

Think

new things

Make

new connections

Terms of Reference

**The new Fourth Estate revisited:
how can we strengthen the news
and information landscape in
advance of the likely tough
challenges of 2024?**

A Ditchley conference in collaboration with the
MacArthur Foundation

7-8 December 2023

DITCHLEY

Terms of Reference

The new Fourth Estate revisited: how can we strengthen the news and information landscape in advance of the likely tough challenges of 2024?

A Ditchley conference in collaboration with the MacArthur Foundation aimed at setting an agenda to defend and renew the news and information landscape.

News and trustworthy information have had a tough time in recent years due to changes in business models, the impact of social media, increasing political polarisation, interference from state actors and the rise of effective disinformation campaigns. But 2024 looks set to bring a whole new level of challenge.

On the political front, elections will be hotly contested in many countries, including India, Indonesia, Mexico, the EU for the European Parliament, the UK and, most importantly of course, the US, with implications for the rest of the world. The US election, as of this writing, will most likely be fought between President Biden, the 81-year-old Democratic incumbent and President Trump, former Republican President, who has the unprecedented distinction of facing multiple federal indictments for a range of serious offences – including conspiracy to overturn the results of the 2020 elections – whilst trouncing his primacy rivals in the polls. The glimmer of potential national reconciliation and solidarity that 6 January sparked has been extinguished. Partisanship has deepened. Every election in the US is announced as crucial but this one certainly has the credentials, and a bitter campaign will likely further accelerate challenges to reliable news and trusted information.

From abroad, Russia will have every reason and few constraints to interfere in the elections and to attempt to sow chaos. The continuing war with Ukraine is likely to be at a desperate point for both sides, making rash moves more likely. Strategic competition with China and tensions with Iran may also come into play.

How then can democratic countries better support the supply of good quality information, locally and internationally? How can we best prepare for the political challenges of 2024? The challenges will be not only political but also technological and commercial. Generative AI, at present in its infancy, is maturing quickly to become a potent source of deep fake information, images, audio and video, able to scale disinformation campaigns at computer speed. 'Seeing is believing' will no longer hold as a tenet, probably further undermining the status of objective reported facts and putting more emphasis on preconceptions and faith in a particular world view. The low cost and credibility of synthetic media is a significant disinformation threat for elections in 2024.

At the same time, AI and changes in digital platforms will likely further disrupt traditional news organisation models. AI will deliver new tools for newsgathering and reporting but these will coincide with potentially negative effects on business models and the information ecosystem writ large. The potential for generative AI-produced search could undermine

already vulnerable news and media business models and platforms, for example bypassing and undermining intellectual property rights. Public news services like the BBC in the UK face intensified challenges to remain relevant for emerging generations.

Set against these challenges, how can a news and information landscape that delivers a mixed supply be defended? And how can it be defended when we are in the middle of a revolution not just in the production of news and information but its distribution and, in quite profound ways, its consumption? Processes of human cognition and understanding are changing as the ways we receive and take in information are changed.

Detail

As at our 2022 discussion, we will look at both production and consumption and begin to address the many challenges of how a sufficiently high quality and diversified supply of trustworthy news and information for people in differing regions, of different levels of education and of different political views at local, national and at international level could be fostered.

If last year's conference helped define a call to action, the aim of this December's conference will be to turn that into an agenda for 2024 and beyond.

The conference will aim to develop an international work plan to improve understanding and coordination, and therefore to build impact, across the various approaches, initiatives and innovations already underway, whilst also spotting and filling gaps. Building on last year's discussion, the conference will explore:

- The scope for further development of sustainable local news initiatives, in different cities, regions and countries, employing new business models.
- The risks and opportunities of uses of AI in news and information production and uses by citizens in search and information seeking. This includes greater understanding of the risk that generative AI-produced search will remove news producer attribution and undermine copyright and the basis of intellectual property.
- How news producers and platforms can better engage citizens across the political spectrum and provide tools and processes to help them navigate rapid digital transformation.

The conference will consider the emerging resources for both the production and consumption of verifiable and accessible news and information to support a distributed and diverse set of interests. It will consider how to stimulate the demand for the high quality and well researched objective information that is necessary for the functioning of democratic societies.

For the middle part of the conference, we will break into working groups to examine three interrelated areas in more detail:

Group A Local news and new business models for journalism

How can we build internationally on MacArthur's Press Forward initiative in the US, aimed at transforming philanthropic funding of new business models for local news and so addressing news deserts and areas dominated by skewed reporting? What other sources of

funding and business models can we identify and stimulate alongside philanthropy (which is less prevalent in Europe and elsewhere than in the US)? What can be done to create shared infrastructure and platforms to reduce the start-up and running costs of new news organisations? What sorts of different models of local news are emerging? How can new local news business models be made resilient against the threat that the content they produce is gobbled up and republished by voracious generative AI-seeking advertising revenue? How can trust in local news build towards trust in national and international news?

Group B The impact of AI on newsgathering, content creation, ownership, verification and the information ecosystem at large

How can AI technologies be applied to support better journalism in service of the public? What are the ethical and transparency boundaries in applications of AI tools? The implications of generative AI-produced search that removes news producer attribution could be dramatic with impact on revenue, on business models and on the ability of publishers to protect their intellectual property. The debate about how to fight disinformation must take account of these risks to news organisations. The fundamental technology behind generative AI is moving fast but thinking on use cases is lagging far behind. How can advances in AI genuinely transform our processing and verification, accountability and transparency of information sources and attribution?

Group C Public engagement

What are news organizations doing to support public understanding of the media landscape, including AI-generated synthetic media, and to increase the capacity of citizens to research, assess and verify trustworthy news? Are there structures that could be put in place across the media ecosystem to help consumers track the provenance of media? What kinds of technology and support can be made available to people to help them to recognise media manipulation? What kind of incentive, regulation or leadership is needed for media companies to put these practices in place, and will they be able to co-ordinate these efforts? Should the strengthening of public service media be our focus or would resources and attention be better directed on fostering a much more diverse set of news sources?

More broadly, last December's conference recognised that innovation tends to be led from companies based in northern California, Israel and East Asia. The implication is that Europe will be a receiver of technology rather than a creator. What impact will this have on the longer-term shifts in the news and information landscape across Europe? China's response has been to attempt to manage social media and proactively shape media narratives. China is proud of its approach with, for example, moderating children's access (and time spent on-line), and contrasts this with political polarisation within democracies. Are there things to learn as well as things to fear and avoid in the Chinese approach?