

Foreign Affairs Committee

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

Tuesday 18 November 2025

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Fleur Anderson; Aphra Brandreth; Phil Brickell; Richard Foord; Abtisam Mohamed; Edward Morello.

In the absence of the Chair, Richard Foord took the Chair.

Questions 136-180

Witnesses

[I](#): Jon Bateman, Senior Fellow and Co-Director, Technology and International Affairs Programme, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Roberta Braga, Founder and Executive Director, Digital Democracy Institute of the Americas, and Nina Jankowicz, Chief Executive Officer, American Sunlight Project.

[II](#): Alexandre Brasil, Deputy Head of Mission, Brazilian Embassy London.

[III](#): Nishant Lalwani, Chief Executive Officer, International Fund for Public Interest Media.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Jon Bateman, Roberta Braga and Nina Jankowicz.

Q136 Chair: The Foreign Affairs Committee is today holding another evidence session as part of our disinformation diplomacy inquiry. Our Chair, Dame Emily Thornberry, is unable to attend, and she sends her apologies for not being able to hear witnesses today. Ms Jankowicz and Ms Braga, would you please introduce yourselves for the record?

Nina Jankowicz: Good morning, everyone. My name is Nina Jankowicz. I am the co-founder and CEO of the American Sunlight Project, which is a bi-partisan not-for-profit in the US focused on increasing the cost of lies that undermine democracy. We do actor-agnostic research on information manipulation. I was one of *Time's* 100 most influential people in AI in 2022. I am an adjunct professor at Syracuse University, where I teach a graduate-level course on disinformation and influence. I am the author of two books on Russian interference and online harms. I have also, relevant to this inquiry, managed disinformation research and democracy support programmes funded by both the UK and the US. I am really happy to be here with you today.

Roberta Braga: Good morning. My name is Roberta Braga. I am the founder and executive director of the Digital Democracy Institute of the Americas—DDIA—based out of Washington DC. I am originally from Brazil. Our mission at DDIA is to strengthen a healthier internet for Latinos and Latin Americans. We do that through a combination of research, public opinion and narrative research in English, Spanish and Portuguese, capacity building and policy work. I held various other roles before this related to election integrity in Latin America. I spent five years at the Atlantic Council's Latin America Center, where I managed projects on the 2018 elections in Brazil, Colombia and Mexico, as well as some work on Venezuela related to information integrity. Thank you all for having us.

Q137 Chair: Thank you very much for joining us. First, I would like to ask about foreign information manipulation and interference in the US. Could you outline the character of the FIMI threats to the US as you see them?

Nina Jankowicz: Right now, in terms of foreign information manipulation and interference, as well as broader online influence campaigns coming from adversaries, we are seeing a back to basics from state actors as a result of tech platforms' retreat from content moderation. I will give you one example. In 2024, ASP—my organisation—identified 1,100 likely automated accounts that posted hundreds of times a day and repeatedly retweeted overt Russian propaganda within 60 seconds of it posting. We looked back at that network right before this evidence session to see what was going on with it, and right now, we are seeing that more than 800 of these accounts are still active. To give you an idea of the volume, they have posted more than 11.1 million times in the last year, on issues



ranging from the war in Gaza to the war in Ukraine, to the cost of living and housing crisis not only in the US but in the UK as well. This network is likely controlled by Russia, by our estimation, and it is aware of the most sensitive political issues in our country. Now, this is all happening despite Elon Musk's promise to rid his platform of bots. We are seeing a similar influx in other online spaces.

I also note that our strategic adversaries are doing things like grooming large language models. They recognise that people all over the world, including in the United States, are now using large language models to quickly search for and understand and synthesise information. We found that the Pravda network, which is a collection of several hundred pro-Russian content-aggregation sites, is pumping out at least 3.6 million articles a year. We surmise that this is in order to pump the large language models, which are trying to Hoover up any content they can find online, full of pro-Russian propaganda. We have tested them a number of times, and each time we ask particularly about the war in Ukraine and events in Ukraine, the large language models, including some of the biggest proprietary models, are spitting out Russian propaganda.

Overall, because our society is more divided right now, we have presented fertile ground to adversaries—not just Russia but China, Iran and any other actor that has the will to manipulate our society. That polarisation is really great fuel for disinformation campaigns. I like to say that the most successful disinformation campaigns are FIMI: they are not related to cut-and-dried falsehoods; they are related to the ways that bad actors are manipulating and amplifying pre-existing fissures in our society. There are plenty of examples, but I will stop there.

Chair: Thank you, Ms Braga, for raising your hand. I will come to you in a moment. First, Aphra is going to come in on some of Ms Jankowicz's points.

Q138 Aphra Brandreth: I want to ask a bit more about not just Russian but Chinese state-sponsored information operations. As you have clearly set out, Russian disinformation appears to be marked by real scale, as well as adaptability and persistence, while Chinese FIMI, although it can be done at scale, sometimes appears to be a bit more limited by the quality of the output. Nina, could you set out how you see Russian and Chinese state-sponsored information operations differing in their selection of targets, strategic objectives and methods?

Nina Jankowicz: Absolutely. I think China is quite a bit more selective in the ways it chooses both to interfere in elections and to launch influence campaigns. We know from Office of the Director of National Intelligence assessments over the past several years—since 2018, I think—that China has done a cost-benefit analysis on whether to interfere in US elections and most of the time has elected not to. That is in part because its tradecraft is a little bit sloppier—it is easy to identify the networks that are coming from China—but I imagine that that is going to change with the advent of high-quality large language models.

This is true for all actors that operate in a language or culture that is not their own. Now, because of LLMs, although some safeguards are in place—I will give the companies that: they are moving to try to put up firewalls for those who might use LLMs to implement disinformation campaigns—if you are an actor sitting in China and you do not have great English skills, you can now write a tweet or a Facebook post or what have you in pitch-perfect, grammatically correct, idiomatically correct English. You can also generate visual content to go along with that and ask the LLM the best time to put that content in the world in order to target vulnerable audiences.

To sum up, the Chinese are a little bit more circumspect in their decisions to interfere. In the past, the quality has been a little bit worse, a little bit easier to spot, with a little more brute force, if you will, but China certainly has the ability to be quite impactful in the future, not only because of LLMs but because of the sheer size and capacity of the Chinese state, if it were to train that capacity on the United States, the UK or another country.

Q139 Aphra Brandreth: How do you see Russian misinformation targeted to undermine American support for Ukraine?

Nina Jankowicz: Not too long ago I did a project with the Centre for Information Resilience, which is based in London. In 2022 and 2023, we were already seeing the erosion of support for Ukraine in the United States. That was in part due to the Russian amplification of narratives about Ukrainian corruption, and about the history between Russia and Ukraine and how Ukraine actually belonged with Russia. We actually saw the repeating of some of these narratives in Congress itself.

I wanted to bring up earlier the fact that information laundering is a threat to democratic societies. That is not only the United States; I see information laundering in the UK quite frequently as well. It is when a foreign actor identifies an authentic local voice in the dialogue in a specific country and introduces a narrative to them, perhaps in their X feed, perhaps through meetings or lobbying, and then that narrative is laundered into official business like a hearing such as this one, or perhaps someone goes and does a hit on TV. That is the way that we see a lot of this pro-Russian disinformation making its way into the US political discourse, all the way up to the highest office of the land, the Oval Office, as we saw during the fateful Oval Office meeting between President Trump and President Zelensky.

Q140 Phil Brickell: I have a quick question for Nina Jankowicz about China. The briefing for this session spoke about the increasing use of private commercial firms to disseminate foreign information manipulation and interference. Could you talk more about who these private firms are, and why there seems to be increasing use of privatised FIMI?

Nina Jankowicz: That is something that we have seen not only from China but from many other nation state actors, including Russia. My conjecture is that these firms are being hired to get around the detection and mitigation tools that the platforms have in place. Russia has, of

course, done that with PR firms in Africa. It has attempted to hire influencers in France through PR firms, and it even set up a carve-out media organisation here in the United States, staffed by two Canadians. It is a way to outsource these sorts of operations and evade detection. I assume that China and Iran are doing that as well. These firms are, I would say, more focused on income and profit than the moral scruples that others among us might have. Introducing—if there are not some already—know-your-customer principles for public relations firms, particularly those that operate at a mass scale, could be an interesting way to mitigate those harms.

Q141 Chair: Ms Braga, I will come on to Latin America in a minute. We have been joined by Jon Bateman, senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. First, Mr Bateman, will you introduce yourself for the record, please?

Jon Bateman: Thank you. I apologise for a catastrophic time zone miscalculation—we will blame ChatGPT for this one. My name is Jon Bateman. I work at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where I co-lead our technology programme.

Chair: Edward, do you have any questions to pose to Mr Bateman?

Q142 Edward Morello: I do not, but I would like to go back to a point that Ms Jankowicz made. Ms Jankowicz, you mentioned that Russian FIMI has been successful, in some cases, in penetrating the political discourse in the US and the UK. You mentioned the meeting in the Oval Office. Given that we have your expertise here, looking at the UK, do you want to identify any British actors that you would say have been successfully captured by Russian misinformation?

Nina Jankowicz: I have certainly seen a lot of Russian rhetoric coming from Mr Farage. I do not think that will be a surprise to anyone in this room. His narratives about Ukraine converge with the Trump administration's narratives. There is also convergence on fighting disinformation. We will get to that later on but, to preview it, certainly Mr Farage seems to be an important ally of the Trump administration's in tearing down counter-disinformation programming, not only in the UK but in the EU.

Q143 Chair: Mr Bateman, are there any recent developments in Russian or Chinese state-sponsored FIMI that are of particular concern?

Jon Bateman: The general direction of both Russia and China is continued dedication to the tool and, from China in particular, an increased boldness and volume of activity. China has become more sophisticated over time. It has taken to mimicking some of the efforts that Russia has traditionally been associated with in the past, involving investment in the development of online personas that can be used at a later date.

China also has a great amount of volume that it brings to this. It concerns me, as an American that, as of 2016, China was not intervening in US

elections substantially, and that has gradually changed. That shows you some of the increased willingness of these actors to take action.

Q144 Abtisam Mohamed: My question is to Nina. You mentioned earlier the fertile ground for tackling FIMI. At the moment, there is no official organisation in America for that. What is the main US agency or body countering FIMI against the threats you have mentioned?

Nina Jankowicz: I would say there is not one. We have unilaterally disarmed in the fight against FIMI and falsehoods more broadly. As you know, the Global Engagement centre was dismantled in a bad faith campaign that labelled its work to expose FIMI as censorship. As I understand it, the GEC's activity and investment in that space was larger than the FCDO's entire investment. So that is a pretty big hole.

Other offices have also been cut back drastically or completely dismantled as a result of the censorship lie. That includes the Office of the Director of National Intelligence's Foreign Malign Influence centre, the FBI's foreign influence taskforce, and work on mis- and disinformation at the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency at the Department of Homeland Security, where people have either been fired or reassigned.

It looks like, as of the next fiscal year, the budget for countering mis- and disinformation related to election infrastructure at CISA will be completely eliminated. That is in addition to the gutting of USAID, which supported those programmes abroad, the cuts to investments in media and resilience-building programmes, and the shuttering or stop-work order at Voice of America and RFE/RL.

As I see it—and I am not sure if my co-panellists would agree, though I would venture to say that they would—the pressure right now on the work in countering FIMI, is mostly coming from civil society, which is beleaguered, underfunded and under a lot of pressure, harassment and threats because of the work that we have done.

Q145 Abtisam Mohamed: Who do the harassment and threats come from?

Nina Jankowicz: You may know a little bit about my personal background, but I briefly served in the Biden administration doing work to make our counter-disinformation policy at the Department of Homeland Security. Just to give you a little of my personal experience with this: for the past three and a half years, which is the entirety of the time my son has been alive—I was pregnant when I was at DHS—my family has been dealing with severe threats, including death threats. We were doxxed and, as a result, had to move our residence. I had a cyber stalker. There have also been legal threats and lawfare against many of the organisations and people in our field in the United States.

A lot of people surmise or suggest—those who believe in this idea that my colleagues and I are censors—that we have committed treason in the United States. Of course, one of the punishments for treason is death, so you can kind of make a logical conclusion about where things go from there.



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It has been a really trying three years. That being said, I think the fact that we are all here at 5.30 on a Tuesday morning shows our commitment to this cause and our belief that this work is more important than ever.

Q146 Fleur Anderson: That is extremely worrying to hear, and I am sorry for all that you have endured. For a US citizen, or for our constituents here in the UK—perhaps this question is for Jon and for Nina—why do you think people should be concerned about foreign information manipulation and interference? What is the impact on the ordinary person on the street?

Jon Bateman: First and foremost, for me, it is a violation of the boundaries of democratic fair play. Most countries have some kind of norms or laws about what is considered legitimate participation in the democratic process involving foreign actors. In the US, for example, we tolerate foreign actors offering their speech, under the first amendment, but we do not tolerate them offering campaign contributions, and there is a growing norm certainly against inauthentic behaviours and covert action by foreign Governments. It is a violation of that norm, first and foremost. I would actually just say that it is a foreign policy problem; it is unfriendly, hostile behaviour by outside actors.

I would add that, if we are worried about the tangible, practical effects of this, we do not really know. Obviously, there is the human element: people like Nina are suffering because of the second or third-order consequences of foreign disinformation, but there is no strong empirical evidence that these kinds of social media based campaigns or false personas are actually affecting electoral outcomes or having large-scale effects on national politics in major, relatively stable democracies like the UK.

Roberta Braga: Can I add something? For the last two years at DDIA, we have been doing a lot of research in the United States with Latino communities specifically. There are about 68 million Latinos in the US from a variety of different places, some of which are English dominant and some Spanish dominant. To Jon's point, we have approached trying to measure the impact on Latinos of misinformation and other online harms using public opinion research. We took 15 false claims and seven conspiracy theories and put them in front of over 3,000 Latinos in March 2024, before the elections, and September 2024, which was the month before the elections. We were actually able to see that a lot of these misinformation narratives are taking hold, especially the ones related to elites and institutions, which exacerbate citizens' distrust in Government, in each other and in the processes of democracy.

To give you an idea of the many different narratives that we tested, the two that were penetrating the most had to do with elites and institutions. The first was that there is a deep state composed of shadowy political figures that is working against the public—54% of the people we tested had seen this narrative and 42% accepted it to be true. The other was that elites are plotting with social media companies and mainstream media outlets to hide the truth from us—54% of the 3,000 plus people had seen this narrative and 47% accepted it.



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The other effect we have seen is that these actors are also helping to cement the degree of uncertainty and scepticism in absolutely everything that at least Latinos are seeing on the internet. To give you a sense of that, in March, 62% of the 3,000-plus people in the poll told us that they were either rejecting some of the claims or unsure whether they were true or false 100%, and that percentage was 66% in September. I think that, even more than belief, we should increasingly be worried about uncertainty and scepticism. People are very much trying to navigate this pollution with few tools and resources, and that is having an effect in how they engage with politics and democracy as well.

Nina Jankowicz: Can I add one final thought on why the common man or woman should care about foreign information manipulation and interference? We all want our vote to count. Although Jon pointed out the lack of good data on the effect of FIMI campaigns on individual elections, I still think that people want to be able to make decisions based on accurate information, and they do not want to be pandered or lied to. They want to go cast a ballot and know that their ballot—I am not talking about cyber exploits here—is based on fact, and they want it to matter in our democracy. When you have actors, whether they are from China, Russian, Iran or other countries, masquerading as Americans and trying to lead individual Americans astray, or Brits and others, it is fundamentally at odds with our democratic rights to access information, and to use that information in exercising our democratic responsibilities, such as casting ballots.

Q147 **Fleur Anderson:** Nina, the G7 established the rapid response mechanism in 2018 to detect and respond to threats to democracy, including hostile foreign information manipulation and interference attacks. How would you assess its effectiveness? Has it improved resilience against such threats?

Nina Jankowicz: My assessment of the G7 RRM is rather tepid. I think it is good as an information-sharing structure, and has brought together powerful countries to discuss these threats, usually on the margins of G7 summits, but it not has met the goals of being rapid or even responding in a concrete way. That is in part because of the political machinations at play. For the G7 RRM to even put out a statement on these issues, they need consensus from all the countries involved. As a result, they often do not even put out statements on this stuff, particularly now, when one of the G7 countries—my own, the United States—has gone completely cold on these issues and some other countries are leaning that way as well. It is a good working-level information-sharing tool, but that is about it.

Moving it further away from Government and giving it more political insulation—perhaps making it an arm's length entity, so that it is not as impacted by political changes in each capital—would be a good way to make it more effective. In general, we need to think more about the ways the countries involved can use the pointy end of the stick and not just do attribution and detection. That is all great, but when you are not having any impact on the strategic adversaries that the G7 RRM is set up to counter, you are just shuffling papers around, unfortunately.



Fleur Anderson: Thank you. That is depressing, but helpful.

Chair: We are now going to think a little about foreign information manipulation and interference in Latin America.

Q148 **Edward Morello:** Ms Braga, thank you for your patience. Latin America is obviously a large geography, so perhaps you can start by telling us, at a very macro level, about the main actors that are looking to use FIMI in Latin America and what their main targets are.

Roberta Braga: In this case, we are treating Latin America as a unit, but as we know it is very nuanced and complex. There are three sets of actors per country. I would say that Russia, China and Iran are the three that we have kept the closest eye on, but they all have three buckets of influencers in the region: the state-backed, state-funded news media outlets; local influencers and proxies, in some cases even academics, who often parrot some of the same official narratives; and then the soft power arm, which I will talk a bit about. In Russia's case, RT en Español is one of the biggest outlets, with penetration in various countries in the region. In Brazil's case, it is actually Sputnik Mundo; Russia has thrown a lot of resources behind the Portuguese-language version of Sputnik there. In Iran's case, HispanTV is one of the main actors; it is producing Spanish-language content across countries in the region.

Both these networks also have a large penetration among Latinos and Spanish speakers in the United States, as I mentioned. Our communities, Latinos and Latin Americans, are incredibly connected across borders. Often the narratives that these actors are pushing drive at local divisions, but the movements and narratives are often cyclical. They are borderless, and get recycled over and over. Where we see the changes happening is often in the specific claims in each country that are used to underpin some of the meta-narratives or false stories that get told.

These three buckets of actors—state-funded media outlets, proxies and local influencers, and the soft power arm—often harness a history of scepticism about the global powers, specifically the United States. They are trying to push the multi-polar world order view, and using some illicit methods to do so. However, as far as who they are targeting, a large percentage of the population in many Latin American countries believe that their country should have a more prominent seat at the decision-making table around the world, that the degree of influence that the United States and other global powers have over their realities and lives is unfair, and that a multipolar world order—or a multistate world order—is the future of geopolitical influence. Countries such as Brazil, where I am originally from, oftentimes also espouse that as the official approach to diplomacy and democracy. Those country actors know that and often try to harness that to advance their own agendas in the countries.

Q149 **Edward Morello:** How is that feeding into individual countries' relations with their neighbours, the US or other powers?

Roberta Braga: It is hard to say whether those narratives are changing official practice, but I can give you a few instances in which I think that

their influence—or at least their interference—in the conversation online might have had an effect. Looking backwards, there were three instances. One was elections in Brazil and Colombia, specifically in 2018. In the 2018 context, we saw the election fraud narrative—that elections are fraudulent and cannot be trusted—appearing in both of those countries in unique ways. It is something that we also see in the United States.

In Brazil and Colombia, we saw those actors amplifying people's suspicions. In Brazil's case, it was that the voting machines that Brazil uses are being hacked, are untrustworthy, or that when the number of the candidate is typed in, which is what you are supposed to do there, they are not generating the votes reflective of that. In Colombia, we saw Sharpiegate—people affirming that the type of pen being used on the ballots was misguided or erroneous, or that the ballots were somehow being manipulated. We saw those actors amplifying those suspicions.

During covid-19, the actors came in to amplify anti-vaccine suspicions, and also to position themselves as being providers of solutions where the United States may have been taking a step back.

Last, those actors often exploit local countries' moments of social unrest. We have had a lot of instances in Latin America of social unrest in the past five to 10 years. An example of that was the 2019 Chilean protests. We saw those actors amplifying some of that.

Looking forward, we have already begun to see that movement in the narrative-building from Russia, Iran and others is eroding trust in democratic institutions. In Brazil's case, in the STF, the supreme court, Judge Alexandre de Moraes and other members of the court took a stronger position following our 8 January 2023 protests, which mirrored the US's 6 January 2021 protests, to take down accounts that were spreading election fraud lies, and it took it a little further than usual. It became a scapegoat and was attacked massively. Those actors fitted in there to create division.

Now that Brazil is taking more of a lead in and building the BRICS movement, we see Russia, Iran and others promoting their own geopolitical goals by saying that BRICS is an alternative to imperialist power.

Nina mentioned that as the United States takes a step back from engagement with the region—or, in this case, when it prioritises the local immigration agenda and takes more of a tone of animosity, which we often see from, for example, White House social media accounts and official rhetoric, where they are attacking countries to ensure that those countries' citizens do not migrate to the United States—it leaves a massive gap. China and Russia are stepping in to position themselves as better trading partners, and as a place where, perhaps, US or foreign students from Latin America might be able to go if they cannot go and study in the United States, for example, or where refugees and asylum seekers might be able to find some safety or refuge if they cannot stay in the United States.



Q150 Edward Morello: To what degree is the narrative coming out of the current US Administration playing into the hands of the desired policy outcomes of those malign actors in Latin America? Is it supportive? Is it all part of a bigger game of checkers?

Roberta Braga: I would say that it is definitely part of a bigger game, and one that is hard to measure. In some instances, the United States takes a position of supporting local leaders—say in the case of Javier Milei, with the amount of money that was given to Argentina to help its economy bounce back. That might be seen as a hand given to the region, but in other cases, the United States is taking a position of demonising these countries, writ large, if their people are migrating to the United States at any scale. As is now happening with Venezuela, the United States potentially takes a stance of considering interference or Government change—regime change in this case in Venezuela—and that will have an impact in other countries in the region.

That could also create an environment that, for some people in Latin America, might be reflective of past instances of US interference in the region. Even though the discussion about Venezuela is incredibly complex, countries like Russia, China and Iran know how to harness that history to create further division. Oftentimes, what we see is that they are fuelling the narrative on multiple sides of the political aisle in English, Spanish and Portuguese. On both the right and the left, we see some involvement of those actors. If anything, it is creating that higher degree of distrust, more polarisation, more uncertainty, and more emotional and sensationalistic engagement on social media.

Q151 Edward Morello: Do you want to speak to anything at a regional-actor level? You mentioned Venezuela, but what about Nicaragua, Cuba or anywhere like that? Are individual countries getting support from foreign actors in order to pursue their own local goals?

Roberta Braga: At least online, the Maduro regime, Cuba and a few others have had support from Russia and Iran. For example, in the case of HispanTV, the Iranian state-funded network that I mentioned, it positions the discussion online to reflect a heroes versus villains dichotomy. The anti-imperialist bloc, which comprises Venezuela, Cuba and in this case Palestine, and they bring in Iran and Russia, is framed as the righteous and resilient defenders of our human rights or of power in the region. The predatory empire is the other side's position, in this case the US and Israel framed as failing, corrupt, aggressive and Nazi Zionist. A cycle of amplification happens between the Maduro regime, the Venezuela state-funded information outlets and the information outlets that are funded by states like Iran, Russia and China. They create that pitting.

To give you an idea, for HispanTV, last week our team did a look at its engagement rates between 11 and 13 November. In those three days alone, in Spanish, 55 articles were posted on its website and 42 unique Telegram messages were posted to public channels. On average per month, about 90,000 views on its website came from Venezuela, Colombia and Mexico. I think that you see them simultaneously being an instrument



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of Iranian foreign policy, harnessing some of the Russia FIMI playbook that Nina mentioned, but also amplifying and giving fodder to the positions of some of those other regional actors like Venezuela and Cuba.

Q152 Phil Brickell: Mention was made of soft power in Latin America as exercised by Russia and China. Roberta Braga, can you talk about what Chinese and Russian soft power in Latin America looks like and how it is characterised?

Roberta Braga: I can give an example of that. I will send supplementary materials afterwards, because the organisation that we are working with on this is based in Brazil. In Brazil, one example is the Bolshoi Ballet. They have made inroads in the country—I think there have been 14 different ballet auditions in the last few months. They are really harnessing the everyday person's desire for culture, entertainment and escapism to position themselves as an alternative. That is one example.

There is also the education example that I mentioned. Russia has a different diplomatic relationship with Brazil than with other countries around the world. There is less animosity and more of a history of neutral diplomatic engagement. Russia harnesses that to position itself as a place where tourists can go, where students can study and where people can learn the language.

In the Brazil case, the United States remains the pillar of cultural admiration, you could say. However, because of a lot of the Trump Administration's positioning, the United States is also a place that people look at with disdain in some cases, depending on what side of the political aisle they are on. Around the protests on 7 September, which is Brazil's national independence day, some people went on to the streets in Brazil carrying an American flag, and in some cases an American and Brazilian flag combined. They were taking the Trump movement in stride with their own Bolsonaro-backed movement. They cling to all the narratives that we mentioned, including election fraud.

In other instances, the United States is now looked at in Brazil as an incredibly bad actor that is creating a lot of uncertainty in the region, that cannot be trusted as a trade partner and that is very irresponsible. There is also some polarisation being created with these global powers. Russia, China and Iran know how to dive into that to exacerbate the divisions.

Chair: Sadly, we are up against it time-wise. I thank each of our panel members for giving evidence this morning at a very early o'clock in the United States. Thank you very much for getting up to join us. If there is other evidence that you want to give, please write to the Committee with any further thoughts that you wish that you had expressed today or that you want us to reflect on.

Examination of witness

Witness: Alexandre Brasil.

Q153 **Chair:** The Committee is very grateful to the Brazilian embassy for sparing the time to give us evidence today. You perhaps heard that we do not have our Chair, Dame Emily Thornberry, today. She gives her apologies. Could you please introduce yourself?

Alexandre Brasil: Good morning, Members of Parliament. My name is Alexandre Brazil. I am the deputy head of mission at the Brazilian embassy here. My diplomatic career goes back to 1998. I have a STEM degree in computer science and have at different moments of my career followed subjects related to tech. I have been on our science desk at UNESCO and I worked at the press office twice, so I am well-positioned to talk about what we are doing in the field of disinformation.

Chair: Mr Brasil, we have only got 15 minutes for this session, but we are fascinated to hear more about disinformation in Brazil.

Q154 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Thank you, Mr Brasil. Brazil has been at the centre of the debate surrounding disinformation and online platforms following the judicial dispute with X. Can you outline more about that dispute and the types of disinformation that were identified?

Alexandre Brasil: What happened during the X controversy was a lot of fluff. Lots of people did not understand exactly what happened, but it was basically the application of the law. We had a law that was approved by Congress, which allowed the Supreme Court to ask for the suspension of accounts that are clearly and provably spouting misinformation, in that case about the elections. The Supreme Court Justice placed a fine, as the law allowed him to do, and because X did not have any kind of office to receive the fine, it was suspended. After some time, some discussion and a lot of misinformation on this subject, the company placed someone there in the law, the fine was given and X is working perfectly fine in Brazil right now. I would like to stress that it is not a Government policy—it was not decision by the Executive branch of the Government; it was a consequence of a law approved by Congress and applied by the judicial system, as should be done with any kind of company in any kind of field.

Q155 **Abtisam Mohamed:** What kind of activity were they involved in in Brazil?

Alexandre Brasil: There were accounts saying things similar to what has been said here about frauds in election, the problems with the electoral machines and other things, which were unsupported and proven false. There was a request for the suspension of the accounts that was not accepted by the company.

Q156 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Has that experience with X influenced the broader regulatory reforms to various other online platforms?

Alexandre Brasil: The law is there; it is something that we need to apply. There is a high bar to do this kind of thing, so it is not something people do willy-nilly. The law is still in place. We have recently approved a more stringent law regarding young people—children and adolescents—that is supposed to enter into force next March. That follows a very strong popular movement against what is being called *adultização*—I do not know how to translate it in English—which is about making children adults



before their time. There was work on trying to prevent the kind of account that is appropriate for adults from being directed at children and teenagers. There is new law, but there is older law about this kind of misinformation and the fact that companies have some responsibility to avoid this kind of misinformation and act on it—that is still there.

Q157 Abtisam Mohamed: You said that X is now functioning in Brazil, so it is back to normal. How do you respond to people or organisations that may criticise that what happened could undermine freedom of expression or freedom of speech?

Alexandre Brasil: Freedom of speech is always a very difficult matter. We have a law that was approved by Congress, and freedom of speech does not include the right to tell lies. As long as there is a very strong rule of law and a very strong way of making sure that we are fighting misinformation and blatant lies—not opinions—I do not think it can be construed as a form of censorship. The matter is how you do it, as with anything. If you have a strong institution and a strong judicial system that is capable of looking into the content and saying that the law is clear, then you can say the sky is red or the sky is blue, so you should be aware of that. Of course, if you say that you should paint the whole sky red and there should be some kind of technology to do so, that is an opinion and it should not be restricted.

Q158 Chair: Mr Brasil, you have offered a very hypothetical example, but can you give some actual examples of the sorts of disinformation that have been identified in Brazil?

Alexandre Brasil: Brazil is not different from all the other countries in the world. We experienced a lot of misinformation during the pandemic regarding the vaccines. We had specific matters of disinformation regarding the election. It is not dissimilar to what has been happening in different countries in the world. In the case of Brazil, because we have the very peculiar system of machines that are electronic, there was Brazil-specific misinformation, saying these machines could be or were hacked. There was something going on, but it is similar to things that have been going on in different parts of the world.

Q159 Chair: We were grateful to have you sitting at the back during the first panel, and so you will have heard the evidence presented by Ms Braga. Did you agree with her comments?

Alexandre Brasil: What I can say about that is that we don't identify in Brazil foreign manipulation exercises as much as a domestic environment of creating misinformation. That is something that I would say—it is our own. I don't know what is happening in other countries in the region, and I am not in a position to talk about other countries here, but we have received in Brazil a very active environment of people in Brazil who are working on misinformation. That is something that we try to fight against. That is what I would like to say.

It is our diplomatic tradition to try to keep our dialogue open with all the countries, and we don't think it is appropriate to single out countries in

different ways. Engaging in dialogue has always been the Brazilian way to do foreign policy.

Q160 Abtisam Mohamed: Does that political non-alignment prevent you from identifying misinformation or disinformation when it happens and is attributed to other states?

Alexandre Brasil: No, of course not. As I said, the question of disinformation is a question of facts. You must remember that there are different countries spouting disinformation—not only the countries that we see mentioned here—so we are trying to deal with the matter domestically. We are also trying to deal with this matter of different actors in the foreign arena and trying to talk with everyone. We have been talking about that with BRICS, the UN and the G20.

Our President approved a very strong declaration on that in the G20. BRICS has a very strong declaration on that. Our President at COP30 just approved a very active effort to combat disinformation on climate change, for instance, so there are a lot of things that we are doing. We believe very strongly that the way to do that is not to name and shame but to engage in dialogue.

Q161 Abtisam Mohamed: We heard earlier that America has closed the Global Engagement Centre. What function does Brazil have to tackle FIMI?

Alexandre Brasil: Brazil is not the home of these companies. The countries that have the headquarters of the companies that are hosting misinformation are the ones that can help because they have more leverage on them. We are trying to apply the law of Brazil in Brazilian territory and trying to make people realise that they have to be more careful about what they read and how they interact. There is a lot of education that needs to be done. The decision of the United States Government is not something I can comment on.

Q162 Fleur Anderson: Just to follow up on that, is there a unit in the Brazilian Government that deals with this and, from your experience, what makes that effective in identifying foreign disinformation. We heard from the previous panel about foreign malign actors masquerading as local citizens. We were talking about America and the UK and how difficult that is to disentangle. Has the Brazilian Government unit also found that it is hard to disentangle where these threats are coming from?

Alexandre Brasil: There are different organs that are doing this. We have the observatory for digital policies, which was created to respond to the threats. We also have a specific tribunal for elections. They deal with this kind of misinformation that is directed at elections and reducing confidence and trust in our electoral system.

We have some specific parts of the judicial system that are working on trying to identify this, and trying to work with the companies so that we can reduce the amount of lies, disinformation and misinformation that is happening on the internet. As we all know, there is an ocean of things happening. It is very hard to keep track of, but there are people working



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on it. We recently had the visit of our national protection data agent, or our data protection national agent—sometimes we have to invert the names in Portuguese! They were here talking to Ofcom about its experience in how to deal with, for instance, teenagers and children online. The online world now touches every part of our lives. As a Government, you have to try to think about that in different realms. It is not one organ that is going to deal with that; there has to be a whole of Government approach on this.

Chair: Abtislam, do you have any other questions on climate disinformation?

Q163 **Abtislam Mohamed:** Yes. During his opening speech at COP30, President Lula warned that we are living in an era of fake news and misrepresentation. What forms of climate related disinformation do the Brazilian Government consider might be most harmful to international climate co-operation?

Alexandre Brasil: I understand that what our President said at the beginning of COP30 was directed at misinformation on climate change, one of the many obstacles we have to dealing with the danger that climate change represents to our lives. That is why we have been working throughout this year on the idea that we need to work on information integrity on climate change. We have the declaration on information integrity on climate change that was recently signed by 12 countries at COP, and we hope the United Kingdom will join us as soon as possible on that. We are not only creating a written commitment, but trying to engage researchers and people who are trying to identify whence this kind of misinformation comes and trying to combat that. That was for us what our President was saying at the COP30 presidency.

Chair: Unless any other members of the Committee have got any questions, I think that is us. Thank you very much, Mr Brasil, for coming across London today. If there is any further evidence you wish to give the Committee, please put it in writing.

Examination of witness

Witness: Nishant Lalwani

Q164 **Chair:** Thank you to our final witness today, Mr Lalwani. If you did not hear earlier, Dame Emily Thornberry, who typically chairs the Foreign Affairs Committee, is away today and sends her apologies. Could I ask you to introduce yourself?

Nishant Lalwani: I am Nishant Lalwani. I am the CEO of the International Fund for Public Interest Media.

Q165 **Chair:** Thank you. This session will consider global media freedoms. First, I want to ask, in quite broad terms, what your assessment is of media freedoms globally, and how has that changed recently.

Nishant Lalwani: All the data shows that media freedom has been declining over the last 13 to 15 years. That is primarily for two reasons.



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One is that there have been more attacks on journalists. There has been the rise of autocratic leaders around the world who have the same playbook of trying to undermine trustworthy, independent media and journalists and replace trustworthy journalism with their own narratives. It is a very cost-effective and impactful way of allowing propaganda to thrive and autocratic power to consolidate. That political tactic has been used everywhere from the Philippines to Georgia to other states.

The second reason is that there has been economic crisis in independent journalism. That started with the dotcom era and the attention economy, with advertising revenue moving away from newspapers and other sources of journalism to the tech platforms, which redirected it to entertainment and other sources of content. We have seen independent media go through what the UN Secretary-General called “media extinction” in many countries. In Brazil, I believe we have lost almost 1,000 media outlets in the last 10 years. Even in the UK, I believe we have lost more than 250 news titles in the last 15 years. When you leave that gap, you can have theoretical media freedom, but you do not have news outlets actually reporting in a pluralistic, fact-based way on what is happening in their communities. You have media freedom in theory, but not in practice.

Q166 Chair: You talk about that over the span of the last 10 to 15 years, Mr Lalwani. What about more recently? What about in the last few years?

Nishant Lalwani: I think those trends have accelerated. There are a number of factors leading to that, but one example is the lack of funding available for independent media. We estimate, with the OECD data, that just 0.2% of all foreign aid is spent on supporting independent media. With all the cuts that have come recently—obviously, USAID in January, but also the cuts around Europe and here—there is going to be much less money available to support trustworthy journalism. That has had a massive impact already in eastern Europe, for example, where our grantees at the International Fund have seen a 50% to 70% decrease in funding available. In Latin America, it is between a 15% and 40% decrease since the beginning of the year. This is happening now and very rapidly. There do not appear to be any estates or foundations that are seriously considering stepping up to fill these gaps.

The other factor, of course, is technological progress. Nina earlier did a great job of explaining how LLMs are being groomed by disinformation networks. Another way of looking at the problem is that, if you look at the large tech companies, they have done certain deals with media organisations such as Reuters, the Associated Press and Axel Springer to bring trustworthy news data into their LLMs. Those deals are almost all in English. Some are in French and one or two are in German, but I do not think there are any in Spanish. There are none in Portuguese, Hindi, Swahili or Bengali—other really enormous languages.

The quality of training and grounding data for LLMs in non-English languages is appalling, and the volume of misinformation and disinformation coming through LLMs—which are increasingly the way that people search for information, either directly or even through AI news



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summaries—is much higher in non-English languages. That is providing, via the Pravda network that Nina mentioned, a really easy way to spread propaganda and undermine media freedom.

Q167 **Chair:** Before I bring Aphra in, I want to ask about the languages that are used for training the models. You listed several that are used, but what about Russian, Chinese and perhaps Farsi?

Nishant Lalwani: In my statement just now, I was talking about largely the American and European tech companies, and what journalism they are using officially as grounding data and training data. The licensing deals that they have struck with an Axel Springer or Associated Press are largely for English, and there are a couple of European languages in there as well. Of course, they do crawl for data across many news organisations around the world—in many cases, without permission or compensation. There is also a lot of machine-translated text from different languages into English.

What we have seen is that the Chinese, Russian and other states are using the gaps in other languages, and the hunger that tech companies have to fulfil grounding and training requirements and to increase their datasets, and filling them with disinformation. We can talk about the other training models that are being built in China, Russia and so on—in particular in China—and their own datasets, but they are, of course, even more opaque than the American models.

Q168 **Aphra Brandreth:** Thank you for setting out so comprehensively the challenges for global media freedoms. You are the CEO and co-founder of the International Fund for public media interest. Could you set out the work that the organisation does to promote global media freedoms and counter disinformation?

Nishant Lalwani: Sure. It is the International Fund for Public Interest Media, as in media that serves the public interest. It is the first—and to date, the only—multilateral financing mechanism for journalism globally. Our primary function is to provide funding for independent journalism in the global south and in eastern Europe. We are funded by 10 states, including France, Sweden, Australia, Ghana—it recently made a commitment; it is the first African country to make one—Estonia and a number of others, as well as foundations like the Ford Foundation and Luminate, and certain companies as well.

Our goal is to create a truly multilateral coalition—we have 20 donors in total, and the numbers are growing all the time—that can take on some of the threats we are seeing around disinformation and ensure that media outlets have the funding to do independent reporting, but also have the funding to actually invest in evolving. Obviously, with AI and with the political threats facing journalism, media outlets need to invest in new ways of reaching audiences. It is very difficult for them to do that when they do not have the funding required even to pay their reporters and do the basics of journalism.

We have supported 122 media organisations across 31 countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Pacific islands, eastern Europe and so on. I will

give you an example of one of our larger programmes in Moldova. Over the last two years we have supported 10 news outlets in Moldova by putting in €2.3 million over that time. These include the top five news outlets as ranked by the Independent Journalism Centre there, as well as a number of other really innovative news outlets like Diez, which is doing social media-first youth engagement based on independent reporting.

We have had some terrific success stories there. For example, *Ziarul de Gardă*, which is the paper of record in Moldova with the largest circulation, did deep investigative journalism stories. "Serving Moscow" was their prize-winning story that uncovered Russian influence in Moldova, Russian vote-buying as well as money being paid to politicians and so on. That was a great story; it helped inform the people of Moldova. It also increased their circulation by about 30%, which is a very profitable exercise for them, and helped them be more relevant and increase their own reporting ability, especially outside the capital. That is the kind of funding that we do to ensure that power is being held to account and that news outlets have more money to invest in serving the public.

Q169 Aphra Brandreth: You have set out the work that you are doing and the countries that are providing funding. Given the funding challenges, to what extent do you think there is a need for a dedicated, multilateral initiative to fund independent journalism to combat FIMI and create a resilient information space? Where there are initiatives like the G7, NATO and the EU that might fund other initiatives, how are you making sure that you are not duplicating some of the efforts that they are going to?

Nishant Lalwani: Thank you for the question. We created the International Fund because we felt that there was a huge gap in terms of providing core financial support to newsrooms. There are some really important other multilateral efforts. Of course, there is the Media Freedom Coalition, which the UK created back in 2019. There is the Global Media Defence Fund, which focuses, as you know, on journalist safety. There isn't another multilateral effort that focuses on providing funding for journalism, so we are addressing the economic challenges—the challenges of financial viability for media outlets—which are increasing.

Many autocrats know that this is a tool that can be used against media outlets. In Georgia, the foreign agents law was created to try to stop funding to media outlets. In India, foreign funders are not allowed to fund journalism, because that starves them of oxygen. In the Philippines, Duterte tried to stop the funding lines to Rappler, a key source of independent news, because that starves them of their ability to keep working.

It is an active battle to try to ensure that funding exists, and there wasn't any multilateral fund or initiative that directly provided funding. Journalist safety, regulation and other pieces are crucial, but they are served by other entities. So first, we think this fund is crucial, which is why we started it, and it is unique in that way.



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Secondly, these challenges to independent news and the challenges of disinformation are so great that I don't think it is really possible for one state or one company to tackle them alone. We are talking about immensely powerful forces, whether it is Elon Musk or Russia's propaganda network and the budget that it puts behind it. Russia, we estimate, spends about \$1.5 billion every year on propaganda outside its borders. China's number is several orders of magnitude higher than that. Some years, it reaches \$8 billion to \$10 billion in total. The entire OECD spends less than \$500 million—in 2023, it spent less than \$500 million—so the 33 OECD countries combined spend less than a third of what Russia spends. We estimate, since USAID was shut down, another \$200 million loss, so that number is down to \$300 million.

Unless one single country can massively up its budget, which I know is not the climate right now, it is not really possible for individual states to tackle these threats. Whether it is tech regulation or the propaganda battle we are facing, it is much more cost-effective to tackle these things as a group, especially given our shared goals.

Q170 Fleur Anderson: I will come on to talk more about the effect of this in the UK, but first, could you outline what the threats are? With Russia spending so much money on this, what is in it for them? What are they hoping to achieve? What is the problem with all of this? I can understand it, but maybe you can just outline it a bit more. You have said that propaganda thrives, autocratic power consolidates. Can you say a bit more about what the bad outcomes of this are?

Nishant Lalwani: Absolutely. There are two or three primary impacts. The first and highest-level goals are about the destabilisation of democracies and the destabilisation of multilateralism and joint action. For example, Russia has—after what it has spent in Ukraine—spent more, in terms of disinformation, in France than in any other country. If you look at the stories that are being funded, they are smear campaigns against Macron and his family, anti-immigrant campaigns and campaigns in support of the rising right-wing power in France. That pattern has been repeated in other countries, but I think it is no coincidence that it is happening with a leader who is promoting European solidarity and multilateralism, because it is a divide-and-conquer strategy.

You can look at other parts of the world. To go back to the situation in Moldova, for example, there are very specific goals about Russian power. In the Transnistria region, for example, there is no independent media at all—it is a separatist region of Moldova—and a ton of Russian capital is going in to support everything from public services to politicians' pay packets. There, it is really about the Russian expansion of power on its borders. Certainly in European countries we are seeing Russia try to destabilise and fracture intergovernmental co-operation—and pretty successfully, in most cases.

Q171 Fleur Anderson: That is very concerning. In your experience, who are the main actors responsible for the transnational repression of journalism in the UK, and what are their tactics?



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Nishant Lalwani: I would call out a couple. One is quite simply paying for content and paying influencers to spread false narratives. We are seeing a pretty sophisticated network of individuals being paid to further anti-immigrant narratives and to support political campaigns, formal or otherwise, that oppose existing power structures.

In other parts of the world—less so in the UK—we see investment in buying up media houses. For example, all across Africa there has been extraordinary Chinese investment in terms of equity in and the ownership of independent newsrooms, including in South Africa, which has typically had a very good record on media freedom. Those assets are activated around elections or particular destabilisation campaigns, or around campaigns to acquire natural resources. Of course, there are some protections in the UK against ownership, which have been helpful, but financial influence is still there.

Q172 **Fleur Anderson:** Who is doing that? Is it the state actors we have been talking about?

Nishant Lalwani: Yes, primarily.

Fleur Anderson: Russia, China and Iran are the three that were mentioned in the previous panels. Who would you say is operating in the UK?

Nishant Lalwani: My knowledge is weaker on Iran, but certainly Russia and China.

Q173 **Fleur Anderson:** The Committee has received evidence calling for the UK to place China on the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme. Do you think that is necessary in the context of combating the transnational repression of journalism?

Nishant Lalwani: Yes, absolutely. It is long overdue.

Q174 **Fleur Anderson:** Could more be done? What other advice would you give?

Nishant Lalwani: In terms of protecting the UK's news infrastructure?

Fleur Anderson: Yes. What are the best things we can do here in the UK?

Nishant Lalwani: As I have mentioned, we have seen more than 250 news outlets and titles go out of business in the UK over the last 15 years—my local newspaper, the Cardiff *Echo*¹, went out of business a few years ago—and that leaves a huge gap in local reporting, as we saw in Stockport, in terms of facts being delivered quickly to the communities in which events are situated. Countries including Canada, France and Luxembourg have pretty sophisticated domestic news subsidies that allow local news to stay afloat. That is an important addition to think about here in the UK.

¹ Note by witness: When saying “my local newspaper, the Cardiff Echo”, I misspoke. What I meant to say was “my local newspaper, Sport Echo”.

Q175 Phil Brickell: Mr Lalwani, you have mentioned Georgia twice. In that context, I wanted to reflect on the fact that in 2023 the previous US Administration provided, by my reckoning, \$144 million-worth of support through USAID, of which \$3.5 million was for media and freedom of information support. Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced the closure of that agency in July. How have the cuts to USAID impacted media freedoms globally? Perhaps you could speak to countries such as Georgia, where we have seen Government crackdowns on freedom of information and on independent media operating in-country.

Nishant Lalwani: They have had an enormous impact, and I do not think we have even seen the full extent of it yet. We estimate, with OECD data, that the US provided about 21% of media support globally, in terms of foreign aid budgets supporting media. Although they have been cut, those cuts are still flowing through the system, because they supported, for example, Internews, which also had big programmes across eastern Europe. As I mentioned, we estimate that between 50% and 70% of revenue to outlets across eastern Europe has been cut because of USAID, which was the main donor.

That, plus the fact that the Government have consolidated power and made it illegal for external funders to fund media and forced many Georgian media organisations into exile over the past six to 12 months, means that there is much less accountability for Government actions in Georgia. There is clearly a huge and deepening reliance on Russian power and capital to support the aims of Russian expansion into the EU.

When we look at the countries across eastern Europe, many consider Georgia to be a case of we did too little, too late in supporting truly independent journalism. Even when USAID was around, a few million a year—and not all of that going directly into the reporting budgets of media organisations—was insufficient.

Q176 Phil Brickell: How has that announced closure of USAID impacted your work at the International Fund?

Nishant Lalwani: USAID was our biggest donor overall. Last month at the Paris Peace Forum we secured an additional €10 million from France. Once we receive that, France will be the biggest donor to the fund over time. We still did lose an enormous source of both capital and ongoing budgetary support for the fund. That has made fundraising and support for our grantees particularly difficult. Many of them have lost direct support or support that was coming from the US Government, and we have had to cut back on our support as well.

We have honoured all existing grant commitments and prioritised eastern Europe in our grant making, given some of the geopolitical threats and how reliant they were on USAID. Unfortunately, there are not many countries in the world right now that are increasing their support for media. France is an exception, despite their budget cuts and foreign aid cuts. They have increased their support; they will have supported us with

€24 million overall when we get this new commitment. But few other countries in Europe are doing that.

Q177 Fleur Anderson: How will the proposed cuts to the UK overseas development grants impact media freedoms globally? We have talked about the US cuts; what is your assessment of the UK reduction?

Nishant Lalwani: They are very concerning. If you look at OECD data, our analysis is that since 2019 and the Global Media Freedom conference hosted here, the UK has already cut \$30 million of funding in foreign aid spend on media. Any further cuts, especially given the broader and geopolitical environment, will be tremendously damaging to the sector.

The UK has historically been one of the leaders in supporting media freedom in journalism, as evidenced by the creation of the Media Freedom Coalition. There are a couple of other states, including the Nordic countries, that do this but the UK's role is unique. Any further cuts and I am not sure which other countries could even begin to step up.

Q178 Fleur Anderson: Do you have any further breakdown of the \$30 million of cuts? Which were the main countries that the UK was focusing its support on, in terms of media freedom?

Nishant Lalwani: I am not sure I actually have that data here, but I could write in with it, if that is okay?

Q179 Fleur Anderson: That would be very helpful. You talked at the beginning about the 20 donors that have come together in a coalition. Is that in response to these cuts, bringing together other countries prepared to do that funding to bridge some of the gap? What will be the remaining gaps? You have highlighted eastern Europe as where your funding priorities are. Is that where you are seeing the main gaps?

Nishant Lalwani: We created the International Fund in 2022, which was obviously long before the current US Administration or the cutting of USAID. We did it then because we felt that we needed radically to increase the amount of funding available for journalism. The economic threats to journalism have existed for 20 years, but they have accelerated recently. The political threats have certainly accelerated in the last 10 years. Even before USAID, we saw a huge need to increase the amount of funding. Our goal then was to go from 0.3% of foreign aid to about 1% of foreign aid, which would have introduced an extra \$1 billion or so of funding for journalism globally.

Unfortunately, we are going the other way. The cuts since the beginning of the year have created an additional \$200 million shortfall versus this time last year. Realistically, I do not really see how even that gap is going to be covered through OECD states. There are countries such as Spain and Qatar that have taken more of an active role in trying to support journalism and democracy, but it will not be to that extent. We are relying on countries that have a track record of supporting multilateralism and journalism and democracy, even if they cannot cover that gap, to do what they can in terms of financial support to media, and also to become



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political champions. That is ensure that countries—or even companies, because there is a huge need for the private sector to get involved—that have not historically supported these sectors step in.

Our funding coalition is pretty diverse. We have countries such as Taiwan, New Zealand and Estonia that have financially supported the fund. Ghana, which I mentioned earlier, made a financial commitment last month. We are looking at expanding the typical multilateral actors, or those who have supported multilateralism, to a much broader base. That is both because we need a broader coalition right now, as the threats are so vivid, and because of the financial constraints facing each individual state.

Q180 **Chair:** Can I just check, Mr Lalwani, whether the 30 million of cuts was pounds?

Nishant Lalwani: That was dollars, because the OECD counts in dollars.

Chair: Got it—okay. You have offered to write to us about the effect of those UK cuts on media freedom in recipient countries. If there is anything else that you did not cover today or you feel that you would like to give evidence to the Committee on, please just add that in writing as well. Thank you very much, Mr Lalwani, for giving evidence today.