

# 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.

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# [Press release: UK and Switzerland agree to transition trade agreement after Brexit](#)

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The UK Government and the Swiss Federal Council have approved the transition of a trade agreement, allowing businesses to continue trading freely after the UK leaves the European Union.

This is the first and one of the most significant existing trade agreements to the UK to have been agreed as part of the government's preparations to ensure continuity for businesses and consumers as we leave the EU.

There are around 40 existing EU trade agreements that the UK government is seeking to provide continuity for and a number of other agreements are at an advanced stage.

The agreement replicates the existing EU-Switzerland arrangements as far as possible and will come into effect as soon as the implementation period ends in January 2021, or on 29 March 2019 if the UK leaves the EU without a deal. It has now been initialled by both countries.

Britain has a major trade surplus with Switzerland, with exports worth £19.04 billion last year. British exports have grown by 41.1% in the last 5 years.

## **International Trade Secretary Dr Liam Fox said:**

This is one of the most significant existing trade agreements, with British companies exporting £19 billion worth of goods and services last year, and it will provide the certainty that businesses need to continue trading freely.

This is the first of around 40 trade agreements that we will provide continuity for and many other agreements are also close to

being agreed. It is a vital part of our no deal planning and it means that businesses and consumers can continue to benefit from our close trading relationships with the world beyond the European Union.

**Carolyn Fairbairn, CBI Director-General, said:**

It's good news that a transition to a trade agreement with Switzerland has been agreed.

A great deal with the EU needs to be delivered alongside continuity of the trade agreements the UK already enjoys through single market membership. The opportunity now is to reach agreement on the remaining deals.

British jewellery, precious stones and metal are the largest goods exports to Switzerland, worth £10.7 billion in 2017. Pharmaceutical products also continue to be one of the UKs biggest exports to Switzerland, worth over £500m in 2017.

Once the agreement is signed, both the UK and Switzerland will seek parliamentary approval for the agreement.

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## [News story: Setting standards for the import and export of food](#)

### **Background**

The principal aim of the [Codex Committee on Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems](#) (CCFICS) is to develop principles and guidelines for food import and export inspection and certification systems with a view to harmonise methods and procedures which protect the health of consumers, ensure fair trading practices and facilitate international trade in foodstuffs. There has been growing interest within Codex to address food authenticity and/or food fraud which is why a side event on Food Integrity and Food Authenticity was scheduled.

At the invitation of the Food Standards Agency, [Selvarani Elahi](#) , the Deputy Government Chemist, attended the 24th meeting of CCFICS in Brisbane, Australia, as part of the UK delegation and gave a presentation on the [Food Authenticity Network](#) at a side event on Food Integrity and Food Authenticity.

Selvarani's presentation covered the following information about the Food Authenticity Network:

- It is a UK government initiative to help bring together those involved in food authenticity testing.
- The Network raises awareness of the tools available to check for mislabelling and food fraud and to ensure that the UK has access to a resilient network of laboratories providing fit for purpose testing to check for food authenticity.
- The Network now also includes a section on Food Fraud Mitigation, in which the major global services, guidance and reports aimed at preventing food fraud have been collated.
- The Network has grown substantially and now has over 930 members from 45 different countries/territories and over 1300 followers on [Twitter](#).
- The Network will transition to a public-private partnership model from January 2019.
- The plan is for the Network's [website](#) to be used as the architecture to cost effectively develop bespoke pages for other countries thereby building a truly global system that can be used fight food fraud in a coordinated and cohesive manner across the world.

The meeting was attended by forty-one Member countries, one Member and four observer organisations. The presentation on the Food Authenticity Network was well received and there was interest in the model constructed for the UK and EU. Follow-on discussions are now in progress with the countries who expressed an interest, to potentially develop bespoke pages for their countries. The presentation has been placed on the [CCFICs meeting page](#) of the Codex website.

For more information about the work the Government Chemist does, or advice in food testing matters contact:

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**[News story: ESFA funded adult education budget 2019 to 2020 illustrative allocations issued](#)**



We have now issued illustrative ESFA adult education budget (AEB) allocations for the 2019 to 2020 funding year to providers. We have issued these to assist providers with their planning. We will confirm allocation values before the end of March 2019.

We will also publish provisional 2017 to 2018 delivery data, showing in which of the devolved areas the delivery took place and segmented by the different elements of AEB. In ensuring ESFA AEB allocations are distributed fairly, and in line with the budget set, we are using 2017 to 2018 delivery and residence data as part of our allocation calculation.

These allocations are in line with the move to combined authority commissioning and with the approach already thoroughly communicated to the sector.

The illustrative allocations and the provisional data are not final and may be subject to change.

For more information on adult allocations, please see our [19+ funding allocations page](#) on GOV.UK. For more general information on devolution please see the [guide](#) on GOV.UK.

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