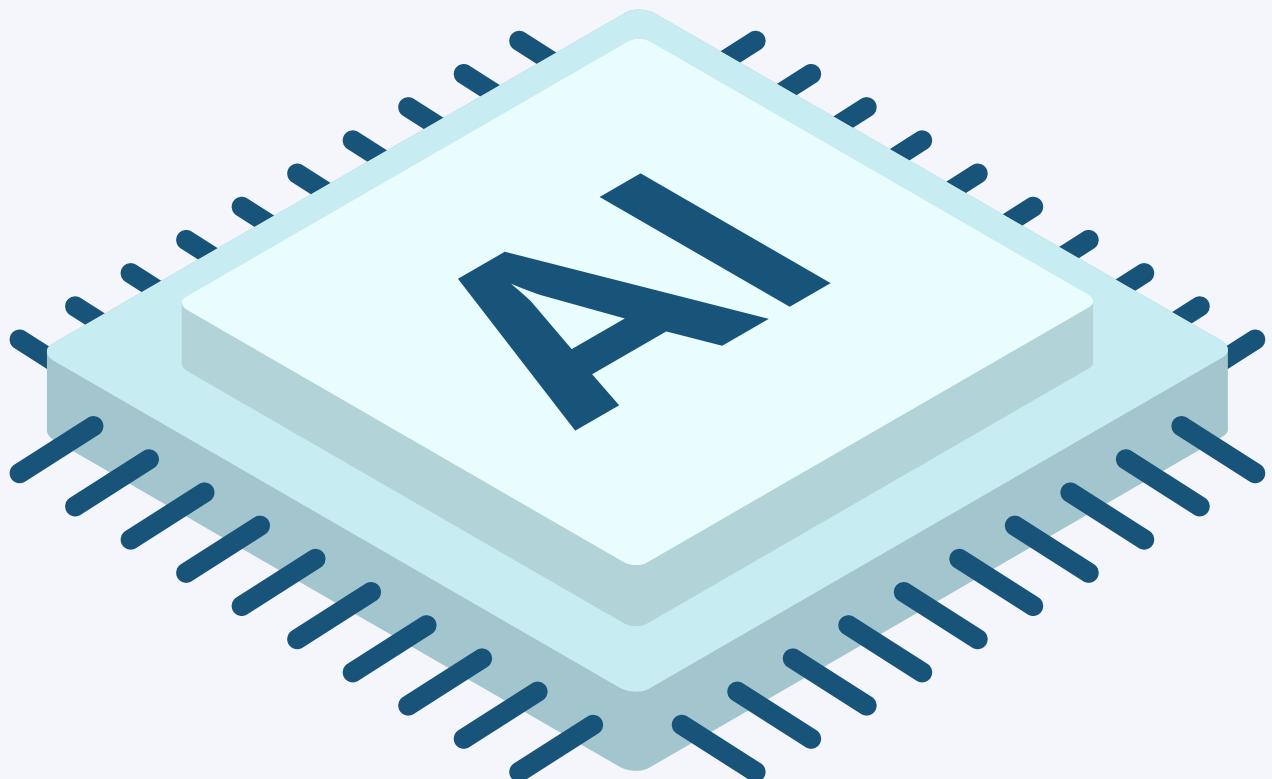


Defending Democracy inquiry

Written evidence submitted by Centre Think Tank to the National Security Strategy Committee



Written evidence

By Sarah Walsh and Torrin Wilkins, May 20th, 2024

Centre

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About Centre

We are an independent non-profit foundation and cross-party think tank. Our mission is to rebuild the centre ground and to create a more centrist and moderate politics. We support better public services and a strong economy inspired by policies from the Nordic countries.

To achieve these goals, we work with people from across the UK and party politics. This includes engaging with politicians and our networks, which include academia, politics, and law.

Our work includes creating new conversations by hosting events and conducting interviews. We also produce new policy ideas to better inform debate, publish papers, and release articles. We aim to build consensus, shape public opinion, and work with policymakers to change policy.

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Our evidence was a submission to the “Defending Democracy” inquiry to the Committee on National Security Strategy. The inquiry focused on: “In 2024, there are expected to be over 70 elections around the world. As the UK approaches its next general election, JCNSS is launching its inquiry into ‘Defending Democracy’ to better understand how threats to the UK’s democracy may evolve and be addressed. This will primarily focus on the work of the National Security Council’s Defending Democracy Taskforce.”

Our response to the inquiry:

a) The perceived and actual threats to democracy and how they will evolve

There are various internal and external threats to democracy which include perceived and actual threats. The main external threats and where some of the greatest tensions currently exist are with Russia and China.

There are several actual threats to democracy within the UK. The threats are in part facilitated by the more general decline in trust in democratic institutions and processes due to continued political polarisation and scandals. Alongside this is the lack of sanctions or accountability for those who spread misinformation, especially for politicians who may share false information. Risks associated with this include increased divisive misinformation campaigns aimed at influencing elections.

Alongside this, there are further perceived threats to democracy. Attempts to interfere in democracy have been attempted, in particular by Russia, to swing election votes towards the interests of those foreign countries.

Another issue is likely future threats to democracy which may end up as either perceived or actual threats. These include new technologies such as deepfake technology and manipulation spread through social media platforms. Social media also more generally provides a platform for faster and wider dissemination of information.

b) Our current infrastructure for defending democracy and its effectiveness

The effectiveness of the UK's legislative framework for defending democracy, including the National Security Act 2023, is subject to ongoing debate and scrutiny. Whilst the act introduced new powers aimed at enhancing national security, such as addressing foreign interference and disinformation, its implementation and impact on democracy require continuous evaluation to ensure it strikes the right balance between security and civil liberties.

The National Security Act 2023 shifts focus from terrorism to a much broader definition of ‘state threats’ including those from other countries, including foreign interference which is largely positive. It also introduces measures to tackle these threats, such as a foreign influence registration scheme which deems many foreign interference acts as unlawful for the first time in the UK.

However, there are concerns that it may not effectively protect democracy, as it struggles to distinguish between defending the democratic process and its overall integrity. It assumes the current democratic process is already to a high standard and therefore, loopholes remain, for example, allowing foreign money to influence politics as part of the formal electoral process.

Amendments proposed by the House of Lords would have led to the exclusion of foreign money however, this was overturned by the House of Commons leading some to question whether those benefiting are eager to retain the status quo¹.

The Act addresses some issues but leaves others unattended, potentially making the situation worse. It is likely that more discussions and actions will be needed to safeguard democracy effectively.

c) The challenge of foreign interference and its impact

There are continuing concerns about foreign interference in elections. For example, when exploring the scale and effect of Russian disinformation strategies on elections held in the UK between 2014-20, findings suggested the impact was significant. A narrative within the government has also emerged around wanting to both defend democracy whilst also adopting a 'hands-off' approach in practice².

These attacks can be coordinated directly from foreign security services. In Russia, the Federal Security Service was itself behind unsuccessful attempts. The objectives behind these attacks included "to use information obtained to interfere in UK politics and democratic processes" by leaking specific information³.

The government tried to deter this action, in part using the foreign interference offence to increase sanctions for those trying to influence elections and who meet the foreign power condition. However, there are also cross-party calls to further investigate the impact of Russian interference in UK elections⁴.

d) The role of independent bodies, the public and tech companies

There is a large role for independent bodies, the public and technology companies in tackling threats to the democratic system. It will require action from all of these to tackle these threats.

The technology sector can play a large role in defending democracy. To counter the growing issue of misinformation various companies within the technology sector have introduced fact-checking tools. For example, Google has developed SynthID⁵ a tool which discreetly integrates a digital watermark into an image's pixels.

This is both discrete and allows images generated using AI to be identified later on if they are circulated more widely. This can be used to identify AI-generated images, music or audio which is falsely portrayed as real.

More widely companies such as Amazon, Google, Meta, Microsoft, and OpenAI have also committed to developing AI whilst also managing the risks it poses⁶. Tackling this issue will require continuing and expanding this cooperation between technology companies. This could include continued development of improved AI identification methods across the sector.

The government can also play a leading role in tackling misinformation at its source. One area is implementing education initiatives which encourage the public to question the provenance of information.

There are existing examples of initiatives we can learn from such as the Ofcom "Making Sense of Media" Advisory Panel which focuses on media literacy. In 2021 the Government also announced a new program to upskill teachers, library workers, youth workers and carers of disabled children⁷.

Internationally we have seen large schemes to tackle misinformation within the education system. This system places a large focus on media literacy and teaches students how to spot misinformation⁸. This is integral to tackling the increased risk of misinformation and fake news.

The media also has a role in identifying fake news and claims. This includes fact-checking services such as BBC Verify which looks at individual events or statistics. There are also organisations which are external to the media such as Full Fact which fact-check information and release reports on the issue of misinformation.

The challenge will be to expand these services as misinformation continues to grow on social media and the internet more widely.

Finally, the public can also play their part in tackling misinformation if properly equipped to identify it. This includes fact-checking questionable information on social media and having conversations with those around them who may themselves be viewing misinformation.

e) How the UK can more effectively defend democracy and reduce the risk of foreign interference

There are many ways the UK can collaborate with other democracies to ensure democratic values are upheld and foreign interference eradicated.

The first is information sharing between countries. The UK can collaborate with other democracies, such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and European partners. This can be achieved through platforms such as the Five Eyes intelligence alliance to exchange information and insights on foreign interference activities. Indeed, the European Parliament issued a report in January 2023 tackling this issue and recommending ways in which democracies can collaborate to close loopholes currently exploited by foreign interference.

Another is enhanced diplomatic coordination. The UK can work closely with allies in the European Union, NATO, and the G7 to coordinate diplomatic efforts in response to instances of foreign interference, such as joint statements and coordinated sanctions against offending states.

The UK can also align its policies with other democracies to develop a unified approach to countering foreign interference, including enacting legislation to enhance transparency in political financing, criminalising foreign interference activities, strengthening cybersecurity measures, and regulating foreign lobbying activities creating greater transparency.

We can participate in multilateral initiatives such as the Community of Democracies, the International Conference on Democracy in Cyberspace, and the Alliance for Securing Democracy to promote democracy and counter foreign interference on a global scale. This would align with other recommendations centred on policy alignment, information sharing and collaboration.

Capacity building will also be beneficial and means providing support to democratic institutions in vulnerable countries through initiatives like the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, and the European Endowment for Democracy, offering training, resources, and technical assistance to strengthen electoral processes, media freedom, and civil society resilience.

Finally, the UK can lead efforts to establish global norms and standards for responsible state behaviour in cyberspace and information operations through initiatives like the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism and/or the Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace.

There are numerous ways that the DDT could protect political parties, elected officials and core electoral infrastructure:

Investing in secure voting technology, for example, paper audit trails and secure transmission protocols.

Providing support to candidates and parties by offering resources and training to political entities to improve their cybersecurity practices, crisis management, and response capabilities.

Enhancing election monitoring by implementing comprehensive monitoring systems to detect and address any irregularities or attempts at interference during the electoral process.

Introduce an information-sharing framework for use across political parties, as proposed in 2023, to support the vetting of parliamentary staff and reduce the risk of foreign espionage and influence which creates vulnerabilities.

¹ Scott, PF., 'State threats', security, and democracy: the National Security Act 2023 Legal Studies, (2023), pp. 1-17. (doi:10.1017/lst.2023.39)

² Richards, Fake news, disinformation and the democratic state: a case study of the UK government's narrative, Icono, 1 (2021), pp. 95-122.

³ UK exposes attempted Russian cyber interference in politics and democratic processes, GOV.UK, 2023). Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-exposes-attempted-russian-cyber-interference-in-politics-and-democracy> (Accessed on 21 March 2023)

⁴ The Guardian, European Court Urged to Challenge UK Failure to Investigate Russia Interference. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2022/mar/29/european-court-urged-to-challenge-uk-failure-to-investigate-russia-interference#:~:text=MPs%20take%20Russian%20election%20interference%20case%20to%20human%20right%20court,-This%20article%20is&text=A%20coalition%20of%20MPs%20and,Russian%20interference%20in%20UK%20elections>. (Accessed on 21 March 2023).

⁵ Google Deep Mind, 2023 Identifying AI-generated content with SynthID. Available at: <https://deepmind.google/technologies/synthid/> (Accessed on 10 March 2023)

⁶ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/07/21/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-secures-voluntary-commitments-from-leading-artificial-intelligence-companies-to-manage-the-risks-posed-by-ai/>.

⁷ GOV.UK, Minister launches new strategy to fight online disinformation. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/minister-launches-new-strategy-to-fight-online-disinformation> (Accessed 1 March 2023).

⁸ New York Times, How Finland Is Teaching a Generation to Spot Misinformation. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/10/world/europe/finland-misinformation-classes.html>. (Accessed 21 March 2023).

Company details

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Disclaimers

Any errors or omissions are the responsibility of the author alone.

Author Disclosure Statement

Nothing to disclose.

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