

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Disinformation diplomacy: How malign actors are seeking to undermine democracy, HC 703

Tuesday 16 September 2025

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Members present: Emily Thornberry (Chair); Alex Ballinger; Aphra Brandreth; Phil Brickell; Richard Foord; Uma Kumaran; Abtisam Mohamed; Edward Morello; Sir John Whittingdale.

Questions 73-135

Witnesses

[I](#): Grace Theodoulou, Policy Fellow, China Observatory, Council on Geostrategy; Mr Andrew Yeh, Executive Director, China Strategic Risks Institute; and James Kynge, Senior Research Fellow for China and the World, Chatham House.

[II](#): Dr Antonio Giustozzi, Senior Research Fellow, Terrorism and Conflict, Royal United Services Institute; and Dr Dani Madrid-Morales, Lecturer in Journalism and Global Communication, University of Sheffield.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Grace Theodoulou, Mr Andrew Yeh and James Kynge.

Q73 **Chair:** This morning, the Foreign Affairs Committee is holding an evidence session as part of our disinformation inquiry. This is the first panel, and we are joined by three experts on China. Please introduce yourselves for the record—your names and what you do. May I begin with you please, James Kynge?

James Kynge: I am James Kynge, senior research fellow at Chatham House.

Chair: And you were previously at the *Financial Times*, as China-Europe correspondent.

Grace Theodoulou: I am Grace Theodoulou, policy fellow at the China Observatory of the Council on Geostrategy.

Chair: And you previously worked at the Taipei Representative Office in the UK.

Grace Theodoulou: Yes, exactly, in the economic division.

Mr Yeh: I am Andrew Yeh, the executive director of the China Strategic Risks Institute.

Chair: Previously secretariat manager at the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China.

Mr Yeh: That is correct.

Q74 **Chair:** Excellent. Thank you very much for coming in. We have some questions—is it all right if we kick off straightaway? Mr Kynge, how does the Chinese Communist party use foreign information manipulation and interference as part of its broader geopolitical strategy? We hear a lot about Russia, but some people watching may not fully appreciate the extent of China's activities.

James Kynge: Thank you very much. There are a number of parts to this, but I will try to be brief. First, China has a very clear and explicit propaganda regime; Xi Jinping calls it “telling China's story well”. The Chinese Communist party has several powerful organs dedicated to propaganda. In Chinese they use the word propaganda: 宣傳, xuānchuán; in English they use the word “publicity”. However, it is clear to any reader of Chinese that these are propaganda organisations aimed at telling China's story well, whether internally or externally.

It is important to create context around this: China's appeal in the world, which I believe is making headway, is not solely dependent on propaganda or disinformation, which is, as I see it, a subset of the propaganda effort. It is also based on some objective advantages: its economic growth; its ascent to the level of a peer competitor with the United States in terms of technology, meaning that, with the US, it is leading the world in technology; and its status as one of the world's biggest investors, its



biggest trader and its leading industrial power. What I am trying to say is that the following that China obtains around the world is based objectively on China's performance, as well as on Chinese propaganda and, as a subset of that, Chinese disinformation.

- Q75 **Chair:** That is a very important point and absolutely one for us to take on board. However, because we think more about countries whose main way of influencing is through disinformation, perhaps the disinformation arm of what China is doing is overlooked. That is why we wanted to specifically focus on it today. Parking your very important point and trying to get back to the disinformation point, in what way does China behave differently from other state actors that are well known for using disinformation, such as Russia or Iran? What is the difference in approach?

James Kyngé: I am not an expert on Russia and Iran, but from what I have read I would say China's disinformation approach pretty much spans the waterfront. It is a concerted, whole-of-Government approach, backed by very strong Chinese Government organisations. Taiwan is probably one of the best examples of Chinese disinformation in play—I am sure the other speakers have been looking at this as well. There are official and NGO readings on this, but the Taiwan National Security Bureau says that disinformation messages from China to Taiwan were 2.15 million in number in 2024, compared with 1.32 million the year earlier. The aim of these attempts was to sow distrust in the Taiwan Government and to sow distrust towards the US, towards Taiwan's armed forces and towards President Lai Ching-te.

- Q76 **Chair:** Give us an example. What sort of thing are we talking about? The number is quite striking, but can you give us an example?

James Kyngé: There is a very interesting NGO in Taiwan called Taiwan FactCheck Centre. That is purely devoted to disinformation coming from China and is freely available online. For instance, the messages will say things like, "The Taiwan military is weak", "Taiwan has started drafting women into its army because it is so desperate because none of the men want to join up", and, "the mothers are crying for their sons who are being drafted". It says things like, "The US has"—

- Q77 **Chair:** Where do those messages come from? For those of us who think of this through the prism of the kind of messages that we get, is this through social media?

James Kyngé: This is across the panoply of different media. Some of it comes from Chinese state media, which as you know directly reports to the Communist party of China. Some it comes through Twitter, some from Facebook, some through other social media. Of course, China has its own social media, which is accessible to those who read Chinese, such as those people in Taiwan. It is really across the spectrum. There is a whole list of Chinese disinformation messages regarding the UK and particularly regarding Hong Kong.

- Q78 **Chair:** What do they say about us?

James Kyngé: There are several claims. This got quite hot during the demonstrations in Hong Kong and subsequently during the imposition of the national security law in Hong Kong. One claim was, "The UK supports Hong Kong independence". That is clearly not true, as the joint declaration makes absolutely clear. There is another claim that, "The Sino-British joint declaration was a historical document". That comes from China News, which is an official Chinese media, and is demonstrably not true, based on the treaties that the UK and Hong Kong have signed.

The Xinhua News Agency, the main news agency of the Chinese Communist party, says that Hong Kong is an internal matter only for China, which, again, is against both the Basic Law of Hong Kong and the joint declaration of Hong Kong. There is a claim that came from CCTV that the west does not criticise the US over police brutality and is therefore guilty of double standards. Well, that is not true; there has been plenty of criticism of the US over police brutality, as we all know. I could go on and on—

Q79 **Chair:** No, I think we have got the gist of it.

James Kyngé: To summarise—maybe the other speakers will disagree—part of the intent is to whittle away at the perceptions and understandings that form the pillars of western democracies, and to create confusion where confidence once was. This is probably my personal sense of this, but I have been reporting on China for 40 years, and my sense is that quite often this is an attempt to create confusion rather than to knock down those pillars, as it were.

Q80 **Aphra Brandreth:** Thank you. To you, Grace, and picking up on what James Kyngé was saying, how do you see China's use of state-backed media and social media to influence and shape global narratives?

Grace Theodoulou: It is important to understand that China uses a combination of truths, half-truths, lies and omissions in its disinformation campaigns, and they use them in combination with state-backed media pushing out specific narratives. Then you have Chinese diplomats retweeting and resharing these narratives and also thousands upon thousands of fake accounts by Chinese bots, often paid for and coordinated by Chinese PR firms. You have a combination of state and non-state companies retweeting and pushing out these narratives. If you do not know the situation very well, it can be quite hard to trace what is a state narrative and what is supposedly an independent narrative. Can you repeat the second part of your question?

Q81 **Chair:** It was thinking about how they are trying to shape global narratives. They are using social media bots and so on, but are you seeing particular themes coming through or methods that they are using?

Grace Theodoulou: Some of the themes that come up again and again is that the so-called west—predominantly the US, its main target, the UK and other western countries—are unstable, that we are troublemakers and neo-colonialists. That is one aspect. On Ukraine specifically, of course they say that they do not condone what happened, but then they share a lot of

the Russian narratives that NATO was provocative and all those things. They have certain stock phrases and some narratives that they repeat over and over again.

What is slightly concerning is that the China Global Television Network—CGTN—which is the more televisual element that Xinhua feeds into, broadcasts its TV channels in the six UN languages around the world. It is not like these narratives are being pushed in Chinese and English only. It has an extensive global audience. That is of particular importance in the global south, which is the battleground for influence.

Q82 Richard Foord: Andrew, how does China mask its influence operations through companies, bilateral partnerships and cultural institutions?

Mr Yeh: That is a really important point. We have seen a lot of disinformation come through official Chinese channels, as the others have highlighted—through the state media organisations, through diplomats and so on. If we look at some of the most innovative, effective and wide-reaching Chinese disinformation content, however, it is not through traditional media forms or official diplomatic channels, but through YouTube Shorts, TikTok, social media and so on. We have seen over the last few years a plethora of smaller media organisations, with much more ambiguous ties to the party-state, which are able to very effectively get their message out on these platforms.

It is increasingly difficult for social media companies to keep track of them and close them down and, if they do close them down, they then reappear under a separate heading. For example, some might set up initially in Taiwan, try to spread Chinese propaganda there, get closed down in Taiwan and move to Hong Kong, where they are still able to present it. We are seeing a broader grey zone of media organisations with ambiguous links to the Chinese state.

The other way, which has been raised already, is emphasising that this is not just about disinformation in terms of falsehoods, but about information manipulation and the amplifications of narratives that are beneficial to the Chinese Government. For example, Taiwan is, like the UK, a thriving democracy with a plethora of views. China does not necessarily have to create its own content that is critical of the Taiwanese Government or seeks to undermine whoever is in Government at that time; it is simply able to use the thousands of fake accounts and these dubious media organisations to retweet, repost, comment on and drive up this content through the social media algorithms, achieving a much greater influence over the narrative than it otherwise would have. That is the challenge when we are talking about non-official or non-state actors in China's disinformation.

Q83 Chair: It reminds me of a story someone told me about radio stations that might be completely bland and perhaps have really good football coverage, so they get huge listenership—that was in relation to South America, but I wonder if it might apply elsewhere—and at a particular, crucial moment there might be a particular bit of news, at which point it

switches and becomes very pro-Chinese before going back again to just talking about football. Is that just one apocryphal story that I have been told, or does it fit within a pattern?

Mr Yeh: That is absolutely right. It is particularly important within one of the targets of China's information operations, which is what they term as the global south—developing countries where China wants to assert its leadership globally. You will see companies such as CGTN, which was mentioned earlier, and Xinhua News Agency, which have agreements with local media organisations in places such as Kenya, Ghana and Indonesia. They are content-sharing agreements, so they agree, every once in a while, to broadcast a story from the Chinese media.

That is where you begin to have ordinary, local coverage, which is very accessible to local audiences, 90% of the time, and suddenly they will get a snippet from the Chinese media section.

Q84 **Chair:** So the local radio station becomes financially viable because it gets support from China?

Mr Yeh: That is right, yes. What you will also find is that, compared with some of the western news organisations such as the BBC or CNN, the Chinese organisations are much better at establishing local offices in the region and using local journalists, leading to a more easily accessible format for some of those audiences to engage with.

Phil Brickell: I have a quick question. We have talked about social media a lot. We have talked about radio and television. One of the things that truly shocked me when I first came to this place was seeing that MPs were receiving *China Daily*—a Government-owned newspaper run by the Chinese Communist party's propaganda arm—in their postbag. I am glad that has stopped.

Chair: You've read it, then?

Q85 **Phil Brickell:** I cannot speak for other Members, but I certainly did not. To what extent is the Chinese Communist party also using printed publications akin to *China Daily* to pursue that agenda?

Mr Yeh: That is an issue, but I would push back a little bit and say that there are bigger issues. You can look *China Daily* up online and very quickly find out that it is a Chinese Government-supported publication. The number of people engaging with printed media is declining and declining, as you know. It is absolutely right to look at *China Daily* and its influence in the UK, whether in Parliament or outside Parliament, but I am much more concerned by China's ability to amplify and control the narrative on social media by retweeting and reposting stories that fit within its narrative.

Because they are amplifying content, rather than creating their own, it is not the case that you can just look up a certain individual and say, "They are linked to the Chinese state," because they might not be. But the 50,000 accounts that retweeted him might be linked to the Chinese state,

and that is much more insidious, much more difficult to pin down and much harder to regulate and respond to.

- Q86 **Alex Ballinger:** It was interesting to hear some of the examples you gave of Chinese misinformation around the decadent west, the culture wars, NATO being a big threat to Russia in Ukraine and the like. Those are also the narratives that we hear the Russians are pushing. Is there any evidence that China and Russia, or maybe other actors, are co-ordinating these disinformation campaigns? Or are they just jumping on the back of each other?

Grace Theodoulou: So far, it seems like the co-operation between China and Russia has been quite opportunistic and on specific common interests they have, but it is interesting that on 1 September, just as Putin was arriving in China for the big military parade, a very large private media conglomerate in Russia shared a media co-operation agreement with Xinhua News, so I think we might be about to see stronger, more systemic co-operation between China and Russia.

There have been other instances where Russia pushes a certain narrative, their diplomats retweet and reshare the content on social media, and then it is shared further in China. There is that kind of cross-pollination between the two a lot of the time. It is not like so far there have been specific written agreements in place; it is just that whenever their interests converge there is definitely amplification there.

- Q87 **Alex Ballinger:** And you are saying that is increasing—they are learning from each other in the successes.

Grace Theodoulou: It is increasing, and one really important thing we need to keep an eye out for is that the Russian narrative around Ukraine is that it was a denazification campaign, against fascism and all these things. In the language and words we are seeing, China is really pushing the anti-fascist war—basically, the second world war, after the Japanese surrender. In their joint statements together, China and Russia keep saying, “We were two of the key countries in fighting fascism.” We are seeing these words repeated over and over again.

Of course, on the surface, fighting fascism is a great thing, but if you do not always know the context and the complexities of each situation, specifically in countries where they might not know the history that well, the lines get confused again. Suddenly, you have China and Russia seeming like these greatly benevolent countries working together to fight this awful thing.

- Q88 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Mr Kynge referred to the volume of Chinese disinformation in Taiwan in the run-up to the Taiwanese election. Can you, Andrew, and perhaps the others too, talk about the main targets for Chinese disinformation? Taiwan is a clear one, but there are also the Uyghurs, Hong Kong and Tibet. Are these all mass disinformation subjects? Can you give us some examples?

Mr Yeh: I think Taiwan is in a slightly different category to the others. For Taiwan, we are not just talking about telling China's story well, which was mentioned earlier; we are talking about warfare. If you look at PLA military strategy, it divides political warfare into public opinion warfare, lawfare and psychological warfare. All these components are coming into place in Taiwan.

In terms of other targets, a really key one to focus on—

Q89 **Chair:** Sorry, but before you move on do you mind explaining what was going on in the run-up to the election in '24?

Mr Yeh: Sure. I think we saw a number of dominant narratives in Taiwan at that time. One was discrediting individuals who are aligned with the DPP, which is traditionally pro-independence, or other individuals who are generally anti-Beijing in some way.

Chair: So there are different political parties with a different emphasis, and there was an attempt to discredit the political party, or the individuals within the political party who were more in favour of independence from China than their rivals.

Mr Yeh: Exactly. For example, a series of deepfake videos purported to show President Lai, who was a candidate at the time, admitting that the opposition parties actually represented the country's interests better than he did. There was a series of deepfake explicit sexual images circulating on the internet around certain DPP politicians as well, so some of it is quite personal.

More broadly, there is an element of simply trying to portray Taiwan as a failed state—not necessarily looking at individuals or parties, but trying to discredit the Government as a whole. That involves creating falsehoods. For example, most recently—this was not at the 2024 election—there was some false information going around about how many undersea cables around Taiwan had been cut. The false information said there were nine; in reality, it was three. There are all these efforts to embarrass the Taiwanese Government and show that they are not fit for purpose. That is seen as serving Chinese interests.

The other dominant narrative around the 2024 election was US scepticism—trying to persuade the Taiwanese public that the US cannot be relied on. For example, there was disinformation around the Taiwanese Government harvesting organs and blood and selling them to the US. There was disinformation on the US poisoning pork and exporting it to Taiwan. There is also issue amplification: where there are legitimate concerns, from a Taiwanese perspective, about the US position on Taiwan, those issues were being amplified by these fake accounts. US scepticism, discrediting individuals and undermining the state are the key tenets of the Taiwan strategy.

Q90 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Could you go on with some examples of other subjects of Chinese disinformation?

Mr Yeh: Sure. The global south has already been mentioned. The other key one I would highlight is the Chinese diaspora globally. The Chinese Communist party thinks about this very broadly. By its own estimates, there are 40 million to 60 million overseas Chinese, as it calls them. That does not just mean people with PRC passports or people born in mainland China; it includes anyone with Chinese linguistic, cultural or ethnic heritage.

China sees the diaspora as both a vulnerability and an opportunity. In terms of the vulnerability, it is extremely worried about activists and dissidents within the diaspora. We have seen that in terms of some of the disinformation spread about Hong Kong activists in the UK, for example. You may have seen a deepfake video circulating on the news last week that purported to show Hongkongers, some of them in the UK, having a conversation, but it was in fact fake.

China also sees the diaspora as an opportunity—the idea that some of the groups that may be more friendly to China might be able to help to spread good messages about China and help to exert political influence. Within that diaspora, we are not just talking about mainland Chinese. We are also talking about Hongkongers. They view Taiwan as part of this diaspora as well. That would be the other key group that I would focus on.

Q91 **Chair:** Forgive me for jumping in again, but this reminds me of when I went to Australia and was told that there was a social media platform that was used largely by the Australian Chinese community. There were messages going into that, and it was unknown to mainstream Australian political thinking. Because they did not speak Chinese or have an entry into it, they had no idea of the extent to which people were being manipulated. Is that right?

Mr Yeh: Yes, we see this phenomenon both on the mainstream platforms we are used to—YouTube, Facebook or Instagram—and on specific platforms that are popular in the Chinese communities, such as Weibo, WeChat, Xiaohongshu and so on. Some of those are Chinese entities, so they are much easier for the Chinese Government not only to spread disinformation on but to conduct surveillance and collect data on. Monitoring those is definitely a real challenge as well.

Q92 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Who is the target of this? Is it principally the Chinese diaspora, or are they seeking to influence public opinion generally?

Mr Yeh: I think it is both. The Chinese diaspora is a unique target audience. It is about neutralising any opposition there might be to Chinese Communist party rule, as well as persuading them that the Chinese Communist party is the one legitimate ruler of China, and that if they have some kind of Chinese heritage, they owe something to the Chinese Communist party and should adhere to the Chinese Communist party in some way.

On broader influence in UK society as a whole, it is interesting that there seems to be an effort, in both Russian and Chinese state media, to

platform individuals on the political extremes. For example, far-right German AfD MPs and MEPs will often appear both in Chinese state media and in Russian state media. I do worry and suspect that, as our own political debate in the UK becomes more polarised, there will be an attempt by China to platform those on either extreme in an effort to make our governance less effective, our debate more polarised and our society therefore weaker.

Chair: That leads on to what Uma was going to ask.

Q93 **Uma Kumaran:** Thank you for a really fascinating session. Last year we heard evidence from the BBC World Service, including from the current BBC director general. He said, in relation to both Chinese and Russian state media buying up airwaves on which the BBC World Service had previously broadcast, that the world faces an “all-out assault on truth”, and that it had led to a rise of people in the middle east hearing unchecked propaganda. What role do you think civil society, independent media and academia play in building resilience against Chinese or other foreign disinformation manipulation?

James Kyngge: There could be a major role. Again, I go back to the example of Taiwan, which is on the frontlines of a Chinese disinformation campaign, so it has really sharpened up its act. You have organisations like the Taiwan fact-checking one I mentioned. That really is an attempt to increase the China literacy of the population, so that people can go somewhere trusted to check whatever allegation has been made, or whatever rumour is now circulating on social media channels.

To me, there is a very clear need in democracies for that type of resilient effort, which you might call fact-checking, and it could perhaps have Government leadership or direction. It seems to me to be a crucial issue, given the fact that we are talking about not only China but Russia and Iran, and there are plenty of other players around. The way in which people consume information these days is so vastly different from what it was even 10 years ago, with people having personally tailored sources of information that largely come through social media. So yes, I think it is key.

The other thing I should mention is that China is also moving to export its censorship regime, and I am talking about not only software but hardware. There was a leak of information picked up by *Wired* magazine last week that showed that China is exporting what is called the “great firewall”, which is shorthand for the hardware and software that backs its censorship regime. A list of countries have already bought this censorship package: Kazakhstan, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Myanmar and another that was not identified.

What the censorship regime allows these countries to do is not only filter the messages that are going through to their people, using this Chinese software, but monitor the browsing habits of individuals. In the case of Myanmar, according to leaked documents that came from the China security state, it turned out that 81 million Myanmar citizens were being

monitored simultaneously at any one moment. This is a highly sophisticated infrastructural capability that China is now exporting around the world. Again, it is primarily being exported to the global south—as Andrew has already mentioned, that is the prime target for the export of China’s censorship state.

Q94 **Chair:** That is remarkable. Are leaks like that common?

James Kynge: Very uncommon.

Chair: That is what I thought. Because of time, I will go to Richard first and then come back to Phil.

Q95 **Richard Foord:** How might algorithmic manipulation and censorship on the Chinese platforms that we are discussing contribute to the spread of disinformation? Mr Kynge just described the export of the software; what effect might that have when we think about algorithmic manipulation?

Grace Theodoulou: I can answer first. The most important example here is TikTok, which Google analysis shows is the most important and most used search engine for gen Z, so that is where they get most of their information. We have seen examples of algorithmic manipulation whereby, effectively, if you try to search on TikTok for something like “Xinjiang”, “Tibet” or “Hong Kong”, very CCP-favourable narratives come up saying how wonderful life is in Tibet and Xinjiang, and all these things. That is something we really need to look at.

In the case of the US, one of the biggest concerns relates to the fact that we saw yesterday that an initial deal has been signed for the transfer of TikTok, but the algorithm is probably the most useful tool for the CCP on this issue, because it is such a powerful tool for them to develop their soft power and China’s image.

I wanted to briefly answer Sir John Whittingdale’s question on Xinjiang and Tibet and the disinformation there. It is important to categorise the disinformation campaigns into the battles that China thinks it has already won—Tibet, Hong Kong and Xinjiang—and then the issues it is yet to conquer, which are Taiwan and the South China sea.

When it comes to Xinjiang and Tibet, those people are already subjugated, so China’s main goal there is to change the narrative abroad and to push this narrative that, “Yeah, everything’s fine. There were never any issues. It’s a happy, prosperous society.” One of the things they do is recruit western academics and businesspeople to write op-eds in the *Global Times*, which is the mouthpiece of the CCP, saying that they have visited these places in person and everyone’s really happy, they are doing these lovely folk dances and everything’s great.

Mr Yeh: I would add that we should be more concerned by Chinese platforms, because they could be more resistant to compliance and more open to influence from the Chinese Government, but it is not just about Chinese platforms.

Chair: Would you call TikTok a Chinese platform?

Mr Yeh: I would, yes, because the parent company is ultimately owned by China.

Chair: It is in Singapore, they said.

Mr Yeh: Yes, but if you look at the board structures and so on, it is clearly a Chinese company.

If we look at non-Chinese platforms—Twitter, Facebook and YouTube—it is not hard to manipulate the algorithms, right? If you have enough fake accounts and can generate enough fake content, you can rise to the top of those algorithms. So it does not matter that they are not Chinese companies; China still knows how to play the game and still knows how to make friendly Chinese narratives come to the top of accounts.

Historically, some of those companies have been very good at removing fake Chinese accounts. We saw Twitter in 2020 and Meta in 2023, I think, remove thousands of fake Chinese accounts. But I do not know how long we can rely on tech companies to do that work for us. Unless the Government take an active approach in making sure that tech companies are rooting out fake Chinese accounts, or fake accounts from any other country, then we are essentially relying on their good will to protect us from some of the excesses.

Q96 **Richard Foord:** Given the place of the debate in the United States and the hostility that exists towards China in the US Administration, is it not the case that the US Government are going to seek to work with US-based social media companies to try to regulate those areas?

Mr Yeh: Historically, that has been the case. The problem is twofold. Part of the problem is Elon Musk, his ownership of X and his business interests in China through Tesla. Elon Musk historically has had a very close relationship with the Chinese regime and I would doubt, now that X is under Elon Musk's control, how forthright it will be in challenging Chinese disinformation.

The other issue is the way that President Trump sees disinformation. He sees "fake news" and these other terms that are thrown around as ways to criticise him and his policy. So there has been a hollowing-out within the US around some of the institutions and some of the civil society groups that have taken the lead in combating fake news and disinformation.

Again, this is an area where the UK Government can step up to the plate when it comes to supporting civil society efforts around the world to combat disinformation and information manipulation, because I think the US role in that is going to decline over the next few years.

Q97 **Uma Kumaran:** You have been talking about information manipulation, and earlier we heard about a really alarming example from Myanmar. Would you say that TikTok is a method by which China could monitor UK users of its platform?

Grace Theodoulou: I can give an example. In 2022 there was a story in the media about TikTok in the US, and it was found that ByteDance—the parent company in China—had tracked the location of two US TikTok employees from China to see whether they had been at the same location as the journalists who leaked a certain story to the press. So it is possible for them to track data. It is possible for them to track that data from China, and once that data is in China, it is possible for it to be passed on to the CCP.

Q98 **Uma Kumaran:** Do you think the UK Government should look again at TikTok in Britain?

Grace Theodoulou: Yes, I think they should. It is not just the algorithm issue; it is clear that the data can be accessed from China. The second that it is in China, if the CCP requests that data to go to them, it is possible for that to happen. It is wise that TikTok is banned on UK Parliament devices, on NATO devices, and by a series of other countries.

Q99 **Chair:** Do the rest of you think that the Government should avoid being on TikTok?

James Kyngé: What the Government decide is for the Government, but my sense is that we should have a much clearer understanding of where data goes when you are using a Chinese device. That is the first stop.

Q100 **Chair:** But let us say you have TikTok on your phone. What data could the Chinese extract because of that?

Grace Theodoulou: As I said, location is one type. Specifically for the UK, one of the main issues is transnational repression. You have to ask the question: what data would they want to know? Do they really care about some person in the north of England watching cat videos? I do not think that is their main concern. It is the people who have a bounty on their heads. Where are they? Who are their associates? Who can then be targeted for bribery, and all those things? Those are the questions that we have to ask.

Q101 **Chair:** Are you on TikTok?

Mr Yeh: I am not, no. For TikTok, and for any social media company, there are three areas that the UK Government should press them on. One is censorship: how can we have trust in TikTok and other platforms that they are not conducting censorship on behalf of China or any other state, and how actively can we monitor and guarantee that? The second is integrity: how willing are TikTok and other social media providers to detect, monitor and take down fake accounts, particularly when they are sponsored by states? The third, as James mentioned, is data security: how do we know that the sensitive personal data of UK citizens is not being transferred to authoritarian Governments like that of China?

Those are the three areas to push TikTok on, and to push any social media company in the UK on.

James Kyngé: Just to add to that, anyone who works in the China space knows that if you have Chinese apps such as WeChat, Weibo, Xiaohongshu, you keep them on a separate phone. We all know that basically all your data is transparent to the Communist party of China, if you are using any of those Chinese apps.

Chair: For the record, I have just bought a phone for TikTok, but I have a separate one because I think that the warnings that you are giving today are very serious.

Q102 **Phil Brickell:** To focus on how this plays out in the UK, the Committee has received evidence calling on the UK Government to place China on the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme. Starting with Mr Kyngé, what impact do you think that measure would have on China's ability to propagate disinformation in the UK? What practical implications do you think that step would have for UK-based individuals and entities working with, or on behalf of, Chinese state-owned organisations?

James Kyngé: I am not absolutely sure of the implications of that. It would obviously increase oversight, but I would defer to the other panellists on the finer details of it.

Grace Theodoulou: I will start with the business side. From my understanding, if we were to place China on the enhanced tier, it would make a lot of the current, ongoing business deals quite difficult to enact. From my understanding, if, let's say, you had a Chinese business delegation and some of them were CCP members, you would have to declare everything, up to the chauffeur who goes to pick them up from the airport. Obviously, that adds a lot of bureaucracy and it is a big hassle.

What would make a bit more sense is to have almost a specific mechanism for China, and perhaps not FIRS as it currently stands. The China audit says that it is the most complex bilateral relationship we have. Does that not perhaps merit its own framework? The way it currently stands, how is it going to work if we have China on the enhanced tier and, as I said, add all this bureaucracy to every single business deal, while also saying, "We can't do without China. We have to increase business with them"?

In terms of propagating disinformation, an interesting example is that in the US, in 2019 I believe, they required Xinhua to register with the equivalent, the Foreign Agents Registration Act, and two years later they required CGTN, the more televisual state propaganda outlet, to register. When they registered, they also had to submit their spending, so we got some figures on exactly how much Chinese state media was spending on propaganda in the US, which was really interesting.

Q103 **Chair:** How much was it?

Grace Theodoulou: Altogether, it was \$64 million in 2020, I believe, and the US was the biggest target for Chinese propaganda in terms of spending.

Q104 **Chair:** How much did they spend on us?

Grace Theodoulou: I am not sure about that.

Q105 **Chair:** Can you write to us?

Grace Theodoulou: I can get back to you on that—if we require them to register, we will have some figures.

Q106 **Phil Brickell:** Mr Yeh, I am curious to hear what your thoughts are on the enhanced tier of FIRS.

Mr Yeh: I think China should be on the enhanced tier, as a country that is not only seeking to exert influence in the UK through a number of complex mechanisms, as we have been discussing this morning, but directly threatening UK security interests, when it comes to cyber-security, the safety of Hongkongers and other diaspora groups here in the UK, and undermining the UK's soft power and influence abroad. Putting it on the enhanced tier would allow for greater transparency.

There are two areas that I will highlight quickly. One is around some of the smaller media groups that we discussed earlier. There is a carve-out in FIRS for recognised media providers, but some of the most insidious information operations are not the very well-established Chinese state media organisations. That is there and that should be tracked, but this is about influencers on YouTube who may be receiving money from the Chinese state to propagate certain messages. They will not be registered as a recognised media provider. To what degree are the UK Government able to monitor and enforce the foreign influence registration scheme when it comes to some of those smaller, novel, innovative media forms? Putting China on the enhanced tier would make it much clearer that, actually, those operations on behalf of the Chinese state must be registered and must be transparent.

Q107 **Phil Brickell:** To be really clear, if you are an influencer on TikTok or another social media platform and you are getting paid to propagate the Chinese state's messaging, under the FIRS on the enhanced tier, would you have to register?

Mr Yeh: That is my understanding of it. The key would be whether it qualifies as a political influence activity or not, and the degree to which the content that you are propagating is directly commenting on UK politics or not, or directly calling on Members of Parliament to vote a certain way or not. I think that would probably be where it falls one way or the other.

Currently, if you are the *People's Daily* or *China Daily* in the UK, you are a recognised media provider, so by my understanding you would not need to register separately—you are exempted. But these smaller influencers and smaller media organisations probably are not registered, and we should know if they are propagating material on behalf of the Chinese state. Having China on the enhanced tier would make that obligation even clearer.

The second group to highlight would be some of the business lobbies. The United Front, which is the Chinese Communist party's influence arm, has a number of dedicated trade outfits—for example, the All-China Federation

of Industry and Commerce. The Chinese state also has the China Council for Promotion of International Trade. These have direct links with a number of the British-Chinese business lobbies here in the UK, some of whom are able to meet with Ministers and MPs. Unless China is on that enhanced tier, it is not clear to me that those groups would have an obligation to report that they might have arrangements with the Chinese state or the Chinese Communist party. Putting China on that enhanced tier would allow for more clarity when it comes to some of that business lobbying as well.

Q108 Sir John Whittingdale: You may not be able to answer this, but one of the points made in the House of Commons yesterday afternoon was that messages are seen and interpreted by China. Do you think that the decision not to proceed with the prosecution of two individuals for Chinese espionage is going to send a message that we are weak, and China will interpret it that way?

Grace Theodoulou: I don't know enough about the latest update to be able to comment on that, but I would say that the British public needs a bit more information as to why these charges have suddenly been dropped.

Q109 Edward Morello: To go back briefly, Andrew, to your point about undeclared and unobvious links between Chinese business groups and British business groups and lobbying groups and so forth, I am interested in your perspective on whether what is being labelled the China super-embassy for London would increase the CCP's ability to influence within the UK—whether having such a large facility in central London matters to the capability on the misinformation/disinformation front or, given their ability to operate online, whether it is an irrelevance?

Mr Yeh: I think it would be a question of scale rather than quality. All of the operations that China currently conducts in terms of influence, disinformation and information manipulation, to the extent that it needs an embassy to do that, I imagine it can do from its current embassy, and whether it is one place or another does not make too much of a difference. If it is the case that the expanded embassy means that you can double the number of staff working on those issues in-country, perhaps you do see an increase by some factor of some of those efforts. For me, the embassy does not qualitatively change China's ability to do these campaigns, but in terms of scale, maybe on balance it makes things easier. The others might have dissenting views.

Grace Theodoulou: I agree that I don't think the size of the embassy matters in terms of conducting these campaigns.

Regarding the concerns around the sensitive cables being near the site, first, I have faith in the intelligence services here that they have determined to what extent this is a risk and whether these cables can be moved. For the cables, that is both espionage and sabotage.

On that, we have seen instances of that that have directly affected the UK. You have Salt Typhoon, which is linked to Chinese state actors, which is



mostly espionage—gathering data on the UK and its allies. You then have Volt Typhoon, which is more about scoping the possibility for critical infrastructure disruption. Only about three weeks ago, a division of GCHQ released a report with allies saying that they have seen evidence of that, where China is scoping out the capacity to disrupt our critical national infrastructure.

We need to ask the questions—why are they doing this? Why are they trying to see what the probability is for that to happen in the UK? That is where the concerns around the super-embassy come in, in terms of its location. Again, I would defer to the greater experts on that.

Q110 Chair: Mr Kynge, before you address that point—if you want to—this is the last question. The way the questions have fallen, we have not heard as much from you as we have from others. I wonder whether there is anything we should have asked you that we have not.

James Kynge: No. I would return to what I mentioned at the beginning, which is that I think that disinformation, while obviously, as we have discussed, a very real issue and something that China is putting a huge amount of effort into, is only part of China's narrative contest with the west.

There are other parts of the narrative contest—propaganda being one of them, but also China's very real advantages, and China's lobbying efforts with the key stakeholders in our society, both in the Government and the big corporations. I would just like to situate this information in that panoply of efforts that China is making—and certainly, in my estimation, is making serious headway in. It is part of a much broader effort, and China appears to be winning this narrative war at the moment.

Q111 Chair: We as a Committee were intending to hold the Government to account on the China audit. We have waited quite a long time for that audit and we have not really seen it—in fact, we have seen only a few pages that we are told are part of it. It is quite difficult for us to know how to respond to that, but I interpret what you are saying as you urging us to do more work on China generally, because it is such an important force in the world at the moment.

James Kynge: Absolutely. To bring it down to brass tacks, my sense is that China represents a considerable opportunity, particularly in the areas of trade and investment, and potentially even technology investment, but it also represents a clear security issue. It is incumbent on all of us to get the red lines as clear as possible. If we are clear where the red lines are, that will open us up to co-operate in all the areas in which we should be co-operating for mutual benefit, and to circumscribe the other areas as we see fit. At the moment, it seems that the west in general—not just the UK but certainly all the countries of Europe that I have looked at—does not have the red lines clear. That is a major problem for both sides of the relationship. It prevents clear co-operation, and it prevents us from knowing where the vulnerabilities are.

Chair: On that note, I thank you all for coming and for giving such

fascinating evidence. If you think of anything that you should have added once you have left, please write in and we can include it in your evidence. Thank you very much for your time.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Antonio Giustozzi and Dr Dani Madrid-Morales.

Q112 **Chair:** This morning, the Foreign Affairs Committee is holding a sitting as part of the disinformation inquiry. In the first session, we were joined by experts on China. We now move on to the second session, with experts on Africa. Please could you introduce yourselves.

Dr Madrid-Morales: Good morning, everybody. Thank you for inviting us. My name is Dani Madrid-Morales. I am a lecturer at the University of Sheffield. I lead the disinformation research cluster at the institution. I am also affiliated with the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa, where I am a fellow at the centre for information integrity.

Dr Giustozzi: My name is Antonio Giustozzi. I am a senior research fellow at RUSI—the Royal United Services Institute—in Whitehall. I am here because last year I ran a study on the Wagner Group in Africa. More recently, we have done some work on Russian disinformation and artificial intelligence. I am not an Africa specialist, but it happened that I carried out that project, especially in parts of Francophone Africa, specifically on the Wagner Group.

Q113 **Chair:** I will begin with a general question to Dr Madrid-Morales. Who are the main state and non-state actors conducting information operations in Africa?

Dr Madrid-Morales: I will start by saying a couple of things. First, even though it is very easy for us to talk about Africa as a whole, we cannot think of it as a single place where actors are acting equally. If I can briefly divide it into north, east, west and southern Africa, obviously the main actors in western Africa are Russia, to some extent China, and obviously Turkey is a key actor that has entered the space in recent years.

Q114 **Chair:** Where are the influences of Turkey?

Dr Madrid-Morales: They are quite significant in the west. You might be aware of TRT, which is Turkey's equivalent of the BBC. It launched a TRT Afrika enterprise in recent years. One thing that TRT has done, for example, is open local language content, in Hausa, for Nigeria. Quite interestingly, TRT hired most of the BBC Africa team—BBC Africa journalists—so when it opened its Nigeria office, most of the people working there were taken from the BBC.

Q115 **Chair:** Just so I am absolutely clear about this—and unfortunately it is a rather familiar story—the BBC had an office in Nigeria?

Dr Madrid-Morales: The BBC has its main BBC Africa office in Nairobi, which is their operation for the whole continent, but for some local languages they have local offices. What I am talking about here is that

TRT opened its Africa operation, and when it went to hire journalists for that new TV and radio station, the main source of those journalists was BBC staff—mostly Nigerians and local staff.

Q116 **Chair:** Why did they move? Do you know?

Dr Madrid-Morales: Probably money.

Q117 **Chair:** It wasn't because there were cuts to the BBC there.

Dr Madrid-Morales: No, but most of these actors—including CGTN, which was mentioned in the previous session—pay much better than the BBC. Some of the moves that we have seen on the continent are primarily due to monetary reasons. I think it is important to remember that many of the people working for these organisations—whether CGTN, RT or TRT—are not particularly aligned with one Government or another; it is a matter of, “It’s my job. Where will I make more money, and what will advance my career in the future?”

I will go back to what I was saying at the beginning. North Africa is a space where we see a lot of RT, for Russia, but also Arab language content from Qatar and the Emirates—generally UAE and Saudi Arabia. Then, east Africa is a space where China has been particularly active, while southern Africa is more complex, primarily because South Africa has such an important role in the media space that other actors are really struggling to make inroads. Are you with me?

Q118 **Chair:** Yes, it’s just that I have been given a map, and I am kind of fascinated by it. I was just trying to cross-check it with the evidence you are giving, but we do not have Turkey on it, so that is perhaps an important additional thing. If you are able to write in, we can then add your evidence to the map, which I hope we will publish in our report.

You have been talking about state actors; what about non-state actors?

Dr Madrid-Morales: Obviously, my colleague will speak about the Wagner Group, which used to be a non-state actor and now has become much more part of the Russian state, after Prigozhin died—or was killed. I would say that the main non-state actors are actors affiliated with foreign states and are vehicles or conduits through which some operations are run.

Chair: The famous one is the Wagner Group.

Dr Madrid-Morales: Correct.

Q119 **Chair:** And the Wagner Group has now changed its name. It is now called what?

Dr Madrid-Morales: Africa Corps.

Q120 **Chair:** Okay, and it changed its name because?



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Dr Madrid-Morales: It was dissolved when—actually, I will let my colleague speak to that; it is not my area of expertise, so maybe he can give the context to that.

Chair: Do you want to just explain that?

Dr Giustozzi: Sure. It is a bit of a complex situation, but it is not actually correct to say that Africa Corps replaced the Wagner Group. The Wagner Group remains a separate entity, but was subsumed under—let's call it Africa Corps, but that is only a label, only a brand. In fact, it is a department of the Russian Ministry of Defence that is tasked with essentially contracting out. Basically, they operate not with a typical Russian state contract, but on a different type of contract that is more flexible, so to speak.

The purpose is to attract manpower, if you like, that would not work for the Russian state. The Russian state does not have a very good reputation in terms of flexibility or—before the Ukraine war—pay scales. This is to attract, in our case, quite important people from the commercial sector. People specialising in information campaigns, for example, would not work for the Russian state under those normal conditions. This department is able to offer a different type of contract—more flexible and with more money. They are able to work from home—they do not need to go to an office in the Ministry or whatever. With that kind of flexibility, it is much easier to contract or subcontract privately.

It is not the Wagner Group exclusively—there are other private military companies and entities that can be contracted. It is not only the Wagner Group; the Africa Corps incorporates a variety of organisations, but also individuals who have a direct contract with the Ministry of Defence. It is not only private companies, but private individuals, so it is more complex than that. That is just to clarify the type of structure.

Q121 **Edward Morello:** Just to carry on from that a bit, can you explain whether what used to be Wagner Group, now Africa Corps, is a medium through which Russia is doing misinformation in Africa in the areas where it is active, or is that element still run out of more traditional state apparatus?

Dr Giustozzi: State apparatus is always active, but it tends to specialise more on cyber-operations. They have been investing in the military and expertise in that field for many years. It tends to be more state-focused. Cyber-operations are more state-focused. That does not mean that they cannot hire, if needed, especially when they do large-scale operations and they need volume, ad hoc people from the commercial sector, just to have more people involved for certain campaigns. It could last whatever—one, two or three months—but it is state-led. We do not call that disinformation, because cyber is a different thing.

With regard to what they call information war, there is a stronger presence of private actors, especially when operating in unfamiliar contexts. For Russia, eastern Europe is a familiar context, for obvious reasons. They are



always active there; they know the environment quite well. When Russia became interested again in Africa, after more than 20 years of neglect, they did not have any expertise—they did not have any people on the ground. Of course, they wanted to get going pretty quickly, so they wanted to develop a capacity to operate very quickly. Again, this approach of relying on private contractors turned out to be very useful, so they hired, for example, Africa specialists just to advise on how to organise information operations in Africa.

At the time, that was not done by Africa Corps; it happened that Wagner Group played this kind of role, but it was not the Wagner Group that was actually sending mercenaries to Africa. It was done in St Petersburg. They had a branch dedicated to information operations. They started operating elsewhere, but the issue of Africa landed on their desk and they agreed to do it. They proved that they were flexible and able to adapt, so very quickly they hired some Africa specialists, and then they started hiring African journalists and media operators. They invested a little bit into trying to understand the new operating environment, which was not familiar to them. On that basis, they developed an approach.

That was not the Africa Corps, it was the Wagner Group, but the Wagner Group itself was divided into a number of sub-entities. It was not the same entity that was doing mercenary operations; it was a separate entity doing media operations. Then they themselves tend to subcontract. In Africa, for example, they would hire—let's call them consultants: people who are not organically members of the Wagner Group. They might be hired for short periods of time with any kind of contract arrangements. It is very flexible—essentially, a completely private operation.

Q122 Chair: Before Edward asks the next question, I think I might have missed something. You said that Russia had neglected Africa for 20 years. What was it that sparked its interest again and where in particular is it interested?

Dr Giustozzi: In general, we could say that for at least 10 years, everything was neglected in Russia. It was a situation of collapse. The state had very limited fiscal revenue to spend on anything, so everything was in a state of neglect, from the nuclear arsenal to everything else. Africa was not a priority for a long time. A turning point was the first Donbas war. At that point, the Russians realised that they were quite isolated, but at the same time they saw that around the world there was potential for earning more diplomatic support if they just were willing to invest a few resources. Africa looked good because a lot of countries in Africa do not have the resources. Therefore, a limited investment can translate into major change in terms of diplomatic support or countries that approve of Russia and vote in Russia's favour at the United Nations in the Assembly. That was the point of departure.

Q123 Edward Morello: In terms of the timeline, just so we understand where the role of Russian propaganda and Russian disinformation is, there are countries like Mali, where France has been actively asked to leave and replaced by Russian private military contractors. Is that on the back of



concerted propaganda and disinformation efforts? Is that a pure economic play? How is the state supporting the expansion of Russian boots on the ground in places like east and west Africa?

Dr Giustozzi: It was a multi-dimensional operation. The Wagner Group in Africa has been quite realistic in setting objectives. It understood that you can manipulate opinion, but up to a certain point, especially if you are an outsider—an external actor. The first thing that was obvious when it started looking at west Africa especially was that the French were not very popular there, especially at the elite level. It realised that, with a modest investment, it could strengthen a pre-existing trend. It did not create it, but it positioned itself in order to be useful to west African elites, especially, as we know, in some countries in Francophone Africa—Mali in particular—central Africa and, later, Niger and so on. It realised that there was a lot of dissatisfaction with the French. The French had a very significant presence on the ground, but the relations with the local Governments had not been good for quite some time. It exploited that.

Some of it is not even about narratives. Much of what the Russians were doing was undermining French narratives. It was a purely negative target. Much disinformation is not about having a narrative; it is about undermining somebody else's narrative. Much of the work goes into that.

Of course, it is not always easy to say exactly how much is Russia's work and how much is other actors. One thing that was clear, even before the Russians appeared, is that there were a lot of actors spreading disinformation in Africa—not only foreign ones, which we mentioned, but local ones. Every ambitious African politician would have some journalists working for him. More recently, social media is widely used. They all try to undermine each other. There is a lot of fake news circulating even without the Russians helping.

Since that environment is not always easy to measure with precision, the reason for the Wagner Group's success was not so much that it spent a lot of money—it did not spend much. However, it was able to attract a number of actors that were already present: media houses, individual journalists and, very importantly, politicians. It gave them capabilities to rise to the top of this information war. They became more competitive and more co-ordinated and had more effective propaganda than the competition. The quality of the propaganda being circulated before the Russians arrived was modest by our standards.

I already mentioned that the Wagner Group originally largely relied on people coming from the commercial sector. The Russian commercial sector is very similar to the American one or even some European ones. It is very competitive, and people and companies work very hard to undermine each other. Those skills have been transferred to the political field. Even in Russia there is some political competition. It is not complete, but politicians like to win elections when they are run. They also rely on disinformation internally against each other, but largely it is exported to be deployed in places such as Africa and elsewhere. Those skills and

techniques were definitely well above the pre-existing standard in Africa. They brought in new know-how.

Q124 **Edward Morello:** Perhaps you can expand on that slightly, Dr Madrid-Morales. A lot of the state actors that you outlined at the beginning would not be described as democratic states. The politicians who are rising to the forefront in Africa—often backed by Russian military contractors—tend to be non-democratic actors. The broader question is, to what extent is Russian disinformation and propaganda—and also other state actors—fundamentally undermining democracy, public health and civil society groups on the continent?

Dr Madrid-Morales: It is difficult to establish a causal link between the two. Obviously, Russian actors, whether the Wagner Group or the many other more traditional actors such as RT and Sputnik, which are quite heavily involved in mainly west Africa, are contributing to redrawing the map of mainstream narratives. For example, anti-French sentiment—much linked to an anti-western, anti-colonial sentiment—has been present in most of the continent for many years. Now what those actors are doing is amplifying and giving the tools for those messages to be more prevalent.

One thing that has not been mentioned is the role of some TikTokers and influencers in west Africa who speak to a French-speaking pan-African audience and are using some of those narratives—that democracy has failed us, the French have failed us, and it is time for a change. That change could come in many different shapes, one of which is saying, “Russia have tried to redraw the map in west Africa, so why don’t we give them a try?”

In that sense, those are useful cases that Russia can use to say, “Well, if you want to try something else, why don’t you try us?” I would not draw a direct connection between that and the rise of military coups in west Africa. They are not caused by of Russian disinformation, but Russian disinformation is exploiting the grievances that are created because of that.

Q125 **Sir John Whittingdale:** You have just referred to the use of traditional media such as RT and Sputnik, which is then amplified by influencers and TikTok. Can you tell the extent to which social media is driving that, and is it on other platforms as well as TikTok, such as Telegram or Facebook?

Dr Madrid-Morales: We have to remember that in most of the continent, the main source of information is still traditional media: radio or TV—newspapers, absolutely not. For the majority of people over the age of 45, social media does not have a role. Younger people definitely are using it. Recent data from the Reuters Institute in Oxford said that anywhere between 60% and 70% of young people in Kenya and Nigeria get their news from YouTube. YouTube is an incredibly important source of information, and those actors are very good at marketing their content towards those spaces. Think of China: for a while CGTN was top among international broadcasters in terms of users.

Q126 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Are you talking about repeating information that

has originally been on RT or is it user-generated content?

Dr Madrid-Morales: It is a combination of both. For example, both RT and CGTN have programmes for what they call non-professional journalists. They offer them resources to tell their stories, and those stories—the ones that get told—tend to be those aligned with Moscow and Beijing.

There are also a lot of more grassroots influencers, so to speak. There is a very well-known case, Nathalie Yamb, who is a Cameroonian with a Swiss passport. She is very well known in Francophone Africa. She has a very strong anti-French discourse, and that is very popular among the youth. She has repeatedly pushed for French troops and resources to be out of west Africa, and she repeats a lot of the Russian narratives. Again, they are nothing new.

Antonio was talking about the Russians being away for 20 years; all of this started in the cold war. Both Russia and China had a huge presence on the continent, and both had radio broadcasting in all the local languages. That knowledge is quite important. China has had non-stop broadcasting in Swahili since 1964. Russia had huge operations in Hausa and Igbo, for example. That knowledge is still there. That presence back then used the same narratives: the west is bad, the west is a colonial force, and you have to fight against those values. Those are the repeated narratives that we see today, so there is nothing new in that space.

Your question was about platforms, such as YouTube and TikTok. There is a well-known TV station funded by Russian actors called Afrique Média TV, which is active in putting forward very pro-Russian narratives. It uses a lot of discussion-based programmes—you could think of it like GB News for African audiences. Those are broadcasting primarily on social media, and then they get amplified on satellite dishes, for example.

It is important for people to remember that in the African media space there are three main broadcast providers for satellite dishes; one is French, Canal+, one is South African, DSTV, and the third one is Chinese-owned and called StarTimes. When both Canal+ and DSTV took down RT after the invasion of Ukraine, due to pressure from mostly European actors, StarTimes kept RT there. StarTimes has Afrique Média TV on its free-to-air packages.

The infrastructure is there for those channels to be distributed. Even though there is no clear link or co-operation between Russian and Chinese actors, both of them have similar goals, which are discrediting western actors and promoting their own views. Those views are increasingly aligned on what the world should look like.

Q127 Alex Ballinger: With all these disinformation networks and the various channels that they are using, it is clear that France is a target of a lot of the stuff in west Africa. But how much is it affecting the perceptions of Africans towards France, towards the west more generally, and maybe towards institutions such as the UN and NATO?



Dr Madrid-Morales: If we take Russian propaganda in west Africa, it is exploiting sentiments that were already there. When we talk about anti-French sentiment in Mali, Burkina Faso or Côte d'Ivoire, it is nothing new—it has been there for a long time. It might have been less mainstream, and then some of the platforms and the efforts by Russian actors—and, to a lesser extent, the Chinese—have increased the space that those narratives have in the mainstream.

Some of the research that we have done has shown that it is not so much that people get exposed to those narratives through Russian channels, and then that makes them feel stronger about it, it is just that they were already there, and it is the spark that is needed for them to remember, "Well, through my 25 years of life, I have seen the French around and nothing has changed in my country, so if anybody comes and tells me, 'You've been looking there, but you should be over there,' that makes a lot of sense." It is less about them being very effective in using the channels that they have to distribute the narratives, and more about giving a voice to something that was subdued to some extent. Now those voices are becoming more mainstream.

A lot of what is happening in western Europe is similar. When Chinese or Russian actors have an information manipulation campaign in western Europe, all they do is uncover or give space to voices that have been in the background, and those voices become mainstream. When they become mainstream, the popularity is difficult to stop.

Q128 **Alex Ballinger:** Is there any polling on this sort of stuff? Is there anything that could help us to get a tangible, evidence-based feel of it?

Dr Madrid-Morales: In the written evidence that I provided, I mentioned a study that we did in four countries: Angola, Zambia, Ethiopia and South Africa. We showed the popularity of certain Russian narratives, such as when Russia said that the invasion of Ukraine was because of NATO. We showed statistically that those are very popular narratives. In Ethiopia, 70% of the population say that it is NATO's fault.

We tried to trace why it is that 70% of Ethiopians think that. It is not because they watch Chinese sources, and it is not because they watch Russian sources. It is mostly connected to the fact that those narratives activate an anti-colonial sentiment that is very prevalent in society. For example, during the war in Ukraine, Ethiopian media constantly had anti-west, anti-US sentiments, and those are a lot more embedded domestically.

You have to remember that when that happened, Ethiopia was going through internal conflict. In that internal conflict, a lot of the blame was put on the US. In the Ethiopian war with Tigray, for example, the Government used the US as a scapegoat to shape domestic public opinion by saying, "The US is to blame for what's happening in Ethiopia," so there was already a very prevalent space for anti-western sentiments.

Chair: Also, Ethiopia is very proud of the fact that it was never conquered.

Dr Madrid-Morales: Very much so.

Chair: Out of all the countries in Africa, it remained independent, so the anti-colonial instinct is very deep.

Dr Madrid-Morales: Yes, and it happens in many countries across the continent. I think we in Europe tend to downplay how long-lasting the effects of colonial rule were, and how many societies are significantly poorer than they should be had there not been colonial rule. Therefore, that is a sentiment that cannot be washed away—it is a sentiment that is there. In the battle of narratives, you have the west portraying democracy as the solution to all the problems, but democracy is not delivering in the way that many citizens want. Other actors are then saying, “The west has been lying to you. They’ve been here for a hundred years. They’ve made you worse than you should be. It’s time to try something else.” In that space, that something else becomes quite attractive.

Q129 **Phil Brickell:** I am particularly interested in the money behind some of this, so I have two questions, perhaps starting with Dr Giustozzi. You have talked about the commercial nature of some of the disinformation and the activity that is taking place in Africa. Can you give us a sense of how much money Russia, as an example, is putting into certain African countries to propagate disinformation? I ask that because we are having this discussion against the backdrop of funding for the likes of the British Council and the BBC World Service. I am curious to know if there is any information that you are able to share on that.

Dr Giustozzi: The information is very fragmentary. This is from Wagner Group sources, so you might want to take it with a pinch of salt, but in general, the sources have proved to be reliable in terms of the things they are telling us. At least for a period, the disinformation branch in St Petersburg was funded at the rate of around \$10 million a month, but that was not only for Africa; that was the entire budget. How much of that was for Africa is a bit difficult to say, but when we hear about payments being made to journalists, we are talking about thousands of dollars or more than \$10,000—huge sums. Of course, in Africa, even \$1,000 can be quite a significant amount. For media houses, it is tens of thousands.

We have to consider that the Russians are really focused on Francophone Africa, and not necessarily just the Sahel—of course, there is central Africa, but also the other Francophone countries. Sometimes they broadcast from there, but they mainly have in mind the Sahel. I do think that strategically they are more interested in the Sahel than any other part of Africa.

In aggregate, we are probably talking about some millions of dollars in terms of the total volume of operation, without counting their own staff, because of course, even for the Russians, deploying personnel and even having people working in the media sector advising or helping is quite expensive. It may not be as expensive as for us, but anyway they need to go there and stay somewhere, and nobody is going to deploy to Africa from Russia for a few hundred dollars a month, right? So you have to pay



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substantial salaries to even the limited staff you have on the ground. Then, of course, you have to spend money on the kind of administrative structure you have back in St Petersburg to handle this. So I think, in terms of money spent on the ground, we are talking about a few million per year. I don't think it is a huge amount of money, but it is, importantly, carefully targeted—strategically targeted.

One thing I would say is that, essentially, Wagner Group operations in the media field are considered a bit like a military campaign, with a clear strategy and certain aims in mind, and focusing on what really matters—on the achievements that had to be there to meet the request of the clients, which were not necessarily the Russian state, because some of the contracts were with the African Governments. The Malian Government, for example, had direct contracts with Wagner Group to provide a certain type of information support—in this case, supporting the Government. Other contracts have been about strengthening the image of Russia; there would be Russian contracts. So they had a number of different contracts with different actors, not just with the Russian MOD.

Q130 Phil Brickell: I want to stick to the topic of finances. The UK Government imposed sanctions on African Initiative and three key individuals associated with it in July of this year, and those sanctions comprise asset freezes and a travel ban. How effective do both of you believe the UK Government's and international initiatives have been in sanctioning some of the individuals and the organisations that are responsible for spreading disinformation in Africa, and what more do you think could be done to temper some of those movements?

Dr Giustozzi: I think these kinds of initiatives cause nuisance to Wagner Group or similar actors. Clearly, it is possible to circumvent any sanction—simply by, for example, replacing people. They have abundant human resources. I don't know whether that many individuals need to be involved in a specific operation in Africa; they could be rotated in and out as needed.

In the early stages, some Africa-specialist Russians played an important role. I am not sure whether now they are still that important. Anyway, there are quite a few Africa specialists in Russia, of course, and a number of universities have this kind of expertise. So I think they have sufficiently abundant human resources to adapt. Of course, there will be a cost for them to adapt, but I think it is feasible for them to adapt.

Dr Madrid-Morales: My answer would be that the initiatives are totally ineffective and are probably sending the wrong message. My view on the ways in which the UK or European partners can counter foreign interference is that it should not be done by disrupting those spaces, mostly because that sends the message that we are ready to intervene in a sovereign information space, which is something that we would not like to have done in our own space. The counterargument about what should be done instead is that we should invest more heavily in presenting our own view of the world to those who are being targeted by the Russians, the Chinese, the Turkish and so on. Obviously, the main way the UK can

do that is through the BBC. The Committee would probably agree that the BBC is clearly underfunded in its efforts to spread its message around the world.

I like to remind everybody that when we ask people in polls what is their No. 1 source of information, the BBC comes first across most of Africa. In recent polling that we did in Ethiopia, Angola, Zambia and South Africa, the BBC came first in all four countries.

Q131 Chair: Is that BBC radio, television and social media?

Dr Madrid-Morales: It is a mix. A lot of these people get content on social media, and it is difficult to trace whether it is specifically TV, radio or purely online content. The BBC has done a lot of rethinking of its Africa strategy towards being web-based. It has a very active webpage, with content updated regularly.

Chair: They have told us about that, but it is nice to get it confirmed by you.

Dr Madrid-Morales: Yes, it is. I am not British, and I come here with my Spanish background. As a brand, the BBC has a very bad reputation within the UK, but not outside of it. The BBC is seen as a symbol of freedom of the press and freedom of speech, and those are the values that the UK could export a lot more actively. The way to counter the Russians saying that the west is bad is not by shutting them down, sanctioning them and telling them that they have to leave the country; it is by saying, "That is your story. Let me tell you mine." We are not doing a good job of telling our story. When I say "our", I mean any country that feels that western values, democracy and freedom of speech are the foundations of what we want to tell the world.

You asked, "Is it effective?" No, it is not. That is because Russia, China, Turkey and other actors have already built an infrastructure through which they can distribute their content by so many different means that if you shut down one source, there will be others. Instead, let's invest more in not only putting the UK's position to the world but in supporting local voices, who are probably quite willing to tell a story that is different from the Chinese or the Russian one but do not have the resources to do so.

It is a difficult story to sell to a domestic audience. It is difficult to say, "In a time of cuts, let's invest more in how other countries are telling their own stories," but it is a long-term game. It is important for us to remember that the Chinese, the Russians, the Turkish, the Emiratis and the Saudis are in the long endgame. Russia is investing heavily in training African journalists to create new channels for its information to be distributed. The Chinese are doing the same, while most European actors are doing the opposite. We are shutting down offices and language services. We are narrowing the space for newsrooms to operate. We are going in completely different directions, and that sends the wrong message.

Chair: We have about 10 minutes left and at least four questions. If it is

possible to compress the answers, I would greatly appreciate it because we are all going to have to run off. Alex has a couple of questions.

Q132 Alex Ballinger: I was going to ask the question that you just answered: how can we counter these disinformation narratives? I agree, and the Committee strongly agrees, that the BBC is an excellent way of doing that. Are there any other approaches? Some people have suggested digital literacy or more independent, home-grown African media. Is there anything like that that might also be helpful?

Dr Madrid-Morales: Media literacy has become one of those areas that people like to fund. It is the same as fact-checking, debunking and things like that. While some of those are effective, I do not think they are the solution that we need to go for. Media literacy has been shown sometimes to have a countereffect. When we tell people so regularly that they have to be careful with what information they are consuming, we might move them from being critical consumers to very cynical consumers, which is the opposite of what we want.

It is a lot more efficient to invest in media organisations that are already there—the BBC, for example. We can also make the UK public and UK companies more aware that information is a good area to invest in these days. There are new tenders, for example. Many African countries are still transitioning from analogue to digital TV, which is something that we did 20 years ago. We never see European companies entering those tenders. The Chinese have done most of those transitions, which means that a Chinese company, StarTimes, owns the infrastructure through which most African countries get their TV today. It is more effective if we tell our companies and stakeholders, “Look, that is an area where you should be investing more.” That includes Reuters and Sky. We have all these actors that have a good brand and good infrastructure, but they are not doing enough business in Africa.

Q133 Sir John Whittingdale: You have just mentioned China. I am going back to our earlier session about Chinese activity. Can you quickly describe the extent to which China is a player in this alongside Russia? Are they pursuing similar objectives, and how should we deal with it?

Dr Madrid-Morales: China is the biggest player in the continent by far. China is different from Russia in that it does not do disinformation as much, as the other session pointed out. It does a lot more PR, marketing and propaganda that is favourable towards China.

The key difference is that China has built infrastructure across the continent to broadcast its messages through so many different platforms. No other actor has that ability. China has CGTN, Xinhua and *China Daily* that we know of, but it also has all these partnerships and agreements with a lot of local actors.

I always give one example that is very telling. If you go to a small country like Lesotho, for four hours a day the national broadcaster switches off and broadcasts CGTN. Those four hours used to be for the BBC—that used to be the choice for those four hours. In Kenya, on national TV at 9 pm—

prime time for meals—they switch on to CGTN. That is a slot that used to be for CNN.

No other country has the infrastructure that China has, and we are not doing enough to counter those spaces. We have retreated from the African market, and other actors have entered.

Q134 Aphra Brandreth: I want to ask about the counter-Daesh communications cell, which the UK leads on, to undermine propaganda in parts of Africa, and also I believe in the middle east and Afghanistan. How effective do you think it has been in building that resilience against terror and extremist narratives?

Dr Giustozzi: I don't think it has been very effective.

In general, in recent years, there has been a lot of backlash and criticism of any kind of counter-narrative approach. Essentially, the main problem in Africa is the narrative. If you want to counter somebody's narrative, you need a good alternative narrative. It is not very easy now, especially in Muslim Africa.

For example, you could support a media operation; if you did that, you would probably want to talk about Gaza in a certain way, but the public there does not want that kind of talk. They want answers. When you try to counter Daesh, what do you say about Gaza? Do you have a narrative that can compete with theirs? That is an example. I say Gaza, but I could say something else. We are very weak on messages that can be appealing to the kind of public that Daesh targets, which is not necessarily the man in the street.

In general, this approach is quite discredited. Of course, it is not easy to say. We at RUSI are trying to develop other ways of bypassing the narrative dimension altogether, and we will try to pilot it in some projects we have done, but we are still quite a long way from any kind of consensus on what the effective approach would be.

Q135 Aphra Brandreth: Are there things that you think the cell could do to be more effective or to work more collaboratively with legitimate local security partners, and things like that, to improve its effectiveness?

Dr Giustozzi: There are ways of doing it, but the problem is that there are not many countries where it is easy to find local partners. Of course, if you involve them, you also expose them to risk. That is one issue. For example, if you use some people in the media sector and they are seen as collaborating, they could be a target. In some environments, the danger could be not only from Daesh but from other actors. That is a problem.

We do think there is potential in the media resilience field, as I think my colleague was saying earlier. It is not realistic to think that we can educate the entire public in media resilience, but perhaps we could target a certain sector of the public—the public who aspire to good-quality information. There is a market even in Africa for specialist publications in, for example,



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the business or defence sectors. Perhaps, where there is demand, we could invest in that to offer something that they can appreciate.

The middle class, professional class and business class are of course very important, not so much in terms of numbers—they would not necessarily affect the outcome of an election—but any Government need to work with these guys and rely on them. They will be the people, around the Government, in the business sector who are fixing things for you, and you need to have them on board. Perhaps there is space there. Investment that targets this public and makes sure they have the kind of information they need would be useful. The BBC is very useful, but there is also a demand for specialist information—in business, defence or security—and although there are some actors there, clearly much of the demand is not being met.

Chair: Thank you very much for coming today to share your expertise and information with us. We have heard some pretty startling evidence this morning. If there are questions that you think we should have asked you, or that, now that you know the approach we are taking, there is extra information that you think we might need to know, please write to us and share any further thoughts. Thank you again.