

# Written evidence submitted by Adam Lovett to the National Security Strategy Joint Committee's inquiry into 'Defending Democracy'

1. I am a lecturer at the Australian Catholic University (ACU), Melbourne campus at the School of Philosophy. Until January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2024, I taught at the London School of Economics (LSE) in its Department of Philosophy, Logic, and Scientific Method. I have been doing research in democratic theory for just under ten years, I have published half a dozen articles on democratic values in leading academic journals, and I have a forthcoming book on the challenges that democracies face in achieving democratic ideals.
2. My submission focuses on the following questions of interest:
  - What are the actual and perceived threats to the UK's democracy, and from where do those threats originate?
  - How can the UK work better with other democracies to tackle foreign interference and uphold democratic values?

## Executive summary

3. The main points in my submission are:
  - Democracy is valuable because it enables ordinary citizens to autonomously author government policy. It helps citizens manifest their intentions and preferences in their social and political affairs.
  - Political ignorance impairs the autonomous authorship of government policy. When you have false beliefs about politics, your political choices aren't autonomous. So you cannot author their consequences.
  - A key kind of foreign interference in elections consists in campaigns of disinformation. These threaten democracy in the United Kingdom (UK) and elsewhere because they increase political ignorance, impairing citizens' ability to make autonomous political choices.
  - Political ignorance can be combated by the public provisions of information. So, to counter the ill effects of foreign information for UK and partner democracies, the UK should increase funding for BBC news operations both domestically and internationally.

## Section 1: What are the actual and perceived threats to the UK's democracy, and from where do those threats originate?

### 1.1. Background

4. To understand the threats to UK democracy, we need to understand what makes democracy valuable. An old idea in democratic theory—dating back at least to Rousseau's *The Social Contract* ([1762]2004)—is that democracy is valuable because it conduces to the autonomy of ordinary citizens. Many contemporary thinkers endorse this thought (Altman and Wellman 2009; Stiliz 2019; Wilson 2021; Lovett and Zuehl 2022). The idea is that democracy enables the intentions, wants, and preferences of ordinary citizens to be made manifest in government policy. This helps make ordinary citizens autonomous, and democracy is valuable because such autonomy is valuable.
5. We can understand this value—political theorists call it *democratic autonomy*—by thinking about autonomy in one's personal life (Lovett and Zuehl 2022). It's valuable to be the autonomous author of one's personal affairs. It is valuable for you to be the one who decides who you marry or where you live or what career to

pursue. This gives you authorship over one's life, and that is good in itself (Raz 1986). It's not just that such authorship has good consequences, but rather that it is intrinsically good.

6. You can enjoy authorship of your social and political affairs as well as your individual affairs. Your social and political affairs consist of the important features of your society and political system. They critically include what the government does and the consequences of such governmental action: the nature of the economic system, the extent of inequality, the degree of prosperity, the way your society treats criminals, and so on. Authorship of such things is also intrinsically good—or at least so I've recently argued in published work (Lovett and Zuehl 2022).
7. To be author your social and political affairs, there must be a causal connection between what you want and what the government does. Your intentions must have a causal influence on government. In democracies, because citizens vote in elections, there is a causal connection between what ordinary citizens want and what the government does, when citizens vote in elections. So ordinary citizens, when they vote, can be authors of governmental actions. **Democracy is valuable because it enables citizens to be autonomous author of their social and political affairs.** It enables democratic autonomy.
8. Yet such a causal connection on its own does not suffice for making citizens autonomous authors of government policy. **To act autonomously, you need to know about your options.** To see this, consider a personal case. Suppose you're a twenty-one-year-old choosing whether to be a politician or a banker. But you have no idea what either career involves. You don't know that being a banker involves long hours and being a politician involves knocking on doors. Here, your ignorance means that you are not in a good position to make an autonomous choice (Raz 1986, 382; Lovett 2020). The less you know about your options, the less autonomous is your choice.
9. Analogously, citizens need to know about their options in the ballot booth to be able to make an autonomous choice. If they don't know about the policies of the parties, or the character of the different candidates, then they are not in a good position to autonomously choose who to vote for. And so they are not in a good position to, via their vote, be autonomous author of government policy. In other words, **the less citizens know about their political options, the less we achieve democratic autonomy.**

## 1.2. Election Interference

10. There are many ways for foreign actors to interfere in elections. In this submission, I focus on interference that involves spreading disinformation. Part of such interference consists of propaganda produced by state media entities. Organizations like RT and Sputnik produce articles and videos with biases and inaccurate claims. People who believe them will often end up misinformed. Russia specifically also has an active presence on social media. It has "bots" and "trolls" who post misinformation on platforms such as Facebook, and Twitter (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee 2019; Intelligence and Security Committee 2020, 9–11). The intention of these activities is to affect what citizens of countries like the UK believe.
11. This is bad for UK democracy insofar as it leads British voters to have false beliefs about political matters. When they have false beliefs about politics, they do not know about their political options. That is because, to know about something, you must at least have true beliefs about it (Ichikawa and Steup 2017). So false beliefs induced by electoral interference undermine British voters' ability to make autonomous choices in the ballot box. That undermines the extent to which they are autonomous authors of government policy. So, **disinformation is bad, ultimately, because it reduces voter knowledge and thereby impairs democratic autonomy.**

12. Other kinds of electoral interference involve cybersecurity. Sometimes, foreign actors acquire embarrassing information about parties or candidates and release it to affect election results. Prior to the 2016 United States presidential election, for example, Russia gained access to emails for the Democratic National Committee (D.N.C.) and John Podesta, campaign chairman for Hilary Clinton. It released these emails to Wikileaks in an attempt to weaken electoral support for the Democratic Party (Lipton, Sanger, and Shane 2016; Select Committee on Intelligence 2019).
13. The problem here is also one of political knowledge. Voters form a picture of the relative virtues of the candidates running for office. This informs their vote. By selectively releasing embarrassing information about some of these candidates such electoral interference gives voters a misleading picture of the candidates' relative virtues. By, for example, releasing embarrassing information about Hilary Clinton but not Donald Trump in 2016, Russia could mislead voters into thinking Clinton had serious character shortfalls relative to Trump. Cybersecurity failures allow foreign actors to mislead voters in this way.
14. In summary, when electoral interference is aimed at “disrupting our national conversation and skewing our democratic processes” (Cabinet Office 2023, 49) this is an epistemic problem. The problem is that such interference reduces citizens' knowledge about political matters, by misinforming them. That is problematic because it means citizens cannot be autonomous authors of their social and political affairs—where achieving such authorship is a central feature of what makes democracy valuable.

### 1.3. Solutions

15. Attempts to solve this problem often focus on reducing the spread of disinformation. Twitter, TikTok, YouTube and especially Facebook have stringent policies against misinformation (X 2024; TikTok 2023; YouTube 2024; Transparency Centre 2024). That means they attempt to remove misinformation from their platforms by taking down misleading posts. Additionally, the Online Safety Act 2023 makes it an offense to post false information liable to cause harm. These measures are largely intended to reduce the amount of disinformation people encounter on social media.
16. In 2019, the UK Government set up Counter Disinformation Unit (CDU). The members of this unit flags harmful content to social media companies, rebut misinformation on social media and encourages social media companies to promote official sources of information over other sources. The first two of these activities consist in either preventing users from encountering disinformation or, if they encounter it, reducing the chances that they believe it. Such **negative policy approaches aim to reduce the spread or uptake of misinformation.**
17. Negative policy approaches are valuable, but also have drawbacks. Giving online companies free rein to remove misinformation gives them a lot of power to decide what counts as misinformation. So, it gives them a lot of power over the public discourse. This is plausibly objectionable (Kolodny 2014). And, in any case, it takes more resources to remove or rebut misinformation than it is to promulgate it. It costs very little to post and repost misinformation, but the costs of evaluating such posts is non-negligible. This limits the potential efficacy of negative policy approaches.
18. An alternative to these negative policy approaches to disinformation are positive policy approaches. Negative policy approaches aim to reduce people's exposure to disinformation whereas **positive policy approaches aim to increase people's exposure to accurate information.** The most obvious way to achieve this aim is to publicly fund the provision of accurate news, both online and through other media.

By producing accurate investigative reporting and funding news broadcast, one can counter the problem with disinformation—that disinformation leads to less well-informed citizens.

19. Fortunately, the UK has one of the most well-respected providers of impartial, accurate, news in the world: the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Survey data suggests that at least one in every two UK residents use the BBC as a news source each week (Nielsen et al. 2023). Unfortunately, funding for the BBC mainly comes from the license, and this has been frozen since 2022. From 2024 it will rise below typical measures of inflation (Thomas 2023). Inevitably, this has led to cuts to services, including news services, that the BBC provides (National Union of Journalists 2023). **A good start to countering disinformation is to reverse planned BBC funding cuts.**
20. However, only a minority of the BBC's budget goes on news production. Only £342million of its £1,869million television budget, in 2022-2023, was spent on news and current affairs (National Audit Office 2023). Much of its funding goes on film, drama, radio, sports, and other entertainment. My recommendation, more specifically, is to **make reversing BBC funding cuts conditional on increasing news spending.** The motivation for funding the BBC relevant to this committee is its role in fighting disinformation by providing accurate information. Valuable as entertainment is, it does not counter disinformation. So it is not closely tied to upholding democratic values in the way that news production is.
21. In summary, the problem of foreign electoral interference is that it pollutes our epistemic environment—it makes citizens less likely to have accurate information about politics. One way to address that is negatively: to try and block access to or rebut disinformation. But this gives a lot of power to private actors and is likely not fully efficacious on its own. So an indispensable second way is positively: to provide British citizens with more accurate information. Funding the provision of such information, by funding BBC news services specifically, is a straightforward, effective, way to do that.

## **Section 2: How can the UK work better with other democracies to tackle foreign interference and uphold democratic values?**

22. Following from the analysis of the previous section, one of the main problems with foreign interference with any democracy is that the furnishing of disinformation can lower the level of political knowledge among the citizens of these other democracies. That undermines democratic values by undermining these citizens ability to make autonomous political choices, and so by undermining their ability to autonomously author the policies of their governments.
23. As in the British case, the provision of impartial, accurate reporting on the news and current affairs can counter the problem posed by such disinformation. It can raise the level of political knowledge among citizens of other democracies and thus offset the threat to their political autonomy posed by disinformation. So the UK can do its part in upholding democratic values internationally by helping provide impartial, accurate, news services internationally.
24. The UK is well-positioned to do this. The BBC's global news services reach 438 million people internationally each week, the BBC World Service reaches 148 million people a week. The latter has bureaux in 58 cities and supporting staff in 74 cities. It is committed to countering disinformation in other democracies (BBC World Service 2021), and its reach means it is a potent tool for doing so.
25. However, about 75 percent of the BBC World Service funding comes from the license fee (BBC 2022), and so it has been very hard hit by the freeze on the license fee. To save costs, three-hundred and eighty-

two positions, or about one in five posts, have been cut from the World Service from April 2023 (National Union of Journalists 2023). This has inevitably impaired the provision of BBC news in other countries.

26. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) provides a substantial subsidy to the BBC World Service. In 2021/2022 this amounted to £94.4million (BBC 2022). To compensate for funding cuts in the BBC generally, **I recommend that the FCDO increase its subsidy for the BBC World Service.** Doing so would be a concrete way for the UK to contribute to upholding democratic values in other democracies, and it would leverage the UK's special strengths (namely, its well-established, internationally popular news service).

### Section 3: Conclusion

27. The main problem with foreign interference in media is that it reduces citizens' level of political information. This undermines democratic values because it impairs citizens' abilities to make autonomous political choices. To counter this, the UK should increase the public provision of accurate, impartial information. Domestically, that means reversing the cuts to the BBC and making such reversals conditional on increased news spending. Internationally, it means increasing the FCDO subsidy of the BBC World Service. Undertaking these recommendations is crucial to upholding democratic values at home and abroad.

I would be pleased to provide further information to inform this inquiry. Please do not hesitate to contact me at [adam.lovett@acu.edu.au](mailto:adam.lovett@acu.edu.au).

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