet users who claim to be aware that search results may contain a mixture of accurate and inaccurate sources may be less exposed to misleading information found online. Within this group, it is helpful to distinguish between respondents with greater and lesser confidence in their ability to be their own judges of truth and falsehood.

As shown in Figure 3, internet users in the United States, Denmark, Germany, and Britain are the most likely to doubt their own ability to separate accurate and inaccurate search engine results, while respondents from Greece, Spain, Poland, and Italy are less concerned. Conversely, internet users in Italy, Germany, Greece, and Poland are the most confident in their capacity to distinguish true and false information obtained through the websites they access via online searches. It seems that internet users from countries where media have a weaker tradition of independence from politics are less worried about their abilities to separate truth from falsehood online—possibly because they are used to having to do so when they engage with politically slanted news in the mass media. By contrast, internet users from countries where the news media are more politically independent feel less confident in their abilities to make those judgments on their own. Three of the four countries where internet users are less confident in their ability to identify truthful search engine results have strong public service media—the only exception being the United States. However, Germany has a strong public service media and its internet users are substantially more likely than average to feel capable of spotting true and false websites.

The fact that the United Kingdom sits in between the two groups of countries we identified can be seen as the result of the dualistic journalistic culture that characterizes political news in the country, with newspapers typically taking sides in political controversies while broadcasters tend to adopt a more neutral political stance.

**Figure 3** – Respondents who claim they consider some search engine results to be truthful and others not to be truthful

Source: online surveys of samples representative of adult internet users in each country, conducted within the webpoleu.net project, coordinated by Dr. Cristian Vaccari.
Finally, we can compare the eight democracies for which we have data based on the frequency with which internet users compare websites to verify information. As Figure 4 shows, most respondents in all the eight democracies we surveyed claim to use this tactic. However, a similar divide to that presented in Figure 3 emerges between countries whose news media are characterized by lower levels of political independence—Italy, Greece, Poland, and Spain—and others whose news media are more independent from politics—the United Kingdom, the United States, Denmark, and Germany. It seems that internet users from countries where political news is more entangled with politics are more likely to be in the habit of verifying the quality of the information they see online than internet users from countries where political news is more politically independent. This may have to do with the fact that citizens tend to trust the news more if it is seen as politically independent, so that internet users in countries with lower levels of trust in the news may be more used to having to check the accuracy of information by themselves rather than relying on the news media to provide impartial and accurate information in the first place. As in Figure 3, public service media also seems to play a role, as three of the four countries where respondents are less likely to be their own online fact-checker have strong public service media.

Figure 4 – Respondents who claim they compare different websites to verify accuracy of the information they publish

Source: online surveys of samples representative of adult internet users in each country, conducted within the webpoleu.net project, coordinated by Dr. Cristian Vaccari.

It is worth pointing out than an alternative explanation for the country differences highlighted so far may be that the percentages of the population with an internet connection are higher in the countries where news tends to be more independent of politics than in those where news is more connected with politics. According to the International Telecommunications Union, levels of internet access in the eight countries included in this report in 2015 were as follows: Denmark 96.3%, Germany 87.6%, Greece 66.8%, Italy 65.6%, Poland 68%, Spain 78.7%, United Kingdom 92%, United
States 74.6%. The more widespread internet access is in a given country, the more likely it is that people who use the internet in that country will include large amounts of less educated and older individuals, who—as we saw earlier—are less likely to be skeptical about the information they encounter and less skilled to employ defensive strategies such as checking other websites to establish the truth. By contrast, in countries where internet access is less widespread, internet users are more likely to be disproportionately more educated, and thus both more skeptical and more skilled, all else being equal.

While there may be some truth to this explanation, it does not seem to be able to account for the whole magnitude of the country differences identified here. Moreover, it does not change the fact that, when compared with internet users of seven other Western democracies, British internet users are not particularly sceptical of the quality of search engine results and not very keen to check the accuracy of the information they find on a website by comparing it with other websites. While they may have good reasons to do this, as the kinds of news they get in the media could be seen as more politically impartial than in other countries, their lower levels of scepticism of information accessed via search engines and relatively lukewarm approach to online fact-checking may leave British citizens somewhat more exposed to the negative effects of false and misleading information when they come across it online. Paradoxically, this problem may be felt more acutely across Western democracies whose media systems exhibit generally more desirable qualities, such as politically independent news media, strong public service broadcasters, and high levels of internet access in the population.

- **How can we educate people in how to assess and use different sources of news?**

There is an urgent need to educate electoral regulators in assessing the role of disinformation and automated/algorithmic communication during elections. Our research in the 2010 UK General Election demonstrated that social media analytics companies were in dialogue with political parties to provide services to monitor and therefore find scope to influence public opinion. The British Polling Council among other regulators did not seem to think this relevant to the activities of campaigning. However, our interviews with journalists, party communication officers and analytics firms revealed claims that social media analytics was believed to be useful to affect outcomes – this is why these services are used. In light of the recent claims that the social media analytics firm Cambridge Analytica played a role in the 2015 UK General Election by harnessing citizens’ social media data to allow parties to target those citizens with individualized advertisements, the time has surely come for a discussion of what legislative changes may be needed so that electoral regulators are at least aware of what companies and the parties who hire them are doing with British citizens’ data to influence the outcome of elections. The Committee may consider whether this is a matter of information policy regarding privacy and data protection and whether these matters could be brought into coordination with electoral law.

---
