Think
new *things*
Make
new *connections*

Terms of Reference

The New Fourth Estate: building a resilient 21ˢᵗ-century information eco-system

Friday, 2 – Saturday, 3 December 2022

DITCHLEY

Introduction

In 1948's *1984*, George Orwell described a world where truth was lies, war was peace and freedom slavery. On a bad day, the Internet and claims of partisan news outlets can feel a bit like that.

In the face of disinformation, rampant partisanship and new cults of personality, what can democratic states and societies do to strengthen citizens' willingness and ability to build a common pursuit of the truth across political divides and a set of shared facts as a sound foundation for democratic politics? Rather than lament the loss of that mythical golden age where leaders were truthful, journalists incorruptible, media sources few, and countries respected each other's digital borders, how can we use the extraordinary tools and new opportunities of the 21st century to build a resilient information ecosystem, where facts rise and falsehoods sink? How do we build an optimistic vision for the future of information?

To address this challenge and to explore policy options, business models and potential innovations, this Ditchley conference will bring together the mainstream media, broadcasters, new forms of digital media and digital platforms, creators of fiction, alongside educators, regulators and policy makers from different countries.

Democracy cannot thrive without a strong and free media, in the same way that a body cannot survive without a well-functioning immune system. But the media is, despite Marshall McLuhan's brilliant insight, in the end, a medium, a channel: messages go in at one end and are heard at the other. Both the broadcast and the reception are essential to the act of communication that ties the citizens of a democracy together. Much has been written and many discussions have been held on the deliberate abuse of the media and information environment through disinformation, whether inspired by domestic demagoguery or mischief from abroad, but the greater challenge is perhaps selective hearing. People aren't listening and don't want to hear facts that conflict with their opinions. Political behaviour comes down to what people hear, as much as what is said.

It is through a trusted enough information environment that individuals, communities and whole societies assemble a sufficiently shared worldview to allow democracies to exchange knowledge accepted as truthful, exert oversight, communicate and so function effectively. We need to know that elections are fair to ensure peaceful transitions of power. We have to centre political debate around defined choices between policies rather than a battle of unproven assertion.

How can this be addressed? How can appetite for objective facts be increased? What forms of new digital tools and new media can feed and stimulate that appetite? What new forms of continuous education are needed? What successful experiments could be accelerated? What can government, the private sector and civil society do in their respective spheres and in collaboration?

Has the private sector been slow to think about a robust public sphere and their role in creating or undermining it? For example, misinformation also comes from certain kinds of advertising (fake reviews) or social media data uses (political consultancies). Some elements of the private sector exploit the vulnerabilities of media systems in ways that come close to misinformation.

On the delivery side of information and facts, how can objective and thoughtful reporting and comment by professionals and citizens be strengthened and what business models, including for local news, can be developed to sustain that reporting? And yes, how can cyber warfare be effectively blocked, and illegal disinformation and falsehood called out? How can democratic societies best defend an open pluralistic media?

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For the middle part of the conference, we will split into three working groups to look in more detail at the different aspects of the problem and the opportunity:

Group A: Seeking and hearing the truth and separating it from falsehood
How can educational systems, government at all levels and civil society movements help citizens of all ages develop into skilled sifters of news and other digital material? What opportunities are emerging as a result of the growth of on-line learning? How can digital platforms and broadcast platforms (for example Netflix, Amazon, Apple, the BBC etc.) deliver content and programming that further strengthens individuals' interest and assessment in sorting fact from fiction? How can social groups help create conversations that aim at assessing the truth, not bolstering opinion? What can we do through rites of passage, credentials and popular culture? Are we poisoning our own well with endless dystopian dramas and are there alternatives that would still be good entertainment? What is the role of different types of work and the workplace in fostering discernment of fact from fiction and developing a rationally questioning mindset? How can different faith groups support shared understandings of fact, whilst remaining true to their beliefs?

Group B: Creating an eco-system where facts rise and falsehoods sink
What can digital platforms and governments do about recommender algorithms that are, by their essential nature, builders of echo chambers? How can citizens be better served with a range of opinion and facts whilst respecting freedom of speech and of choice? What signposts and labels should be applied to news and other information? How can we combat misinformation and disinformation without unduly limiting freedom of speech? What new business models can support services that help citizens separate fact from falsehood such as fact checking and analysis on demand?

Group C: Democratising and modernising excellence in journalism
Most citizens do not consume their news directly from carefully edited thoughtful newspapers or news channels and therefore do not read the work of professional journalists. Digital technology has made every citizen (and campaign group) a potential publisher and broadcaster. How can the quality of citizen journalism and commentary be developed? What incentives are emerging for the production of thoughtful material? What training, with incentives, is available for citizen journalists? What new business models and platforms are emerging? For professional journalists, how is the profession evolving? As we move to a more visual and video based culture, what is the potential for new forms of journalism such as video journalism, Infographic journalism and data analysis-based journalism, as well as fact-checking, long form podcasts and local news models? Has anyone started thinking about journalism and the metaverse (which is likely to bring with it many of the issues of social media but amplified)?

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