Introduction

The following evidence, submitted by Albany Associates Ltd, focuses on the key issues and threats within the information space, and how the Foreign Office might go about addressing them, either through specific action, or in a programmatic sense. The first part of the evidence comprises a summary of several areas that Albany Associates feels should be examined:

- Disinformation
- Technology and the impact it has on information
- Public service broadcasters and trusted brands such as the BBC, UNESCO
- The legal frameworks surrounding media, and the protection of freedom of expression and independent media
- Press freedom and the Commonwealth

The final policy section is policy suggestions and areas (themes and geographies) which should be examined. Anecdotes, material and opinions within this document come from Albany’s extensive work, and has been garnered from global and local networks.

Albany Associates Ltd

Albany has operated around the world, providing strategic communications experience to individuals, governments and civil society actors in some of the world’s most challenging environments, through a wide variety of activities. Since 2004, Albany has been working to strengthen independent media across the Balkans, Europe and countries within the former Soviet Union.

Areas of focus

Disinformation

Disinformation threatens the fundamental values upon which democracies are founded. Recent research conducted into the psycho-social elements of society highlight the importance of trust between members of that society and the resulting effect on views that people hold. In addition, authoritarianism both effects the trust people place in leadership, and focuses their attention on immigration. This theory helps to explain the swift rise of populism. As attitudes change, so too does the landscape in which they are found: for example, the rise in support for populist politics mirrors the rise of people’s perceptions of the importance of immigration, and how it can have an adverse effect on their societies/communities. In addition, the means by which information is passed down from the highest echelons of society to ordinary people is often seen to be condescending, which does not accurately reflect the full truth that ordinary people see, and will not encourage people to change their opinions. This phenomenon, as theorised by Eatwell and Goodwin, has been a long time coming, and will be around for a long time: populism will define the next global epoch.

Technology and the impact on information

In 2011, Facebook was seen as a vanguard of the social media space, and has laid the path for different forms of social media to reinvigorate the global conversation about politics on a local, national, and international level. As a result of this, more people have been able to join the debate, monitoring has become more accessible, and people have been able to hold others to account, through social media, and via other means such as Bellingcat and Wikileaks. However, the UK, USA and other countries need to be seen through the prism of how Facebook, and its ability to assist in the perpetuation of misinformation, has
become a threat to democracy. In a way, the digital realities that people experience through the online world becomes an alternative existence entirely, a reality in its own way. One question that needs to be asked is how online spaces can enhance digital democracy in an era of fake news and disinformation. In addition, social media tends to push people towards extremes, such as on YouTube – when one video has concluded, another ‘suggested’ piece of content comes up, which is more extreme than perhaps the content that preceded it. Social media can be used to enhance freedom of speech. One issue that was raised is the use of social media and people’s data, especially with regard to GDPR. This means an individual can be in charge of their own data, but there is often a failure in understanding how this works, and a need for it to be explained. Digital communications emerged from the marketplace, whereas traditional media from radio and television came from the state, and was subsequently opened up to the marketplace. Is there a means to have a reversal? Can the state impose itself on digital social media and communications, and increase state intervention, or is this likely to increase the gap between the forefront of digital communications, and the cumbersome approach that the state may take to keep up? One option, in order to increase the social responsibility that the social media providers have, is to introduce a levy which can be used for public benefit. However, a levy risks further monopolisation of the social media landscape by the big four, as smaller players would struggle. As the current position between the US Government and Facebook shows, self-regulation in that market is a likely outcome; this is different to the UK, however, where increased regulation from Government can have a positive overall impact.

**Public Service broadcasting and trust in brands**

This is the hardest area of all to address. It is difficult to bring alien values into an established media sector – and in addition, media development is a long-term/long-burn issue. In order to reform this system (which will arguably take years), some fundamental issues need to be resolved, including public buy-in (and also political support, rather than brand-bashing, such as has been à-la-mode recently for politicians to take up arms against the BBC (and its international and foreign-language arms)) and question its value. In addition, bodies such as UNESCO, which, under the UN umbrella, has responsibility for the protection of journalists, are undermined when political appointees suggest the UK might cut funding, for any number of reasons. There also needs to be a return to media literacy in public broadcasting. An example from Serbia demonstrates this: the license fee is the lowest it can be, though people do not understand why they have to pay for it in addition to a cable fee, where the public service broadcast is also available. However, too much training has been carried out over the years without the necessary political buy-in; a model for training linked to practical outputs is also necessary.

**Legal frameworks, and the protection of freedom of expression and independent media**

HMG and the UK are well-respected and have a successful model in this area, especially given that compared to other countries, programs to improve media law and policy are relatively inexpensive to establish. Perhaps it is time to find a parliamentary champion who can help to bring this to the fore, and ensure that it stays in the mind of legislators. In addition, the time-frames for the work that is to be carried out by firms like Albany need to be longer – as it currently stands, the FCO/Home Office/US Department of State have 1-year periods of implementation, which makes it difficult to achieve anything of substance, whereas DFID and USAID have 3-5 years, ensuring a much more effective use of funds and time, and a more impactful result. There is currently no set of ‘standards of best practice’ set out for the online space, compared to a very well-regarded use of standards within the traditional print/TV media. We need to focus at a community level, where the real implementors of change are to be found, such as in conflict zones – local and international experts can work together. Things that need to be invested in are: legislation;
self-regulation with civil-society, where they can monitor to bring attention to problems, such as alert/flagging organisations. Facebook, despite engaging journalists to assist in its attempts to counter the spread of fake news, simply use it as a PR exercise, and ignore the recommendations and suggestions made on a regular basis.

**Press Freedom and the Commonwealth**

In order to discuss the issue of press freedom, we must look at a number of different elements and issues that are related. These include: abuse of state controls on media; the Leveson example (where the use of tools and principles that is employed in the UK is often used as a standard template to be employed elsewhere, without the right and proper checks and balances/democratic institutions in place to ensure it is not an abuse); FOI laws (and the phenomenon of open justice); the safety of journalists. Impunity is a real threat to press freedom.

**Suggestions for future engagement**

- As the UK leaves the EU, the Commonwealth will be an invaluable asset for this type of activity, not least given the historic relationships between the UK and other member states, and the legal and political frameworks being based on the UK. In addition, there is a willingness on the part of Commonwealth countries to engage. Albany has previously engaged in Rwanda and Sri Lanka – and with CHOGM scheduled to be in Rwanda in 2020, this may prove to be a promising initial engagement.
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- Countering disinformation operations from Russia is at the forefront of the FCO’s efforts, but we should not forget China (particularly in Africa) and Iran. However, the tools should be the same depending on how they are used.
- What is a journalist in the modern context? The definition of a journalist – is it the same as it has always been, and that there are simply more people who are engaging in the debate, rather than the definition of a journalist being amended for the modern era. Citizen journalists are not a new idea.
- Governments should stand up for journalists’ rights to investigate and report.
- Where should resources be focused? Should we focus on the role of the internet in providing news and information? Or should more traditional things like press freedom and regulation be the focus?
- Trusted brands – reinforce the importance of these, and how they are not simply objects for political point scoring – e.g. BBC and UNESCO (as described earlier)
- An examination into the feasibility of regulation of the internet and whether this should be covered by the state (and legislation/a state body), or if it should be self-regulating. Implementation of such an initiative should take into account the different ways in which the social media ecosystems (within the context of the wider online world) operate: i.e. a one-size-fits-all approach would not work, especially when it comes to addressing platforms/websites that are much smaller in terms of operational capacity than the big four (Facebook, Twitter, Alphabet (Google) and LinkedIn (Microsoft)).
- HMG should engage in conversations with social media companies, and ensure that the discussions being had are the ‘right ones’ – i.e. the shared interest in preservation of free access is understood, and both work (together) to the same conclusion.
• HMG needs to enhance its international response mechanisms to issues such as attacks on journalists, and to ensure greater coordination and use of bodies such as UNESCO – and HMG could also commission a study. This will assist the Foreign Secretary in his public and private interventions on the matter, such as at the Council of Europe.

• One mechanism that has been tried and tested is a journalist protection hotline, such as the OSCE established in Bosnia in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This will serve a dual purpose: in giving journalists a safe means of reporting violence, aggression etc., and hopefully also encouraging more reporting of these types of events. It is assumed that a large number of cases have not been reported/recorded.

• Governments often use *alien* language (alien, that is, to normal people) to define the lofty values and ambitions they hold for the country, and specifically to preserve the idea that an objective truth exists. However, more often than not, this does not resonate with citizens, and therefore HMG and the state must find propositions that can be aligned with these values, but also have a meaningful resonance with people who care about their daily lives, and their immediate surroundings (communities, etc).

• What should dictate the agenda – the constant tussle between people versus the state, and the populist hierarchy of news importance; wants versus needs.

• To what extent does business/economy/politics trump values – e.g. the British response to Saudi Arabia’s murder of Jamal Khashoggi has been criticised.

• There is a need to connect values and democratic ideals with the local level, where a majority of social media/local campaigns are started.

• Training of journalists – how can we re-inculcate the basics of journalism into everyday reporting – e.g. sensationalist headlines which are used to grab the reader’s attention but do not accurately reflect the content of the story.

• There has been a tendency to use traditional media development techniques to counter disinformation and propaganda but they have not delivered the desired results.

• We need to accept that the rules of the game have changed: the perpetrators of disinformation are more in tune with the target audience than we are. We need to start setting the agenda rather than playing catch-up.

• Broad brush-stroke, values-based programming doesn’t resonate: we can only make a real difference by leveraging authentic voices at a hyperlocal level, then scaling up.

• Responsibility for information-gathering and dissemination now extends beyond traditional media: media literacy is about encouraging ordinary citizens, CSOs and community groups to be more discerning when consuming content and to construct credible, alternative narratives. The grass-roots, peer-to-peer approach embraced by LiveJournal users prior to 2010 is a case in point.

• The Western response to disinformation has been fragmented and poorly coordinated: there is an opportunity/need to align the efforts of diverse donors and implementing agencies, thereby making the most of existing resources and ensuring greater coherency.

• Interventions need to be long-term and holistic, operating on multiple levels with diverse stakeholder groups (e.g. covering regulation, PSB, management etc).

• The narrative that is currently used, based on the post-World War Two rules based order and liberal democracy is fading due to the growing number of people who have no direct link with it. The narrative, therefore, that many people have lived under is becoming obsolete – the Berlin Wall came down nearly 30 years ago, and we need to develop a new forward-looking narrative that people can relate to, and that takes into account the new technological revolution.
• Government needs to lobby those other governments who are clamping down on journalists; and we need to ensure a separation of powers between judges and the executive so that the press is protected by the courts – there needs to be laws that empower and protect, rather than suppress and intimidate.

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