

Speech: Minister Field visits Paris to discuss anti-corruption and disinformation

Mark Field, Minister for Asia and the Pacific, attended the annual Global Anti-Corruption and Integrity Forum at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on 20-21 March. The forum was attended by more than 2,000 participants from government, private sector and civil society from over 120 countries.

This year's forum was focused on 'Tech for Trust': looking at how new technologies are not only changing government, business and society but also opening new avenues for corrupt behaviours and simultaneously offering new tools to address them.

In his speech to forum attendees, the Minister said:

Secretary General, ladies and gentlemen, good morning. It is a great pleasure to be here with the corraling power of the OECD to bring together such a wide range of people from across the globe. Something I feel passionate about, I look upon this organisation as being one of the absolute pillars in this work and hope that you continue to stand up for these values.

And it's a great pleasure to follow you, Secretary General. I very much endorse what you said about using technology to help us tackle corruption, and I thank you for including the example of our Serious Fraud Office using Artificial Intelligence.

That is just one example among many.

Another is the OECD's Global Anti-Corruption & Integrity Hub, which the UK will be funding as part of our new £45 million Global Anti-Corruption Programme that I launched here yesterday.

The Hub will give all its users access to a huge bank of OECD data and analysis, and enable them to engage both with the OECD and with everyone else who is working to tackle corruption.

The UK is also successfully using technology to improve transparency and prevent corrupt interests inserting themselves in the public procurement process, thanks to our Government Digital Service.

Under our new Anti-Corruption Programme, we will be sharing this digital model with target countries to help them achieve greater transparency and scrutiny of bids for public contracts.

Secretary General, you rightly say that technology can also prove destructive in the wrong hands, which is why the theme of this conference – Tech for Trust – is so apt.

As technology becomes part of every sphere of life, trust – or lack of it – is becoming a real issue. This particularly applies to the media, including social media, so I am pleased that today's discussion will focus on that, and the dangers of disinformation.

Because as we are increasingly aware, corruption is not just about money. To its great credit, the OECD is trying to address the issue holistically, as this discussion shows.

Disinformation

Of course disinformation is by no means a new phenomenon.

Indeed, to be frank with you, at the height of the Cold War the UK was involved in activities which might today be characterised as propaganda or fake news. But those were very different times.

Today, mindful of our values, and the vital importance of freedom of speech, propaganda is not a tool we deploy, but an evil we strive to counter and expose. And there is a growing need to do so. Changes in how we read and process information, and the rise of the internet, have given new wings to an age-old problem.

Technology has become a breeding ground for new and insidious ways to deceive audiences, and allow false or manipulated information to spread further and faster than ever before, often at low cost.

We know that more and more people rely on social media for their news and that many of them are aware that the information they are reading could have been manipulated. This has led to a growing sense of suspicion and distrust – even towards reputable news outlets.

In fact last year the Reuters Institute found that less than half of the UK population had faith in the news they were reading.

Of course the problem goes beyond undermining public trust in their news sources. When the information around us is deliberately confused, it can have serious, and much wider, consequences.

Conspiracy theories and malign information on social media can also fracture community cohesion; reduce trust in institutions; and undermine the perception of the integrity of governments, constitutions and democratic processes.

The UK Government is deeply concerned about this threat and we are taking action to confront it. Our aim is to take a 'whole of society' approach and to address the issue on three fronts:

First, by bearing down on the sources of disinformation themselves;

Secondly, by tackling vulnerabilities in social media that enable disinformation to spread;

and thirdly, by empowering audiences to recognise disinformation and protect themselves from it.

We are very aware of the balance between tackling online threats effectively on the one hand, while promoting technological innovation and respecting freedom of expression on the other.

Protecting media freedom, and our citizens' freedom of expression, is absolutely fundamental because they are essential elements of any healthy democracy.

Whatever we do to tackle disinformation, we will not put those fundamental freedoms at risk. That's because, as we all know, a robust, free, vibrant and varied media will itself help to challenge disinformation and raise awareness of it.

And we also know that the countries with the freest and most trusted media also suffer the least corruption.

London Conference

This is why, this year, the flagship campaign of the UK Foreign Office is about championing media freedom and the protection of journalists. As the centrepiece of that campaign, we will co-host, with Canada, a major international conference in London in July.

We will bring together ministers, key industry figures, civil society, academia and the media to push for a greater appreciation of the value of an independent media, and a more co-ordinated approach to securing the safety of media professionals.

I hope we can count on your support.

Conclusion

To conclude, ladies and gentlemen, while we must continue to embrace innovation and reap the benefits of new technologies, we must also ensure sufficient safeguards are in place against the threats they pose. Those threats are global and cannot be addressed by any one country alone.

It is therefore vital that we work together, in forums like this, to ensure that we keep abreast of new technologies – and ideally one step ahead of those who would misuse them.

The UK has a long tradition of championing good governance and fundamental human rights, including a free media. We are a steadfast opponent of corruption, in all its forms, and a steadfast advocate for an online environment that is free, open, peaceful and secure.

We are committed to working with our OECD partners, and with tech companies, industry, academia and civil society to create such an environment, one that is worthy of the trust of our citizens, and that respects and safeguards our fundamental human rights.