

Introduction

Internews is an international non-profit organisation set up in 1982, with headquarters in London (Internews Europe) and Washington DC (Internews Network). A media development organisation, Internews works in more than 80 countries worldwide to support media and other information providers to deliver trustworthy and accurate information. Today, more than ever, the ability to provide such information depends on a safe, global internet and on local actors' ability to fight for their rights, design the technologies that will keep them connected to an uncensored web, and help communities, journalists, human rights defenders, and civil society organisations stay safe online.

Our global technology programs offer support and training on digital safety and digital rights, especially to ensure protection for the world's most vulnerable populations. From funding local internet rights advocacy initiatives and open-source technology development to designing user-centric approaches to organisational security, we focus on local and regional needs, and connect them at the global level to demand an inclusive, safe, and open web.

In addition, we provide technological support to media outlets and human rights defenders, and pilot new approaches to analysing and researching closing civic space.

Internews Europe has focused its response to this inquiry on the crucial role that a free and open internet plays in trustworthy provision of information, limiting our responses to questions 2,3,4,5 and 7. We would be happy to provide further evidence to the inquiry in person and have detailed this below.

1. *What technologies are shifting power? What is the FCDO's understanding of new technologies and their effect on the UK's influence?*

No answer.

2. *How can the FCDO engage with private technology companies to influence and promote the responsible development and use of data and new technologies?*

The impact of technology platforms across global information ecosystems is unprecedented, and the FCDO should engage actively with private technology companies at all levels of these organisations.

Despite their global reach, companies as large as the current social media giants often have a limited understanding of the specific impacts of their technologies on individual markets, and specially on global marginalised and vulnerable populations.

Engaging with regional teams – as well as technologist and not just policy teams – could give the FCDO a clearer insight into the actions of companies in developing and using data and new technologies, as well as helping to highlight the knowledge gaps of these companies.

The UK holds significant influence in relation to that of many individual countries from emerging markets, where the impacts of emerging technologies are often most keenly felt. The FCDO must consider the global impact of its engagement with private technology companies. There is opportunity for the FCDO to convene private sector companies to examine tech platform harms and impacts in underrepresented communities. Wherever possible, the FCDO should consider engaging with a wider range of stakeholders including diverse civil society emerging economies.

Technology companies deploy ‘policy’ teams to liaise with governments and other stakeholders, however confining FCDO engagement to these dedicated staff will limit effectiveness. While high level engagement with decision makers within companies is obviously desirable, access to product teams within companies is also important, given where many of the concerns with private sector practices lie.

3. How can the FCDO engage with private companies to encourage internationally accepted norms for the use of social media as well as to maximise the benefits for diplomacy presented by social media?

In addition to the recommendations above, the FCDO should be encouraged to meet civil society in countries where freedom of expression is under particular threat as a result of policies adopted by social media companies – or by government legislation meant to address “harms” associated with social media. This is because social media policies tend to be developed by social media companies through the lens of north American and western European experience and often fail to take into account the experiences faced by the majority population outside these areas.

The experience of social media is radically different for populations with limited freedom of expression, or with limited access to trustworthy information in accessible languages and formats. Given the size of the biggest technology platforms, hundreds of millions of global users meet this description. For those for whom expression and information access is limited, the relationship with and reliance on social media can be hard for those in countries like the UK, or indeed for the platform companies themselves, to understand. These same populations are increasingly among those targeted with disinformation and hate speech by some governments via social media. Internationally accepted norms for the use of social media must consider these most vulnerable users.

Furthermore, approaches – and resources devoted – to understanding the impact of mis- and disinformation and hate speech in a given context differ widely from country to country, meaning that social media companies' policy and process teams based in headquarter offices often lack the detailed knowledge needed to understand and address impacts of their policies among individual communities or within countries and regions.

The FCDO has clout to encourage internationally accepted norms for social media practice around the world. This means it is imperative the UK government understand the international impact of its own domestic policies. Well-intentioned policies and regulation championed in one jurisdiction may be replicated by authoritarian governments elsewhere and result in significant harm, as happened in the case of German law NetzDG, which was subsequently copied by Russia. At minimum, the FCDO should conduct risk assessments when championing international norms on social media that seek input and advice from civil society stakeholders, particularly those from underrepresented communities. Diversifying knowledge sources in the proposal of international norms is key to ensuring that they can be widely adopted and mitigate unintended harms to populations based in emerging markets.

4. How can the FCDO use its alliances to shape the development of, and promote compliance with, international rules and regulations relating to new and emerging technologies? Is the UK taking sufficient advantage of the G7 Presidency to achieve this?

The UK could significantly deepen its approach to the development of, and promote compliance with, international rules and regulations relating to new and emerging technologies by uniting the current security-focused lens to these issues with a greater focus on human rights and democracy aspects.

At the moment, the way in which the new FCDO departments have been constructed encourages a somewhat siloed approach in which cyber issues are considered in a unit that sits outside the Open Societies and Human Rights team. It is crucial that issues related to new cyber technologies are considered holistically, assessing their potential impacts from an international human rights framework and not simply a security one. Failure to do this risks the development of new international rules and regulations that could stifle the development and protection of open societies and promotion of democracy and the rule of law, which the UK has said is at the heart of its new foreign policy approach.

5. Should the Government's approach to meeting the challenges of technology nationalism and digital fragmentation be based on self-sufficiency, joining with allies or like-minded nations or supporting a coherent global framework?

In an increasingly interconnected world, the government's approach must be to start by working with like-minded allies to support a coherent global framework that guarantees the

highest possible standards in protecting and promoting universal human rights. On issues such as data security and storage, or regulation of speech, a model based on self-sufficiency will result in individual countries opting for practices that harm their own populations and have further negative impacts on regional and global norms and security. An effective global framework will have to consider and mitigate these risks.

6. What opportunities and challenges do cryptocurrency and distributed ledger technologies such as blockchain present for the way the FCDO does diplomacy (for example, enforcing sanctions), and how can the FCDO harness these technologies as new tools of influence or to promote compliance and transparency in international agreements?

No answer.

7. How can the FCDO help build resilience in civil society, in Government, business and foreign relations against the threats posed by abuses of new technologies by state and non-state actors? Can the FCDO support trust-building networks?

Evidence from Internews' 40 years of work in some of the most challenging environments for freedom of expression worldwide shows that supporting local actors is key to building resilience in civil society, in particular against the threats posed by abuses of new technologies by state and non-state actors. This is especially key at a time when states that had enjoyed some degree of political and democratic opening (for example, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and several countries in eastern Europe) are experiencing a dramatic reversal.

The FCDO should support organisations committed to the provision of trustworthy and accurate information. When it comes to misinformation and disinformation, quality independent media remain essential and the first line of defence. Against an array of challenges, some of them related to emerging technologies, ensuring populations have access to accurate, timely, locally relevant, local language news is critical.

Civil society is playing a key role in accountability around the use of technology, including the practices of both technology companies and state actors. While global advocacy bodies create headlines, it is local civil society and media that provide essential contextual expertise and cultural competency to identify and document local impact. Supporting diverse digital rights and tech accountability efforts should be a priority for the FCDO in this space

The impacts of a limited number of technology companies are felt across global contexts, and opportunities for civil society in these diverse geographies to collaborate and share experience is often limited. The FCDO should consider supporting initiatives that allow for networking, trust-building and collaboration between global civil society, as well as with civil society and the private sector. Individually emerging markets often struggle to receive

attention from private sector giants and demonstrating that the same specific issues have caused harm across different markets may result in more impactful advocacy.

8. What would the implications be of the dollar losing its dominant position for international transactions? Will digital currencies force a change in the balance of power?

No answer.

Oral evidence: Our CEO, Jodie Ginsberg, would be happy to give oral evidence to the committee. Ms. Ginsberg is a former journalist and member of the Media Freedom Coalition Consultative Network providing advice to the coalition, established by the UK and Canada to support media freedom globally.

Internews contact: Abdurahman Sharif, Senior Director of Partnerships and Outreach – Europe, e-mail: asharif@internews.eu

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