HOUSE OF LORDS

Select Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies

Corrected oral evidence: Democracy and Digital Technologies

Wednesday 4 March 2020

3.05 pm

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Puttnam (The Chair); Lord Black of Brentwood; Lord German; Lord Harris of Haringey; Lord Lipsey; Lord Lucas; Lord Mitchell; Baroness Morris of Yardley.

Evidence Session No. 18   Heard in Public   Questions 226 - 239

Witness

I: Sir Julian King, Former EU Security Commissioner.

<center>Examination of Witness</center>

Sir Julian King.

Q226 **The Chair:** Welcome to everybody, but, in particular, welcome to Julian. I just have to read out the police caution. As you know, this session is open to the public. A webcast goes out live and is subsequently accessible via the parliamentary website. A verbatim transcript will be taken of your evidence and put on the parliamentary website. You will have the opportunity to make minor corrections for the purposes of clarification or accuracy. Can you introduce yourself for the record?

Sir Julian King: Thank you very much for inviting me. I was, until the end of last year, a member of the European Commission in Brussels. I do not work for the Commission anymore, so I will not be speaking on behalf of the Commission. I am not on HMG's payroll, so I am not speaking on behalf of HMG. For what it is worth, I am speaking on behalf of myself. I hope that I may, in the course of the discussion, say some things that are of interest to your work.

Q227 **Lord German:** Your experience in this area is very important to us. Could you tell us to the extent to which we should be worried about the state of online political activity in the United Kingdom? From your ability to know what happens in the rest of Europe, how do we compare with the rest of Europe in being equipped to deal with such difficulties?

Sir Julian King: With an exception, which we might come on to later, we did not, in the Commission, set ourselves up as an independent monitoring body on disinformation across Europe. We aimed to work with the member state authorities, to bring them together to analyse the different risks and challenges, and together to work to try to manage and mitigate some of those risks and challenges. We did not draw up a league table.

On the basis of the discussions that we hosted and the platforms that we provided, where member states came together, I can say that the UK is as exposed as other member states. Forgive my shorthand; of course, the United Kingdom is not now a member state, but it was at the time we are talking about. The UK is not more exposed, and we saw no evidence to contradict or to disagree with the assessment of the various UK agencies involved in this field that they had no evidence and no proof of any successful interference stemming from outside—or indeed, inside—disinformation.

That does not mean that there was not a lot of disinformation activity. There has been a lot of disinformation activity in the United Kingdom and across the European Union, as you know very well and as you have been looking into. It was because of that level of activity and the concerns around it that we set out to take a series of steps and measures in the run-up in particular to the European parliamentary elections last spring, because member states collectively were concerned that those elections were an attractive target for anyone, either external or domestic actors, seeking to interfere to try to frame or misframe the political debate,

because the European Parliament is an important institution in the European Union.

The elections then took place across 28 countries. They take place across a number of days. If you are seeking to spread disinformation, it is quite a rich target, so that was what led to some of the steps we took together to try to deal with the challenge, and I hope we will have an opportunity to discuss that this morning.

As I said, the Commission never drew up any kind of league table, but there are some quite good independent bodies that look at the challenge and different ways in which the challenge manifests itself and is dealt with across Europe. I will cite them; you can look them up and form your own view about what kind of weight you want to give them. There is the *Prague Manual*, which is drawn up by various Czech think tanks and which looks in particular at how countries across Europe deal with pro-Kremlin disinformation. It rates the UK in the top four or five. It also rates in that top cohort Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden, which you might understand because there is historical context to their being very alert to this challenge.

From a slightly different perspective, there is the Media Literacy Index, which is an Open Society Institute assessment of how good different member states are at promoting different forms of societal resilience to disinformation activities. We can talk about that in a bit more detail if you want. That says that some of the best across Europe at doing this are the Nordics—Finland, Denmark, Sweden and Estonia—and the Netherlands. In its assessment, the UK, in building societal resilience to disinformation, comes about a third of the way down the league table. In the last assessment, it had the UK 12th out of 35 countries across wider Europe that it was looking at.

To add to that, in the work that we were doing in Brussels to bring the different member states together to learn from and support each other, various UK-based agencies made a real contribution and were widely respected for the work that they did. Some of it was ahead of the curve. It was work that others came to do but came to do later. In particular, I would single out the National Cyber Security Centre. The fact that it was on the ground and had real experience that it was ready to share with other member states was very important and helped to accelerate the work that we were doing, building on that UK experience.

Q228 **Lord German:** Just to be clear, do you think we should be more worried, or more concerned, than we appear to be about the misuse of political spaces, whether that be by external actors or internal actors? On that internal/external issue, we have obviously looked for external actors, and we need to be well aware of internal actors, so could you comment on the balance between those?

Sir Julian King: Across Europe as a whole, there has been a step change in awareness of these challenges over the last few years. When I started talking to colleagues about this three and a half years ago, it was not

entirely a niche activity but it was not a very widely shared set of concerns. Events on both sides of the Atlantic and criminal cyber activity, as well as apparently politically motivated cyber activity and disinformation activity, went very fast up the political agenda, including, as I have said, in the run-up to the European parliamentary elections last spring.

We have done more to try to deal with these various challenges. Have we done enough? I have no doubt that we will come on to that. There is still scope for doing more. What were common shared challenges identified for European countries? They were, in particular, disinformation activity and external interference, which you might want to talk about in a bit more detail. There is a very significant amount of pro-Kremlin organised disinformation activity. Without prejudice to who exactly is behind that, the messages that are being spread are supportive of Russian and Kremlin positions. There are also other actors, and what you might call in shorthand the Russian playbook has been copied and replicated by other actors, including apparently domestic actors in various European countries. We have reported on that, based on reports from the different member states. There were examples from many countries across Europe in the run-up to the European parliamentary elections.

There is obviously also the challenge of cyber interference, so there was not just disinformation but interference with the structure of running an election. We took a set of particular measures to try to deal with that side of the challenge, as well as—as I have already said—with some of the societal resilience and awareness in relation to media literacy, civil society and journalistic fact-checkers' engagement

Q229 **Lord Mitchell:** Thank you, Sir Julian. That is very helpful. We are now no longer a member of the EU, they tell me. I just wonder how all these relationships that we have had with the bodies will continue in the future and, more to the point, what effect it will have on our ability to detect cybersecurity events.

Sir Julian King: If you like, we can come on to some of the things we did together over the last few years. I am very happy to talk about those in more detail. Quite how that co-operation is going to develop in the future, I do not know, sitting here today. Cybersecurity and co-operation on cybersecurity issues are mentioned in the respective mandates of the EU 27 and HMG, and much of the co-operation is with a shared interest in exploring ways of working together, but outside institutional structures. Much of the practice that has been built up over recent years could continue outside institutional structures that would require, for example, ECJ supervision, so there may be scope for continued co-operation. We shall have to see.

There is co-operation on these issues in NATO. I am speaking to a group of NATO planners in 10 days' time, as it happens, about how to build NATO co-operation against some of these challenges. There is like-minded co-operation in the G7. Canada, in particular, during its chairmanship of the G7, pushed this agenda forward vigorously. There

are other frameworks where there have been discussions and where I imagine discussions will continue: the OECD and, although it is a bit more complicated, the G20—to cite just two.

The fact that the UK is no longer a member of the European Union should not, in and of itself, limit the scope for international co-operation, which is absolutely crucial on these issues, among like-minded countries. I do not want to say today, because it is too soon to say, how you might structure such co-operation, including continued co-operation with the 27 remaining members of the European Union.

Q230 **Lord Lucas:** How, in the context of an international environment, do you establish what misinformation is? There will be those who say that we own the Elgin Marbles and there will be those who say we do not. That sort of principle must multiply in a complex gathering of European states. Is there a way in which agreement is reached, or do we just live with difference?

Sir Julian King: There is a level of agreement and there is a level of toleration of interpretation and difference. In the framework of the European Union, some countries have sought to address these issues in national legislation, as I am sure you know. The French sought to deal with political disinformation activity in the context of elections through passing legislation that gave powers to the public authorities to take direct action in the period immediately around elections, reflecting their tradition of a particular relationship between the judiciary and the press. The French and the Germans took legislation, which the Germans are now reinforcing, on tackling particular aspects of hate speech-related disinformation, because they had a legal framework in which they could reach agreement on definitions to do that.

At the collective European level, we did not feel that we had sufficient agreement to write down definitions that you would seek to put into legislation, but we did have a working definition, which was agreed by most member states, on political disinformation and disinformation that was misleading and designed and intended to have political effect. That was sufficient basis for us to pursue a series of measures that were built up over a number of years that were non-legislative in nature.

When we get on to the bit about what more we or the EU might want to do, there is a debate about how far and how fast you can seek to strengthen some of the things that have already been done through regulation and legislation, but there will be a challenge, if you try to do that, in finding a satisfactory European-wide definition that people will be able to accept.

Q231 **Lord Lipsey:** Co-operation is a very good thing in life and particularly in this field. I am interested in what co-operation actually means in this kind of field, because in one sense it is laying down principles—"You shall not hack the Queen's emails", or whatever it should be—and at the other end it is technical co-operation in finding out what is coming out of a Russian bot factory or something. Which is it that we are mostly talking about

here, and which will be the most important?

Sir Julian King: We sought over a number of years to build up different sorts of practical co-operation between the member state public authorities, with civil society and, crucially, with the social media platforms. That is the framework that we have at the moment, which works in some respects. It has failings, which are being discussed, and some people want to go further to try to reinforce the network that we have set up.

With the member states, we decided to address together the challenge of trying to protect the actual election process better from interference. We set up an election security network that brought together, from all the member states, representatives of the authorities that run their elections, which are different in different member states, the authorities that were charged with cybersecurity and thinking about how you insulate from cyber interference, and the authorities that deal with data protection.

We found it quite striking, when we brought all these people together for the first time, that the delegations from quite a number of the member states did not know each other in the national delegation, so the first thing we managed to do was to discuss how it was quite a good idea for these different groups within countries to work together on this shared challenge. We then had a series of different meetings, workshops, discussions and exercises that got people to co-operate across member states, to try to learn from each other and to imagine how they would deal with a shared challenge. That was the kind of pragmatic and practical co-operation that you asked about at the beginning of your question.

We then set up a rapid alert system, with each member state nominating somebody—it was up to them how they wanted to organise that nationally—who would have responsibility for feeding into a central information exchange if they saw significant or cross-border disinformation activity, and we linked that into certain specialist groups that worked on this kind of challenge and to the European institutions.

I said that we had not, as the Commission, set ourselves up or equipped ourselves to be specialists in trying to track this stuff, but there was an exception—a team that we have had for some years in the European External Action Service, which is the bit of the institutions that deals with foreign policy and focuses on mapping pro-Kremlin disinformation across Europe. It was able to contribute to this information exchange. We got it up and running and it ran through the European parliamentary elections, and we have been reinforcing it since then. Again, it is an example of non-legislative and non-regulatory co-operation.

We learned from the different civil society actors, in particular the fact-checking community, and asked them what they needed for support. Not surprisingly, they said that they could use some help with setting up platforms for sharing information, and with money and funding, and the institutions have provided relatively modest funding so far to support

European networks of fact-checkers in particular, as well as networks—this quickly becomes more controversial—to support what is sometimes called quality or independent media. I know you have been talking to people about that.

With the social media platforms, this is perhaps one area where working together at a European level makes a real difference, because the platforms find it harder to ignore you if 28, or 27, sets of authorities or markets, depending on your perspective, rock up and say that they would like to see some activity, rather than if it is just one or two member states.

We sat down with the big social media actors and said, "We have a shared problem here. It is not that we are blaming you, but you are a platform across which quite a lot of this activity is taking place and we want to work with you to try to identify the steps that we might take with you to try to get better at closing off the opportunities for disinformation across your platforms". They came up with a series of elements of activity, some of which you have touched upon in some of your other sessions, and, facilitated by us in the Commission, they set themselves a series of goals and outputs that they wanted to be measured against in something that we called the Code of Practice on Disinformation.

We have subsequently held them to account for their progress. There are a number of more detailed areas, but essentially it was about: political ads—who is sponsoring them and how you monitor them; fake activity—bearing down on fake accounts and bots spreading political disinformation; and co-operation with independent actors and independent scrutiny, with both support for the fact-checker community and, crucially, gradually opening up platforms to more independent scrutiny from researchers who were not in-house, so that we got away from the problem of the platforms essentially marking their own homework on this.

We have made some progress, which I can talk about a bit more if you want, on each of those measures, but there is still a lot to be done. The report that we produced after the European parliamentary elections, which we updated from the Commission at the end of last year, pointed to the need to do more on all those areas, but in particular I would single out the need to do more on cracking down on fake accounts and bot activity, and on opening up to independent scrutiny.

Lord Lipsey: That is extremely helpful and interesting, but going back to Lord Mitchell's question, it does sound as if we are going to pay a substantial price in this field, if not in any other, for not being full members of the EU. Whatever words of guff may have got themselves inserted into the agreement, we are losing a clear, close and developing set of practical arrangements for combating this stuff on a European scale, which was beginning to yield very important results, from what you were saying.

Sir Julian King: You will not get me to say that it is not yielding important results, because I devoted three and a half years of my life to trying to support and develop it. It is a forum in which you can build this kind of important international co-operation; it is not the only forum in which you can build this co-operation. There are some advantages in working very closely with like-minded countries in order, for example, to co-ordinate your approaches to the social media platforms, because that yields more results, but it also would be a mistake, as I said in my last role, to limit your ambition for such co-operation only to countries that happen to be members of the European Union, because the like-minded community that faces these common challenges goes wider than that.

I am not just saying this now; I said then that you need to be open to finding other ways of bringing others on board—not just the United States—because they share many of these challenges. I remain positive about that agenda. We need to take that forward.

There are certain things that you can do within an EU context that it is harder to do absent that context. You can take it further down the road that Lord Lucas was asking about: "Okay. We've got to this point in practical co-operation. Do we want to look at the rules? Are we going to do something for example in the regulatory space about how we expect platforms to behave within the European Union?" That debate is just starting. It will continue, because this problem is not going away any time soon. The extent to which the UK might or might not be able to plug into that kind of activity will depend on the outcome of the negotiations on a future relationship that have only just started.

Q232 **Lord Harris of Haringey:** I am not quite sure it follows on naturally. You talked about the election security network. Part of what you said implied that this was all about helping people with shared challenges, so it was a service to members of the EU. We have had evidence from at least one member state that the attacks on its democracy are perceived as an existential threat for that state, and we have had evidence that that is part of what you called the Kremlin playbook to undermine people's faith in democracy.

It is also part of that same playbook to undermine institutions such as NATO and the European Union, and you also told us that the European External Action Service has a special unit that looks at these matters. To what extent did you, as a member of the Commission, feel that your colleagues perceived some of the threats as being existential towards the European Union itself or the European Union's commitment to democracy?

Sir Julian King: This discussion was coloured/led by some countries that are more concerned by these issues than others, and that reflected either the strength of their national authorities that engage in countering this type of activity—the UK, for example—or the exposure that they felt to a particular external interference; the Baltics, for example. Over time, and quite quickly, other countries became engaged. One of the positive things was that, although there were some leaders, other countries understood,

even if they had not started from the same perspective or from the same historical experience, that this was a shared challenge.

By the time we were getting up to the European parliamentary elections, which we used as a lever to try to get people to take action, even if it was not their top priority in the domestic debate, we were getting action across all the member states. There was a different degree of commitment in some, but we were getting action across all of them because they perceived this as potentially a challenge to their shared institutions.

Lord Harris of Haringey: You have not quite got to the stage of people sitting around a table and saying, "This is existential for us as the European Union", but you have got to the stage of saying, "This is a problem that is getting more and more serious and is in danger of undermining the Union".

Sir Julian King: Yes. We got to that stage of the debate in the run-up to the European parliamentary elections. Because of the wider debate about the relationship with the social media platforms, that part of the debate has continued to develop quite quickly over the months since the European parliamentary elections, and it is part of a wider debate in societies across the European Union about how you might want to look at regulating social media activity, political disinformation being one of the harms that attracts a lot of political attention, but, as you know very well, not the only harm that can be transmitted over social media.

Q233 **The Chair:** Broadly speaking, are you encouraged by the new Commission leadership at the top, particularly in this area? What sort of trigger would you imagine might make the situation different? Lord Harris used the word "existential", which is correct. At what point does it tip into being clearly an existential problem, at least for the Union?

Sir Julian King: The new leadership in this area is actually some of the old leadership who stayed on. On the whole, that it is quite a good thing, because they carry on the work that they have already committed to. Notably, Commissioner and now Vice-President Věra Jourová, who is well known to you, is determined to take this work forward. She has the support of quite a number of colleagues who share the perspective that this is a very important subject and we should not just hang around waiting for something bad to happen; we should be trying to get ahead of the problem as far as we can.

I welcome publicly the fact that the new President, Ursula von der Leyen, listed this as one of her concerns very early on and has listed this as one of the issues that, among a number of issues, might be dealt with in proposed legislation on digital services, which they will start to bring forward later this year. This is not dropping down the agenda.

Just to complement what I said on the shared perception of this problem, some countries, as you know, have more direct historical experience of real interference. In wider Europe, of course, Ukraine has too much

experience of this. In the European Union, as you know having met representatives from there, Estonia has had a very dramatic experience of this. I am not saying who is actually generating it, but across Europe there is awareness of a message being generated that is supportive of a pro-Kremlin view of the world.

The unit that I referred to earlier that we developed over recent times has now logged over 7,500 examples of organised pro-Kremlin disinformation activity. That is not one story in one publication in one country; that is repeated patterns, in multiple publications or in a number of member states. The rate at which this was happening and being mapped was not slowing down. It was, in fact, speeding up. The last figures I have are for the first half of 2019 when we were scrutinising this quite closely around the European parliamentary elections, and the rate at which such incidents were mapped during that time was double the same period in 2018.

I will not use the word "existential", but those kinds of things mean that this stays a shared concern that is very high up the agenda.

Q234 **Lord Lucas:** Where do we go from here? What should our role be in international collaboration on cybersecurity? What particularly should we be looking to contribute? Should we be looking to lead anywhere? Looking at your years of experience, where are we internally weak compared with other countries? Where should we be looking to do better?

Sir Julian King: There are some positives, as well as areas that you might want to pick out for further progress. As I said at the outset, it is not our league table, but a league table that I respect puts the UK about a third of the way down when it looks at measures for building societal resilience.

Some of the things that have been done in other countries go all the way through from education activities. I have no doubt you have heard about some of the things that are done in Scandinavian schools. Finland, in particular, has started education at a very young age. That kind of activity is something that we should look at, as is the support for independent fact-checkers and networks of fact-checkers. That varies across Europe, but on the whole, for reasons that I think I understand, it is quite strong in central and eastern Europe. That could be strengthened further in other parts of Europe, including, arguably, the United Kingdom.

There are other areas where we need to do more together, and the UK can continue to give a lead, whatever the detailed institutional relationships might or might not be. Those include being quite firm with the social media platforms about the need for them to step up, at the very least, to the objectives they set themselves in relation to political ads, fake and bot activity, and the need to open themselves up more to independent scrutiny. I see no reason why the UK should be shy in making its voice heard in that debate, and I hope that, whatever the institutional arrangements, it could be a supporting voice for activities that are going on in the European Union framework as well, because, as

you have seen in the evidence you have been taking, we have to do better there and we have to keep the pressure on the platforms to do better.

Some of the cybersecurity experience that we have nationally is highly relevant to others, and I hope we will continue to find ways of sharing that experience. One of the practical challenges in relation to electoral security, which came up in all the discussions we had and reflected international experience, is that very often, although there are slightly different arrangements in different countries, the buck stops with local authorities in organising some, and quite often many, aspects of the conduct of elections. If those local authorities are coming under some form of cyberattack, they need help and support.

This is not unique to Europe. There are examples in the States, where local authorities appear to have been interfered with and it has got in the way of the conduct of electoral activity. That is an area where all of us need to make a bit more of an effort and where the UK has experience that it can share. That can come from all sorts of different angles. It may just be criminal activity that is generating this challenge. There has been press coverage recently about Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council, which has had difficulties conducting some of its activities following a ransomware attack. Building this resilience does not just help electoral security against possible interference from some sort of state-backed party. That is an area where we can all work better together.

There is a lot of scope for sharing best practice on electoral regulation. Some of that can be done collectively at the European level, but actually not that much, because the collective rules at the European level really only bear upon cross-border, European-wide political activity. They do not address the vast majority of political activity, including in the European parliamentary elections, which is national and local. There you need to exchange best practices to try to deal with the national, or occasionally local, legislation that governs those elections. Offline electoral activity in the UK, as in other countries, is still scrutinised exhaustively. When you go online, it is not. You have had evidence about that, and it is one of the key areas that we need to work on.

Q235 **Lord Black of Brentwood:** I want to pick up on some of the things that you started talking about in answer to Lord Lipsey. When looking at how to build societal resistance, we have looked at the role of government but we are also very mindful of the role that civil society has to play in that. You started talking about that, particularly with regard to fact-checking, but are there other things that civil society can do in supporting a resilient democracy? From your vast experience in this area, is there best practice in any other countries that we should be looking at? We heard the other day from the Government of Estonia, so we have a clear view about a lot of very important things that are going on there, but are there other countries that we should look to?

Sir Julian King: As I mentioned, again, it is not the Commission's league table but it is one that I respect. The Prague Manual, which has worked

on this, points to successful examples in the Baltics. The Media Literacy Index, which focused in particular on the societal challenges, picked out Finland, Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden and Estonia. Those examples are always worth looking at closely.

You can also learn from some of the weaknesses. The last Open Society Institute index that I mentioned maps a lot of the weaknesses in the Balkan countries, and it is quite useful to look not only at the best in class but at some of the ones that have particular challenges, see what those challenges are and draw lessons from them. There are wider rule-of-law challenges and wider challenges to society integration, not just resilience.

At the European level, we sought to help and support the networks that were already active. The International Fact-Checking Network brought fact-checkers together but had some holes in its European coverage. It was particularly active in about half the member states. In the other half, it was less active. We sought to work with it to build up a platform and to fund a platform in which those that were more advanced could share their experience with other countries.

We also pressed the social media platforms to build up their networks of fact-checkers in different European countries. We made progress, but still only about half the member states have really active fact-checker networks that plug in effectively to the social media platforms in a way that offers advice and feedback, and we need to do better on that.

It is harder to promote education initiatives at a European level, because education, as some of you know very well, is still very much a national responsibility, but we did bring various groups together at least to share some of the best practice. It sounds as though you have already heard from some of the countries that are most advanced in this area.

Lord Black of Brentwood: You talked earlier about the importance of civil society engaging with the platforms, specifically in fact-checking and other areas. How willing have you found the platforms to be in engaging back with civil society?

Sir Julian King: This is one of the areas that remain a challenge. I also want to come back briefly to the role of supporting so-called quality media, although that is a much more controversial and challenging area at the European level.

We work with the biggest platforms—Facebook, Google and Twitter. Others have joined this effort since, notably Microsoft. Some of them were quite good at engaging with fact-checkers. Some of them, like Microsoft, offered very concrete support to independent fact-checkers, but it was quite patchy across Europe, so we have continued to try to engage with those platforms to encourage them to do more of it.

The area that I found quite frustrating and where we definitely need to return to the charge is openness to independent research scrutiny. Fact-checkers are looking at pieces of content and pieces of alleged

disinformation. Independent research scrutiny is seeking to map patterns of activity in order to learn from it and to be better equipped to deal with such activity in future. To do that, there is a need not just to monitor the content but to have access to how the platforms are doing their work, and there it has been much more difficult.

Lord Black of Brentwood: It is the algorithms.

Sir Julian King: Indeed, ultimately it is the algorithms. As I am sure you have heard from others, that remains a real challenge. Even when we manage to persuade Facebook, for example, to talk to us about this more, its answer was, "We're doing more of it internally". Our reply was, "That's very interesting, but we have all these independent research universities and other people who work in this area who say that you might be doing more of it internally, but actually they have found it harder, over the last 12 months or so, to get access to some of the information". In some cases, they were not getting access to information that 12 months earlier they had had access to, so that is an area that we need to keep a focus on.

Lord Black of Brentwood: That is very interesting. Thank you.

Lord Lucas: If you got to a position where there was widespread fact-checking on social media, how would politicians live with that?

Sir Julian King: I am probably the least politician in this room. You should not be scared of fact-checking if what you are saying will be checked as true.

Q236 **Lord Harris of Haringey:** Some of the things that we are looking at are entirely about interactions between individuals who are using platforms and private internet companies providing those services. Can those areas be effectively regulated, either at a national or an international level?

Sir Julian King: I believe the answer is yes, but it is complicated. Individual users, otherwise known as citizens, need help and support. We have discussed some of the structures that you can use to help and support. The one we have not mentioned, which I want to mention, is support for media literacy. We have tried to do that at the European level with funding and various programmes, but that can become quite controversial because you have to avoid appearing to favour one media outlet over another. We have managed to fund various courses around Europe, which are open but which look at the fundamentals of good journalism and maintaining diverse media. We can continue to do that.

When it comes to the platforms, there is scope for having more of a discussion about whether some of the things that have been identified in discussions with platforms to date, and on which the platforms have been taking some action, could benefit from being put in the framework of regulation. As you know very well, having heard witnesses talk about this, the debate within the platforms has changed quite a lot over the last couple of years. Two years back when we talked about this, there was pretty widespread rejection of the idea, and hostility in the United States

for example. I remember an early occasion when we were invited to the White House and we thought that this was very nice. We were taken to a basement room to have our heads scrubbed: "How dare the Europeans propose regulation in this field?" That kind of debate has moved on a little bit.

Exactly which framework you would do it within definitely still needs more work, but I do not see why it should be impossible to set out regulatory guidelines for the effective monitoring of sponsored ads, how you run ad libraries and how you have a position on fact-checking of political ads. I do not see why it is impossible to have regulation standards for the effective monitoring of fake accounts and bots, and I do not see why you could not set regulatory standards on interaction with independent researchers and scrutineers.

I am glad that some of the big social media platforms have had initiatives in these different areas, but sometimes they have quite difficult internal debates about how far they should go and what kind of priority they should give to these efforts. Some are complicated for them to manage, because they are opening up sensitive areas either of their business model or their algorithmic practice. I have had individuals suggest to me, from within some of the social media platforms, that it might be easier for them to make progress if it was set in a regulatory framework. I think they are more likely to co-operate with a regulatory framework that applies to a wide range of countries/markets that they want to work with than to be faced with a kaleidoscope of different regulatory arrangements that they have to meet across, say, 28 different countries. This is an area where the EU framework for co-operation has an advantage.

Lord Harris of Haringey: The implication of what you are saying is that if the UK is keen to see this sort of regulatory activity with regard to the internet service providers, it is best going in with one of the other big blocs. It could be the EU or it could be something else entirely, but trying to do it on one's own is not very sensible.

Sir Julian King: It is not impossible. We are now not talking about cybersecurity. We are talking about the debate about what you might do through regulation to affect behaviours of social media platforms. The UK debate on harms has gone ahead further and faster than many other member states'. It has not jumped to some of the legislation that I mentioned earlier that exists in one or two member states, and maybe that is a good thing, because getting this right is important.

I do not want to take away from the initiatives that might be taken by one country or another, or which in this case have been taken by HMG. I am telling you nothing you do not know already, but if you want to pitch to Facebook, Google or Twitter something that is quite complicated for them and that might have some cost for them in some sense, it is more persuasive to say, "If you do this, it will apply in a more or less uniform fashion across X number of countries and markets", rather than, "We're going to do this and we don't care what anyone else is doing. You will have to just adjust".

Slightly less positively, in the run-up to the European parliamentary elections we had the experience of a social media platform—Facebook, as it happens—playing this argument back against us and saying, "We'd love to help on ads and how we categorise political advertising, and therefore how we log it in political ad libraries, but it's really very complicated because there seem to be 28 different sets of rules and regulations across the European Union, so we'll do it once you've all aligned". We said, "Actually, we'd like you to do it in time for the European parliamentary elections, please. You seem to be able to operate across"—at that stage—"28 different member state markets. It doesn't seem to be a problem for you. It doesn't seem to be a problem for you to manage your tax liabilities, for example, or absence thereof, across 28 different jurisdictions, so maybe you can help us a bit on this as well".

We should not fall into the trap of saying that you can get progress only if you are moving as a bloc, but if you are moving as a bloc or coalition, which might be European but could be a wider coalition of like-minded countries, you have a better chance of securing action when what you are asking might be difficult.

Lord Harris of Haringey: Is there a role for international institutions, or indeed national institutions, in promoting media or digital literacy and digital citizenship?

Sir Julian King: We had limited experience of that, so I do not know that I have a great basis on which to speak to that question. As I said, the Commission, when I was there, found various ways, which everybody was comfortable with, of promoting media literacy, including digital media literacy, but we were always conscious that this was a difficult area and that we had to tread quite carefully, so that was not area that we developed as far as some of the other things that we have been talking about.

Q237 **Lord Lucas:** In working with the social media companies, if we are looking at what sort of structure we should set up to do that, do we want something with a great depth of expertise to match theirs? Do we just want strong political focus tied to the centre of government? Do we want people who are going to form long-term relationships with these organisations, or do they not really support that? How should we be structuring whatever we put in place to negotiate and maintain the relationships we want with the social media companies?

Sir Julian King: If you can form a longer-term relationship, that will be helpful, but I note—you have probably had others speak to you about this—that when President Macron, in France, led an initiative to try to work out whether there was not self-regulation but reinforced self-regulation with a degree of embedded outside scrutiny as part of the proposed regulatory arrangement, the conversations which the French were trying to have with the big social media platforms were not successful, and they have backed away from that idea.

Yes, you need a relationship, and ideally it should not just be for one election or one set of events, but there appear to be some limits to how embedded that relationship can be, because in the end the credibility of any efforts in this area will depend upon the degree to which people accept that the social media platforms are not marking their own homework.

Q238   **The Chair:** Before I ask Lord Mitchell to ask the last question, can I just make two points, simply because I want to get them on the record and get your response? On Monday, the representative of Estonia mentioned in passing that they were working very closely with Australia, which was surprising to him. He said that they realised that many of the problems they were facing were not dissimilar from the ones that Australia was facing with China and that therefore there was a great deal of shared co-operation. Is that what you said when you talked about relationships not being exclusively European but spreading out wider?

Sir Julian King: That is a more developed version of what I was thinking of. There are like-minded countries; I mentioned Canada's lead during their G7 chairmanship. If you are really going to make progress in this area, it would be helpful to have engagement from the US. Certainly, you should be open to learning from the experience of other countries that might be under different forms of challenge from interference.

From the Commission's perspective, we had quite a lot of exchange with Australia about some of the cyber challenges. We, the Commission, had slightly less on disinformation, but it is excellent if some of the member states are having those kinds of discussions.

We used to be asked quite a lot, "Are you doing this against Russia?" and the answer we used to give, which is still valid, is that if you are building your resilience and trying to arrange measures for countering disinformation, that will help you wherever that disinformation is coming from. It was important for us to have that approach, because, as was documented in some of the reports that we produced after the European parliamentary elections, there was quite a lot of disinformation activity, only some of which was apparently being sourced externally. A lot of disinformation activity was sourced internally.

If you are going to maintain wide support for measures that are potentially politically controversial internally in some countries, because some parties are more or less closely associated with activities that others regard as disinformation, it is more helpful if you couch that effort as being, and everybody accepts that effort as being, to build your resilience and your resistance to counter disinformation, not to counter disinformation from party X. You can learn, even if, as in Australia's case, the main challenge is disinformation that is not sourced from Russia.

The Chair: There is another important thing that, again, from our point of view, it would be good to get on the record. One of the problems that we will have as a Committee, without doubt, will be that a lot of the recommendations we make will fall into different departmental silos—the

Cabinet Office, the Department for Education, et cetera. That, without any doubt, will be a problem in trying to move forward.

The gentleman who represented Estonia here was from their security network. He made the point that the security apparatus, which he led the communication division of, was a useful place to go because that gave him leverage over the education department. The education department, while it may have been somewhat reluctant to step up to citizenship teaching as we would understand it, in a sense was required to as a result of security decisions that had been made in the Cabinet. What similar situation could occur in the UK? How can we as a Committee influence different siloed departments, and where would the leverage most likely come from?

Sir Julian King: I will try to answer that, but I go back to where I started. While trying to help and support member state authorities and member states organised in different ways, we offered to help them to bring different strands of expertise together. The key strands of expertise that we focused on should not be surprising. They were cybersecurity, electoral organisation and regulation, and data privacy and protection. One way or another, you have to find a way to get those strands to work together effectively.

We did not seek to dictate to individual member states how they organised co-ordination between those strands, because there was no basis for us to do that, and seeking to do that would have just generated resistance. We sought to demonstrate that if you did not have that co-operation, you left yourself weaker and more exposed, and that kind of demonstration by example started to yield results.

If you translate that to the UK, the UK in my experience has advantages compared with some of the other European countries in that it has effective cross-departmental co-ordination. You might think that there are challenges, but I can tell you that I have seen worse.

You can have a security-led response, and central government support and empowerment for that security-led response, as you have largely in Estonia—you have cited Estonia, so I have no reservation about citing it back—some of the other Baltic countries and, more controversially, in some other countries; in some ways, you have it in France. You have to leave it up to individual countries to work out how they want to manage that kind of co-ordination. I am okay with that, but such co-ordination is proven across Europe to be really important.

Q239 **Lord Mitchell:** This is the last question, and it is a wide-ranging question in some ways. If the UK Government could do one thing to improve the resilience of our democracy in a digital age, what should they do?

Sir Julian King: I love one-thing questions. Can I give you two things? Notwithstanding all the other things we have talked about, I look at electoral regulation for the online age, which you have talked about in many of your discussions, and I find it really odd, not just in the UK but in many countries across Europe, that all electoral activities—

pamphleteering, advertising or whatever—are regulated down to the nth degree, except when you go online.

The other thing that we ought to look at is cybersecurity and other support, but particularly cybersecurity support, to those on the front line, which are very often local authorities that otherwise might not have the expertise and the experience that they need. Again, they may be being attacked not necessarily by some politically motivated actor but very often by some criminal actor who, for whatever reason, wants to hold to ransom an electoral register or other piece of information held by the local authorities, but it has the same effect.

We need to drive cybersecurity down to the level where in effect it is the front line. When we talk about these issues of election security and disinformation, it is very often local authorities which they affect. I am sorry; I have given two.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed. I am very grateful. I was in Belfast last week for three days, at three conferences. The issue of political interference is sometimes academic. You suddenly realise that the wrong grenade lobbed into the wrong situation at the wrong moment, just in terms of information and misinformation, is actually extraordinarily powerful. The careful use of language in Belfast was one of the things that I came away with last weekend. People were very careful in using language, yet some of the bad actors are prepared to do the exact opposite to create chaos. I am quite nervous about how fragile the situation is and how easily disrupted it might be. Thank you very much indeed. You have been more helpful than you can imagine.