

DEMOS

EPISTEMIC SECURITY 2029

FORTIFYING THE UK'S
INFORMATION SUPPLY CHAIN
TO TACKLE THE DEMOCRATIC
EMERGENCY

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

Demos is the UK's leading cross-party think tank producing research and policies that have been adopted by successive governments for over 30 years. We exist to put people at the heart of policy making and to build a more collaborative democracy. Demos Digital, Demos's digital policy research hub, specialises in digital policy making to create a future in which technology is built for the good of people and democracy.

This paper is a contribution to Demos's strategic pillar on **Trustworthy Technology** working to build bridges between politicians, technical experts, and citizens to explore solutions, improve trust, and create policy to ensure our technologies benefit society. Democracies worldwide are under extreme pressure. Unprecedented levels of distrust in our institutions are fuelling democratic backsliding, the rise of extreme populists across the world and the upending of the norms of liberal democracy. This is exacerbated by the collapse of local news infrastructure in the UK leaving a void in trusted, relevant information. Meanwhile social media platforms control the flow and priority of information with profound impact on public discourse, and divisive rhetoric from home and abroad undermines trust, endangers public safety, and fuels political disengagement. All this is driving the wedge of dissatisfaction and discord deeper and making it all the more difficult to facilitate the kind of democratically enriching discourse needed to underpin well-functioning democracy.

The UK has an opportunity to resist the global trend toward democratic backslide but to do so we must urgently attend to the UK's epistemic security – to securing healthy and robust information supply chains within the UK and building resilience to adverse influences thereupon.

INTRODUCTION

THE DEMOCRATIC EMERGENCY

In 2025, with a new generation of authoritarians leading the governments of many of the world's most powerful nations, we are entering an era of democratic emergency. Unprecedented levels of distrust in our institutions are fuelling democratic backsliding, the rise of extreme populists across the world and the upending of the norms of liberal democracy that was once declared the 'end of history.'

The focus is now on the US, with the unpredictable nature of the Trump administration sending shockwaves around the world. We see the incoming US administration and close social media allies seeking blatantly and directly to influence the political discourse of other sovereign nations, including the UK.

There is no diplomatic or policy muscle memory to deal with this in the UK. It's not happened before with an ally.

This paper argues that the UK has a unique opportunity, indeed, an obligation, to resist the dark global trend toward democratic backslide. However, to do so we must urgently attend to the UK's epistemic security – to securing healthy and robust information supply chains within the UK and building resilience to adverse influences thereupon. Inadequate regulation for online platforms and the dismantled state of local news in the UK are particularly troublesome, despite the valiant efforts of some of the best journalists in the world.

Poor information supply chains are, of course, not the only factor contributing to the present democratic emergency. Like in the US, democracy in the UK is already under considerable pressure after a turbulent decade. Since 2015, we have had five Prime Ministers in a period studded with scandals that have damaged public trust,¹ while the Brexit referendum highlighted stark public and political divisions. The COVID-19 pandemic required extensive public health interventions, which some in the UK framed as authoritarian and anti-democratic.² Inflation, economic inequality, and the high cost of living have created financial precarity for many citizens.³ These challenges have fostered a growing disillusionment with the potential of the UK's democratic system to serve citizens' needs,⁴ leaving it vulnerable to manipulation and anti-democratic forces.

1 Huband-Thompson and Kapetanovic (2024) Trustwatch 2024: polling on trust". Demos. <https://demos.co.uk/blogs/trustwatch-2024-polling-on-trust/>; Clemence and King (2023) "Trust in politicians reaches its lowest score in 40 years." Ipsos. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-trust-in-professions-veracity-index-2023>

2 BBC Monitoring & BBC Reality Check (2021). 'What is the Great Reset - and how did it get hijacked by conspiracy theories?'. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-57532368>. Also International IDEA (2021). 'Democracy faces perfect storm as the world becomes more authoritarian'. International IDEA. <https://www.idea.int/news/democracy-faces-perfect-storm-world-becomes-more-authoritarian>

3 Cribb & Waters (2024). 'Seven key facts about UK living standards'. Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/seven-key-facts-about-uk-living-standards>

4 Knight et al. (2024). "'It can't get any worse": An online forum listening exercise revealing how people talk about poverty now'. Demos. <https://demos.co.uk/research/it-cant-get-any-worse-an-online-forum-listening-exercise-revealing-how-people-talk-about-poverty-now/>

However, this has occurred against a backdrop of threats to the UK's information supply chain worsening, driving the wedge of dissatisfaction and discord deeper and making it all the more difficult to facilitate the kind of democratically enriching discourse needed to underpin well-functioning democracy.

Local news infrastructure in the UK has been decimated leaving a void in trusted information about the issues most locally relevant to citizens – a vacuum that can be filled with speculation and heated debate on social media and messaging platforms, fuelling distrust and at risk of spiraling towards conspiracism.⁵ Private social media companies own the primary mode of communication between citizens and between citizens and government. They decide what information is presented and prioritised on their platforms, having a profound impact on the shape and flavor of public political discourse. Powerful voices both domestically and internationally target UK citizens and elected representatives with inflammatory smears and harmful, ideological rhetoric that risks public safety, sows discord and fuels political disengagement.

In both the global democratic emergency and the challenges to the information supply chain, the UK also has some unique opportunities and strengths. It has elected a progressive government at a time when other countries are turning to autocracy. It has some unparalleled strengths in its information supply chain, not least in public service broadcasters and a diverse and independent media industry despite its economic travails. Its people still have faith in the electoral process.⁶

But those things cannot be taken for granted.

This paper is a call to action to fortify the UK's epistemic security to help preserve democracy. In 2025, we are reaching a tipping point in changing news consumption and novel threats from politicians who seek to disrupt through malice or by blunder. We need to upgrade our efforts to protect the modern information supply chain in the way that traditional media was more closely and carefully managed.

Securing the UK's information supply chain and building resilience to adverse influence on our democratic processes needs to be a central mission of this government. There is no hope for desperately needed national renewal without it.

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⁵ Demos (2024) Driving Disinformation: UK Policy Briefing. https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/LTNs-Policy-Briefing_UK.pdf/; Demos (2024) Conspiracy Loops. https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Conspiracy-Loops_Report.pdf

⁶ Electoral Commission (2024) "Public attitudes 2024". <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/public-attitudes/public-attitudes-2024>

CHAPTER ONE

THE CASE FOR EPISTEMIC SECURITY

Coined in 2020 by researchers at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, University of Cambridge, and The Alan Turing Institute (including the lead author of this paper), Epistemic Security describes the safety and resilience of democratically enriching information supply chains.⁷

Epistemology is the study of knowledge. So if financial security is about keeping our money safe and national security is about keeping our country safe, epistemic security is about keeping our knowledge safe. It describes the steps we take to protect the processes by which information is produced, modified, distributed, appraised, and ultimately used to inform decisions and guide action.

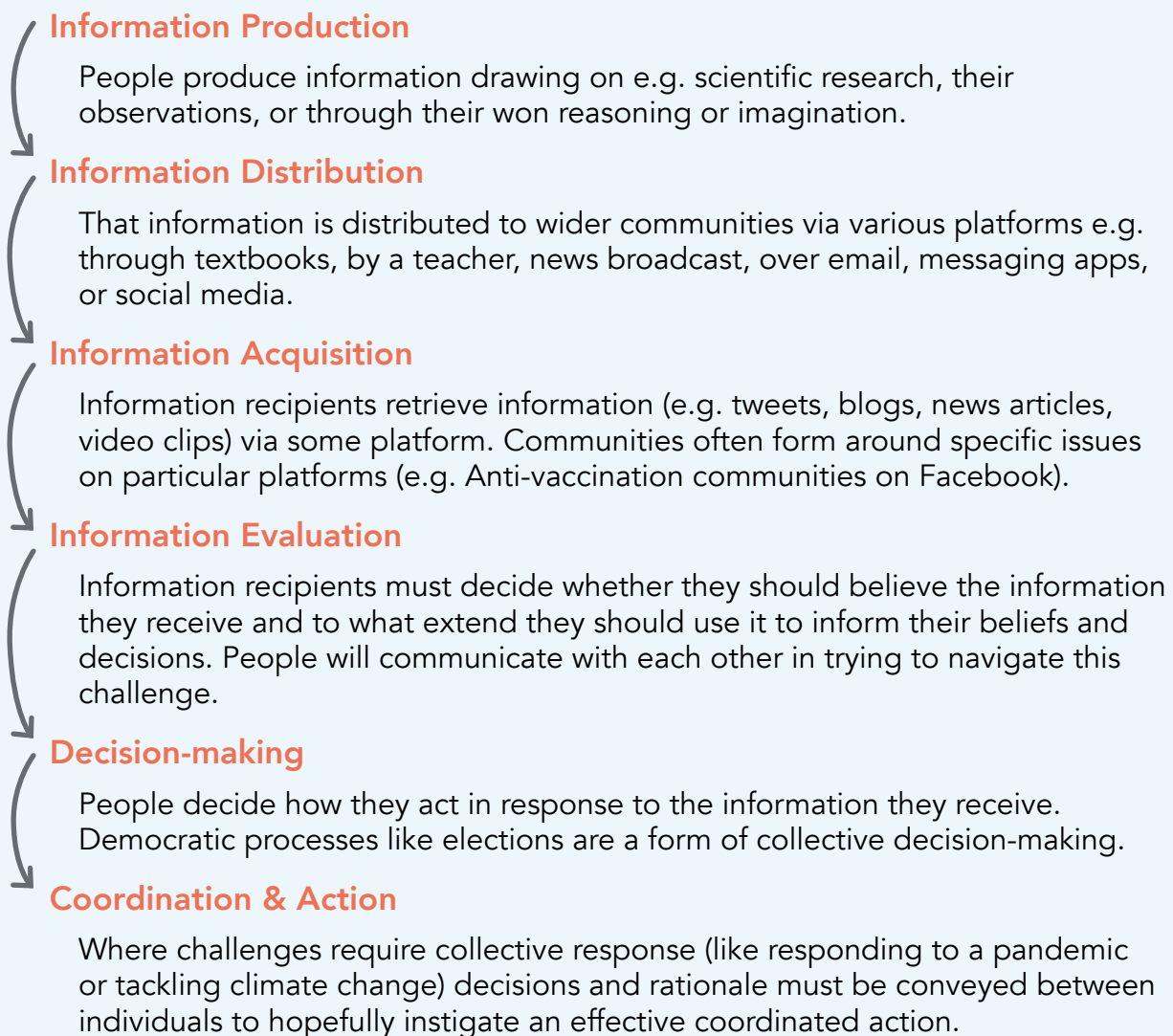
From a national security perspective, epistemic security is about securing our information supply chains, just as we would other critical resources like oil, gas, or semiconductors. Reliable decision-guiding information – and our ability to use it well – is the lifeblood of well-functioning democracy.

⁷ Seger et al. (2020). 'Tackling threats to informed decision-making in democratic societies: Promoting epistemic security in a technologically-advanced world'. The Alan Turing Institute. <https://www.turing.ac.uk/news/publications/tackling-threats-informed-decision-making-democratic-societies>

INFORMATION SUPPLY CHAINS

From start to finish an information supply chain runs from the initial production of information, e.g. by scientific investigation, observation, or imagination, through the communication of information across different platforms, to the use of that information by individuals to inform their opinions, decisions, and actions.

INFORMATION SUPPLY CHAIN⁸



Each step in the supply chain is a potential point of vulnerability – a spot where an adversarial actor, foreign influencer or unwitting blunderer could interfere, sowing discord, driving polarisation, undermining elections, eroding trust in government, or otherwise putting democracy under pressure.

8 Adapted from Seger et al.'s (2020) depiction of an 'epistemic process'.

Without reliable information supply chains, democracies cannot function well; people cannot engage in productive private or public deliberation to make informed decisions about how to vote in elections or referendums or about how to respond to crises and complex challenges like pandemics and climate change. Governments too must have access to and the ability to confirm the reliability of decision-guiding information in order to make the best decisions in service of citizens' interest thus upholding their end of the democratic social contract.

So where our information supply chains come under threat, we must protect the beneficial institutions that we have and reinforce where we are weak. We must build our resilience internally, and make ourselves robust to threats both domestic and international.

As outlined in the next section, information supply chains in the UK are indeed under threat, and existing policy is not up to the task of offering adequate protection to underpin efforts to preserve our liberal democracy.

CHAPTER TWO

THE UK'S EPISTEMIC CRISIS

In the following section we summarise four intersecting conditions which have yielded critical vulnerabilities in UK information supply chains: (1) mass digitisation of communication, (2) weakened news ecosystems, (3) heightened risk of foreign influence, and (4) regulatory shortcomings. Combined, these conditions exacerbate the broader societal challenges facing UK democracy and hinder the potential for resisting democratic backslide.

2.1 THE DIGITISATION OF EVERYTHING

Since the advent of digital computers in the mid-20th century, the world has faced a fundamental change: digital technologies are everywhere. The rapid “digitisation of everything”⁹ accelerating into the 21st century has had profound implications for our information supply chains – having the dual effect of decentralising information production and dissemination away from traditional media gatekeepers while centralising power and influence to digital infrastructure controllers.

Decentralised Communication

Decentralised communication has improved information accessibility for many, but at the same time poses challenges for maintaining information supply chain safety. Previous analogue technologies and institutional arrangements favoured information supply chains in which a small number of institutions would broadcast to very large audiences and could exercise strong editorial control. However, digital technologies have enabled the mass adoption of peer-to-peer communication and have allowed ordinary people to bypass institutional gatekeepers.

⁹ Vieira (2017). ‘The digitalisation of everything: How the US economy is going digital at hyper speed’. London School of Economics. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2017/11/22/the-digitalisation-of-everything-how-the-us-economy-is-going-digital-at-hyper-speed/>

In some ways this has **democratised information**. Everyone with a digital device and a network connection is a media producer. Individual citizens are empowered to communicate, coordinate, share opinions, and report on the behaviour of those in power.

But in other ways it has splintered our narratives and created confusing echo chambers. It has led to the formation of a fierce **attention economy**,¹⁰ with vicious competition for eyeballs on the internet, creating more sources of information and distraction, and diluting democratically important information. Overwhelmed by content, people struggle to decide where to look and what to believe. Information adversaries and blunderers abound, where adversaries seek to intentionally spread falsities and manipulate truths while blunderers unwittingly pick up and amplify these narratives and otherwise confuse the information space.¹¹ In the war for attention in this digital era, human beings are woefully ill-equipped.

The expansion of digital technologies has also led to a vast new **'attack surface'** – to borrow a term from cybersecurity – for those seeking to disrupt healthy democratic processes.¹² Every point of digitisation presents a new vulnerability to malign actors. And the vulnerabilities are many: from hacking against web hosting services, to surveillance by authoritarian regimes against activists, to the mass dissemination of propaganda via social media. As former European Parliamentarian Marietje Schaake puts it, "the digitisation of everything has enabled **the weaponisation of everything**."¹³

Centralised Power

Meanwhile, the digitisation of everything has simultaneously served to centralise power over digital infrastructure in ways that are decidedly un-democratic with pressing implications for states' ability to secure their information supply chains. Controllers of digital infrastructure – from internet satellites to social media platforms – have outsized control over the means of information exchange worldwide. This gives them incredible power over geopolitics and over states but with little to no democratic accountability.

For example, allegedly Elon Musk decided to cut off the Starlink satellite internet service near Crimea in order to hobble a Ukrainian drone attack on Russian occupying vessels.¹⁴ Musk's reasoning for cutting off the service was that the risk of Russian nuclear retaliation was too high. Musk himself has said that the satellites were "not activated" in the region, implying he may have chosen not to activate them.¹⁵ Regardless of which decisions Musk made – to deactivate or not to activate the internet service – or whether one agrees with the outcome, the fact that such a decision rested with an unelected private citizen demonstrates the vulnerable position states find themselves in.

Unilateral content moderation decisions by major social media platforms also fall under a similar category of profound yet unaccountable private influence of information ecosystems with knock-on effects on key aspects of democratic life. Facebook, X/Twitter, and TikTok currently provide the stages on which public political discourse is playing out, but the private companies and individuals that run them can decide how those conversations take shape and what quality of information is served to the public. For example, during the January 6th riots, Meta, Twitter and other similar platforms declined to take significant steps before and during the riots in

10 Simon et al. (1971). 'Designing Organisations for an Information Rich World'. In Computers, communications, and the public interest. Johns Hopkins Press.

11 Seger et al. (2020). 'Tackling threats to informed decision-making in democratic societies: Promoting epistemic security in a technologically-advanced world'. The Alan Turing Institute.

12 An attack surface is the set of vulnerabilities, pathways, or methods that an adversarial actor may use to infiltrate, manipulate, or disrupt a digital system. IBM (No date) "What is an attack surface?" IBM. <https://www.ibm.com/topics/attack-surface>, https://csrc.nist.gov/glossary/term/attack_surface

13 Schaake, M. (2024). The Tech Coup: How to save democracy from Silicon Valley, p. 69.

14 Borger (2023). 'Elon Musk ordered Starlink to be turned off during Ukraine offensive, book says'. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/sep/07/elon-musk-ordered-starlink-turned-off-ukraine-offensive-biography>

15 @ElonMusk (2023). 'The Starlink regions in question were not activated. SpaceX did not deactivate anything.' Twitter. <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1699913329261813809>

order to reduce the spread of extremist content.¹⁶ This was despite internal warnings raised by employees in the days and weeks prior.¹⁷ We are now seeing unilateral decisions by X/Twitter, Meta, and Google to make significant cuts to their trust and safety operations, including by axing entire teams dedicated to fact checking and reviewing harmful content.^{18,19}

2.2 WEAKENED NEWS ECOSYSTEMS

In our modern digitised world, communications are dispersed and often overwhelming, while control over the means of communication is heavily concentrated in the hands of a powerful few. At the same time, and to some extent consequently, traditional news ecosystems are weakening and taking with them a critical pillar of robust information supply chains.

Traditional news media and the professional codes of good journalistic practice have historically played a critical role both in selecting and curating information that is not just in the public interest, but also verified. This role has crucially helped citizens prioritise, view and consume the most trustworthy and important information for their day-to-day decision-making, and engage in productive democratic discourse. For example, a recent study from Ofcom found that people who regularly access public service broadcast news tend to be more knowledgeable about news facts, have higher levels of trust in democratic institutions, and are more likely to have voted in the 2019 general election compared to people who do not. They also tend to be less polarised in their opinions and political positions.²⁰

However, the radical shifts in our information supply chain in the wake of digitisation have significantly disrupted the supply of good quality information, along with other corresponding trends in news consumer behaviour.

Globally, researchers are noting an increase in news avoidance and news fatigue.²¹ While in 2015, 70% of the UK public suggested that they were generally interested in the news, this has fallen a staggering 32 percentage points to 38% in 2024.²² At the same time, 66% say they have no to low trust of the news media.²³ Low trust and engagement is likely to be driven in part by damaging incidents such as the UK phone hacking scandal,²⁴ in which journalists from several outlets hacked into the voicemail of prominent figures. But the larger effect is likely to link to how people consume news, and in turn how news consumption habits drive down news quality and coverage.

71% of UK adults access their news online, and over half (52%) now use social media platforms to access news.²⁵ On a surface level, this has a direct impact on the quality of information people access. Search and social media ranking algorithms operate on an 'engagement-

16 The Guardian (2021). 'Facebook missed weeks of warning signs over Capitol attack, documents suggest'. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/oct/23/facebook-whistleblower-january-6-capitol-attack>

17 Zakrzewski et al. (2023). 'What the Jan. 6 probe found out about social media, but didn't report'. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/01/17/jan6-committee-report-social-media/>

18 Paul (2023) "Reversal of content policies at Alphabet, Meta and X threaten democracy, warn experts" The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2023/dec/07/2024-elections-social-media-content-safety-policies-moderation>

19 Kaplan (2025). 'More Speech and Fewer Mistakes'. Meta. <https://about.fb.com/news/2025/01/meta-more-speech-fewer-mistakes/>

20 Whilst these results cannot prove a causal relationship, they highlight a statistically significant correlation between accessing public service broadcast news and higher levels of trust in democratic institutions. Ofcom (2025). 'The relationship between the use of PSBs for news and societal outcomes: An empirical analysis.' <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/public-service-broadcasting/the-relationship-between-the-use-of-psbs-for-news-and-societal-outcomes-an-empirical-analysis/>

21 Newman et al. (2024). 'Digital News Report'. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, p26 https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/RISJ_DNR_2024_Digital_v10%20lr.pdf

22 Ibid

23 ONS (2023) "Trust in government, UK: 2023" <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/trustinggovernmentuk/2023>

24 Fenton (2016). 'The scandalous power of the press: Phone hacking in the UK'. In *The Routledge Companion to Media and Scandal*. Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781351173001-34/scandalous-power-press-natalie-fenton>;

Waterson (2021). 'News of the World: 10 years since phone-hacking scandal brought down tabloid'. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/jul/10/news-of-the-world-10-years-since-phone-hacking-scandal-brought-down-tabloid>

25 Ofcom (2024) "News consumption in the UK: 2024". <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand-research/tv-research/news/news-consumption-2024/news-consumption-in-the-uk-2024-report.pdf?v=379621>

based paradigm’ – prioritising information almost exclusively on user engagement metrics and advertising revenue.²⁶ On social media platforms, official government accounts and news media are presented as equal information producers as private citizens, private companies, or even automated ‘bots’. Whether true or false, everything is just ‘content’ to be served in an algorithmically-managed feed, with attention and prioritisation often given to content placed higher in a feed rather than, for example, the reliability of a source.²⁷ This presents a significant challenge to national and local government communications departments as well as responsible news media organisations seeking to share information that is in the public interest.²⁸

Accessing news through social media platforms and search engines has also placed the traditional **news business model under severe pressure**, resulting in both reduced news quality and coverage. To generate income online, legacy media organisations have turned to digital advertising and click-based models, but such a shift has led to accusations of lowered journalistic standards as some outlets lean toward more click-bait style content production to attract viewers on social media.²⁹

However, ad revenues are volatile – subject to ever-changing content policy on tech platforms³⁰ – and as the public has shifted to consuming media primarily through digital devices and platforms, analogue formats such as print media have ceased to generate advertising revenues significant enough to sustain quality journalism on their own.³¹ In the UK, national newspaper sales have fallen by nearly two-thirds over the last two decades³² resulting in newspaper closures, industry consolidation, centralisation of resources, reductions in editorial teams and relocation of journalists.³³

The effect has been particularly dire for local news infrastructure. Over 270 local print titles have vanished over the last 15 to 20 years,³⁴ and 38 local authorities have been classified as ‘local news deserts’ that are not served by local news outlets.³⁵ Meanwhile only a little over half of UK citizens say their needs with regards to local news are being met.³⁶ Where local news is provided, citizens report an absence of relevant content, for example, regarding the closure of key public services, pertinent council meetings, or large infrastructure changes.³⁷

26 McDevitt (2006) “In Defense of Autonomy: A Critique of the Public Journalism Critique.” *Journal of Communication* Vol 53 (1); Zuboff (2018) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*; Simon (2022) “Uneasy bedfellows: AI in the news, platform companies and the Issue of Journalistic Autonomy.” *Digital Journalism*, 10(10), 1832–1854; Demos (2023) *Drivers of Digital Discord*. <https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Drivers-of-Digital-Discord.pdf>

27 Lumen Research (2023) “Media Plurality Online: Attention to News on Social Media”. <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/multi-sector/media-plurality/2024/annex-1-attention-to-news-on-social-media.pdf?v=356798>

28 We note this as a particular challenge for local governments with low communications budgets seeking to share accurate information with citizens relating to the Low Traffic Neighbourhood policy (See Box 2).

29 Frampton (2015). ‘Clickbait: The changing face of online journalism’. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-34213693>; Dvorkin (2016). ‘Column: Why click-bait will be the death of journalism’. PBS News. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/economy/what-you-dont-know-about-click-bait-journalism-could-kill-you>; Newman & Fletcher (2017). ‘Bias, Bullshit and Lies: Audience Perspectives on Low Trust in the Media’. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/bias-bullshit-and-lies-audience-perspectives-low-trust-media>

30 Sentance (2017) “Should Google be more transparent with its updates”. Search Engine Watch. <https://www.searchenginewatch.com/2017/05/02/should-google-be-more-transparent-with-its-updates/>

31 Ofcom (2024). “News consumption in the UK: 2024”. <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand-research/tv-research/news/newsconsumption-2024/news-consumption-in-the-uk-2024-report.pdf>

32 Mayhew (2022) “UK national newspaper sales slump by two-thirds in 20 years amid digital disruption.” *PressGazette*. <https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/uk-national-newspaper-sales-slump-by-two-thirds-in-20-years-amid-digital-disruption/>;

33 Abernathy PM (2023) News deserts: a research agenda for addressing disparities in the United States. *Media and Communication* 11(3): 290–29; Barclay et al (2024) “Local news as political institution and the repercussions of ‘news deserts’: A qualitative study of seven UK local areas.” *Journalism*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/14648849241272255>

34 Ponsford (2024) “Colossal decline of UK regional media since 2007 revealed.” *Press Gazette*. <https://pressgazette.co.uk/publishers/regional-newspapers/colossal-decline-of-uk-regional-media-since-2007-revealed/>; Turner (2022) “UK local newspaper closures: launches in digital and print balance out decline. *Press Gazette* <https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/uk-local-newspaper-closures-2022/>

35 Public Interest News Foundation (2024) “UK Local News Mapping Report”. <https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/local-news-map-report-2024>

36 Newman et al. (2024). ‘Digital News Report’. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. p30. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/RISJ_DNR_2024_Digital_v10%20lr.pdf

37 Demos (2024) “Driving Disinformation: disinformation, democratic disformation and the Low Traffic Neighbourhood policy - a portrait of policy failure” <https://demos.co.uk/research/driving-disinformation-democratic-deficits-disinformation-and-low-traffic-neighbourhoods-a-portrait-of-policy-failure/>; Barclay et al (2024) “Local news as political institution and the repercussions of ‘news deserts’: A qualitative study of seven UK local areas.” *Journalism*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/14648849241272255>

Weakening news ecosystems and the decline of local news infrastructure in particular presents an extremely troubling vulnerability in the UK's information supply chain with profound implications for UK democracy. Where people do not hear their concerns discussed or the issues affecting their daily lives taken seriously, there is room for dissatisfaction with government and understandable backlash. So the role of news media for democracy is not just in fostering a well-informed populace to underpin democratic discourse, but in providing an essential link between government action and citizen observation. **Without a robust news ecosystem, trust dwindles, citizens disengage, and an information void is left to be filled by speculation or malign influence.** This is a dynamic Demos research observed surrounding Low Traffic Neighborhood (LTN) measures in Rochdale, Enfield, and Oxford where the decimated local news infrastructures left an information void soon filled with speculation, conspiracism, and distrust of local and national government (see below for a case study summary).

LOCAL NEWS VOIDS CONTRIBUTE TO LOW TRAFFIC NEIGHBOURHOOD (LTN) CONSPIRACY SPECULATION

A recent Demos study highlighted how gaps in communication from local government combined with a lack of local news coverage led to significant frustration and confusion surrounding the introduction of Low Traffic Neighbourhood (LTN) policies.³⁸ The severe backlash against LTNs included rumours swirling online that shadowy elites were forcing 15-minute city climate lockdowns on local communities and of councillors undemocratically installing surveillance regimes on motorists. Digital media analysis indicated an explosion of posts that could be considered inaccurate and also threatening to trust in democracy between 2023 and 2024. Over a quarter (28%) of posts that related to LTNs online that had received high engagement over this period could be described as such. For example, local councils were accused of being 'authoritarian' in their implementation of LTN schemes and compared to 'Nazi Germany' or 'Communist China'. Those who vandalised LTN barriers were celebrated as 'freedom fighters' while communities were said to be the victims of a 'Great Reset'.

This deterioration in the quality of debate online played out offline too. In Rochdale, new planters installed by the Council – used to divert traffic – were set on fire by residents, while councillors in Enfield received death threats and neo-Nazi groups in Oxford joined rallies and called residents 'guinea pigs'. When engaging with residents based in these communities, both those who opposed and supported the policy commented on a lack of factual information about the policy being communicated either by the local council or the local newspaper in a timely way. As a result, many residents suggested their local council was sharing inaccurate or skewed information which was in turn leading them to distrust both the council and the policy they were seeking to implement. In many cases, and in the absence of authoritative information, residents felt that they needed to turn to their local Next Door and Facebook groups (which one resident described as a "cess-pit") to gain information and yet, as a result, struggled to gain the quality information they needed.

38 Demos (2024) "Driving Disinformation: disinformation, democratic disformation and the Low Traffic Neighbourhood policy - a portrait of policy failure" <https://demos.co.uk/research/driving-disinformation-democratic-deficits-disinformation-and-low-traffic-neighbourhoods-a-portrait-of-policy-failure/>

2.3 FOREIGN INFLUENCE AND THE GLOBAL AUTHORITARIAN SHIFT

The combination of the consequences of digitisation, decentralised communication, an unaccountable tech oligarchy, and a weakened news ecosystem has created a window of opportunity for actors seeking to disrupt the UK's democratic system. This moment of vulnerability threatens to intersect with another troubling trend: a rise in authoritarianism and democratic backsliding worldwide³⁹ and an increase in efforts from these nations to influence UK politics.

Authoritarian shift

In Europe, Hungary under Viktor Orbán has faced electoral interference and suppression of rights, earning it the EU Parliament's label of a "hybrid regime of electoral autocracy".⁴⁰ Italy's right-wing populist leader Giorgia Meloni,⁴¹ Austria's far-right Freedom Party,⁴² and Germany's far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)⁴³ have grown steadily in popularity, signaling a broader populist shift. Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has also seen weakened democratic institutions, with the Democracy Index classifying it as a "Moderate Autocracy".⁴⁴

Meanwhile Russia has fully embraced nationalist authoritarianism, centralising power under Vladimir Putin, restricting civil liberties,⁴⁵ and invading Ukraine. It has also supported authoritarian rulers in Syria⁴⁶ and Belarus,⁴⁷ and appears keen to control a 'sphere of influence' across Eastern Europe and Central Asia.⁴⁸

Beyond Europe, India under Narendra Modi has seen rising political violence,⁴⁹ attacks on political opposition⁵⁰ and discrimination against Muslims.⁵¹ In the Philippines, actions taken by former president Rodrigo Duterte and his successor Bongbong Marcos eroded democratic

39 Geddes (2024). 'How New Dictatorships Begin: Change through Time'. In *The Oxford Handbook of Authoritarian Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/55828/chapter-abstract/441351811?>

40 European Parliament (2022). 'MEPs: Hungary can no longer be considered a full democracy'. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220909IPR40137/meps-hungary-can-no-longer-be-considered-a-full-democracy>

41 Stille (2024). 'The shapeshifter: who is the real Giorgia Meloni?'. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/sep/19/shapeshifter-who-is-the-real-giorgia-meloni-italy-prime-minister> BBC (2022) "Who is Giorgia Meloni? The rise to power of Italy's new far-right PM." <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-63351655>

42 Bell (2025). 'Austrian far-right party tasked with forming coalition'. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/clykz8kk9xo>

43 Connolly (2025). 'AfD launches manifesto as campaign season for German election begins'. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/12/afd-launches-manifesto-as-campaign-season-for-german-election-begins>

44 Economist Intelligence (2023). 'Democracy Index 2023'. <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023/>

45 Freedom House (2025). 'Russia: Country Profile'. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia>; Kovalev (2023). 'Russia Is Returning to Its Totalitarian Past'. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/01/russia-putin-wagner-repression-authoritarian-totalitarian-arrests-ukraine-war/>; Vock (2022). 'How Russia descended into authoritarianism'. *The New Statesman*. <https://www.newstatesman.com/international-politics/2022/03/how-russia-descended-into-authoritarianism>

46 Rahman-Jones (2017). 'Why does Russia support Syria and President Assad?'. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-39554171>; Petkova (2020). 'What has Russia gained from five years of fighting in Syria?'. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/10/1/what-has-russia-gained-from-five-years-of-fighting-in-syria>

47 Masters (2023). 'The Belarus-Russia Alliance: An Axis of Autocracy in Eastern Europe'. *Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://www.cfr.org/background/belarus-russia-alliance-axis-autocracy-eastern-europe>; Shykhutsina (2023). 'Unlocking the Puzzle of Authoritarian Persistence in Belarus: the Role of the EU and Russia'. *Institute for International Political Economy Berlin*. https://www.ipe-berlin.org/fileadmin/institut-ipe/Dokumente/Working_Papers/ipe_working_paper_218.pdf

48 Rumer (2023). 'Russia's Wartime Foreign Policy: Regional Hegemony in Question'. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/08/russias-wartime-foreign-policy-regional-hegemony-in-question?lang=en>; EU vs. Disinfo (2024). 'Come play 'sphere of influence' ... this time in Central Asia'. *Eu vs. Disinfo*. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/come-play-sphere-of-influence-this-time-in-central-asia/>

49 ACLED (2024). 'India Votes 2024: A resurgent Hindu nationalism sets the stage for the upcoming elections, driving communal violence'. *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED)*. <https://acleddata.com/2024/04/28/india-votes-2024-a-resurgent-hindu-nationalism-sets-the-stage-for-the-upcoming-elections-driving-communal-violence/>

50 Amnesty International (2024). 'India: Crackdown on opposition reaches a crisis point ahead of national elections'. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/03/india-crackdown-on-opposition-reaches-a-crisis-point-ahead-of-national-elections/>

51 Maizland (2024). 'India's Muslims: An Increasingly Marginalized Population'. *Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://www.cfr.org/background/india-muslims-marginalized-population-bjp-modi>

institutions,⁵² facilitated extrajudicial killings by police,⁵³ and threatened journalists.⁵⁴ In Brazil, the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro closed with the revelation of an alleged coup plot to prevent the peaceful transfer of power.⁵⁵

Most notably, the US, once considered a bastion of democracy, has seen a notable rise in anti-democratic activity since Donald Trump was first elected in 2016. This period has been marked by election interference, political violence, and media attacks as well as tactical blundering to obfuscate news stories – like Trump’s wild assertions about the US taking over Gaza effectively blinding media coverage and shifting the narrative about the Israel-Hamas ceasefire. The Trump administration’s efforts to undermine the 2020 election results further intensified concerns,⁵⁶ culminating in the January 6th Capitol riots in 2021.⁵⁷ In 2017, the US was downgraded to a “flawed democracy” by the Economist Intelligence Unit,⁵⁸ and in 2021 the International IDEA think tank added it to its list of “backsliding” countries.⁵⁹

Rising threat of foreign influence

Against this backdrop of international democratic decline, the UK faces a high risk of attempts at political interference by actors from abroad pushing anti-democratic agendas. These actors fit into ‘traditional’ categories of national security threats, such as adversarial states or terrorist networks as well as non-traditional actors, including powerful individuals keen to pursue their own agendas.

Notably, Russian foreign influence activity appears to have returned to levels associated with the Soviet Union during the Cold War including using covert information operations and campaigns known as ‘dezinformatsiya’.^{60,61,62} Activities include hacking,⁶³ attacks on vital digital

52 Niñalga (2024). ‘People Power Euphoria to Perilous Erosion: The long, winding tale of democratic backsliding in the Philippines’. Democratic Erosion Consortium. <https://www.democratic-erosion.com/2024/05/25/people-power-euphoria-to-perilous-erosion-the-long-winding-tale-of-democratic-backsliding-in-the-philippines/>

53 Amnesty International (2020). ‘Philippines: UN must intensify pressure to end killings as impunity reigns’. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/09/philippines-un-pressure-end-killings/>; Ratcliffe (2024). ‘Rodrigo Duterte’s ‘war on drugs’ in the Philippines – explained in 30 seconds’. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/04/rodrigo-dutertes-war-on-drugs-in-the-philippines-explained-in-30-seconds-ntwnfb>

54 National Union of Journalists (2024). ‘Philippines: journalists under attack despite government commitments’. <https://www.nuj.org.uk/resource/philippines-journalists-under-attack-despite-government-commitments.html>

55 Walker (2024). ‘Brazil police formally accuse Bolsonaro of alleged coup plot’. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c98e29yvl88o>, <https://www.npr.org/2024/11/27/nx-s1-5207832/brazil-bolsonaro-coup-election>

56 Halpert (2024). ‘Trump “resorted to crimes” to overturn 2020 election, prosecutors say’. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c93pdlg4dlno>

57 BBC News (2023). ‘Capitol riots timeline: What happened on 6 January 2021?’. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-56004916>

58 Economist Intelligence (2017). ‘Democracy Index 2017: Free speech under attack’. https://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=DemocracyIndex2017; The Data Team (2017). ‘Declining trust in government is denting democracy’. The Economist. <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2017/01/25/declining-trust-in-government-is-denting-democracy>

59 International IDEA (2021). ‘Global State of Democracy Report 2021: Building Resilience in a Pandemic Era’. <https://www.idea.int/gsod-2021/global-report/>; Berger (2021). ‘U.S. listed as a ‘backsliding’ democracy for first time in report by European think tank’. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/11/22/united-states-backsliding-democracies-list-first-time/>

60 Abrams (2016). ‘Beyond Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures in Putin’s Russia’. Connections: The Quarterly Journal. <https://doi.org/10.11610/connections.15.1.01>

61 Bechis (2020). ‘Playing The Russian Disinformation Game: Information operations from Soviet tactics to Putin’s sharp power’. In Democracy and Fake News. Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003037385-12/playing-russian-disinformation-game-francesco-bechis>

62 Atanasova et al. (2024). ‘Verified Disinformation: How X Profits from the Rise of a Pro-Kremlin Network’. Reset Tech. https://www.reset.tech/resources/verified-disinformation-research-report-reset-tech-2024_web.pdf

63 Nakashima & Harris (2018). ‘How the Russians hacked the DNC and passed its emails to WikiLeaks’. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/how-the-russians-hacked-the-dnc-and-passed-its-emails-to-wikileaks/2018/07/13/af19a828-86c3-11e8-8553-a3ce89036c78_story.html; Campbell & Milmo (2024). ‘UK government weighs action against Russian hackers over NHS records theft’. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/jun/21/uk-national-crime-agency-russian-ransomware-hackers-qilin-nhs-patient-records>

infrastructure,⁶⁴ coordinated campaigns to spread false information online,⁶⁵ threats against journalists and politicians,⁶⁶ and even attempted assassinations as in the case of the Salisbury Poisonings.⁶⁷ Russia's strategic aim in the UK appears to be to sow doubt, confusion, and discord, as well as to undermine support for Ukraine.

Meanwhile, the return of Donald Trump to the US presidency with tech billionaire Elon Musk running a shadow operation in the White House is introducing a new challenge and raising the threat to UK epistemic security to a new level.

As a key strategic ally with close cultural and historical ties, the UK has long had a trusting relationship with the US such that events and trends in the US have often been highly influential in the UK. However, the kind of democratic unrest that grips the US is reaching across the pond facilitated by mechanisms that are becoming alarmingly familiar in the UK – disillusionment and discord exacerbated by information manipulation is underpinning the growth of populism. But there is also serious risk that attempts to influence UK politics from the US become more direct. It is plausible any norms against interfering with the public discourse and politics of allied countries that once constrained Trump's behavior may be thrown aside during his second and final term.⁶⁸

We are already seeing harbingers of such influencing activity. Elon Musk's actions over the last six months have demonstrated a keen interest in influencing UK politics, and his willingness to leverage all his connections and resources to do so.^{69,70,71,72,73,74,75} Now from his quasi-governmental position in the White House, combined with his enormous power over the platforms he owns, Musk's potential for international disruption is further expanded. Given the UK public's record low trust in its own politicians and government,⁷⁶ this creates an especially volatile situation of which Musk, or others so inclined, could take advantage.

64 Cwalina (2024). 'Concerns grow over possible Russian sabotage of undersea cables'. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/concerns-grow-over-possible-russian-sabotage-of-undersea-cables/>

65 Staff and agencies (2022). "'Troll factory' spreading Russian pro-war lies online, says UK'. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/01/troll-factory-spreading-russian-pro-war-lies-online-says-uk>; Atanasova et al. (2024). 'Verified Disinformation: How X Profits from the Rise of a Pro-Kremlin Network'. Reset Tech. https://www.reset.tech/resources/verified-disinformation-research-report-reset-tech-2024_web.pdf; Toler (2018). 'Anatomy of a Russian 'Troll Factory' News Site'. Bellingcat. <https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/case-studies/2018/06/08/anatomy-russian-troll-factory-news-site/>

66 Jacoby (2025). 'Bound By The Rule Of Law, Europe Wrestles With Escalating Hybrid Warfare'. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tamarjacoby/2025/01/07/bound-by-the-rule-of-law-europe-wrestles-with-escalating-hybrid-warfare/>

67 Corera (2020). 'Salisbury poisoning: What did the attack mean for the UK and Russia?'. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-51722301>

68 Global Trends (2021). 'The Future of International Norms: US-Backed International Norms Increasingly Contested'. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/gt2040-home/gt2040-deeper-looks/future-of-international-norms>

69 Vallance & Sardarizadeh (2023). 'Tommy Robinson and Katie Hopkins reinstated on X'. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-67331288>

70 Ibid.

71 McDonald (2024). 'Elon Musk shares fake news claiming UK rioters will be sent to 'detainment camps''. Politico. <https://www.politico.eu/article/elon-musk-share-fake-news-uk-rioters-detainment-camp/>

72 Boffey (2024). 'Why are Labour volunteers causing a stir in the US election race?'. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/oct/23/why-are-labour-volunteers-causing-a-stir-in-the-us-election-race>; Hunter (2024). 'Elon Musk accuses Labour of breaking US election law'. The National. <https://www.thenational.scot/news/24662823.elon-musk-accuses-labour-breaking-us-election-law/>; Marsi (2024). 'Why has Trump accused the UK's Labour Party of US election interference?'. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/23/why-has-trump-accused-the-uks-labour-party-of-election-interference>

73 Honeycombe-Foster (2024). 'Elon Musk brands UK a 'tyrannical police state''. Politico. <https://www.politico.eu/article/elon-musk-brand-uk-tyrannical-police-state/>; Clayton (2024). 'Elon Musk brands Britain a 'tyrannical police state' and boosts far-right activist'. NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/elon-musk-britain-police-state-starmer-election-tommy-robinson-rcna181593>; Chappell (2024). 'Petition for another UK general election passes 2m signatures'. TheTimes. <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/elon-musk-boosts-petition-new-general-election-uk-m8j6hn7ww>

74 Honeycombe-Foster (2024). 'Elon Musk says UK going 'full Stalin''. Politico. <https://www.politico.eu/article/elon-musk-uk-government-donald-trump-stalin-politics-labour-tech/>

75 Culbertson (2025). 'Sir Keir Starmer comments on Elon Musk grooming gang accusations for first time'. Sky News. <https://news.sky.com/story/sir-keir-starmer-comments-on-elon-musk-grooming-gang-accusations-for-first-time-13284467>; Courea & O'Carroll (2025). 'Why is Elon Musk attacking Keir Starmer over the grooming scandal?'. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/jan/06/why-is-elon-musk-attacking-keir-starmer-over-grooming-scandal>; BBC News. 'Brown: No foundation to Musk child grooming claims'. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/czd49j85q48o>

76 National Centre for Social Research (2024). 'Trust and confidence in Britain's system of government at record low'. <https://natcen.ac.uk/news/trust-and-confidence-britains-system-government-record-low>

2.4 REGULATORY SHORTCOMINGS

The spread of digitisation over the past two decades have shown that there are significant shortcomings in our legislative and regulatory frameworks for digital technology and online spaces in particular. In many instances, the regulation lags behind contemporary developments or does not exist at all.

US legislation sets the stage

Much of how the UK's digital supply chains operate is based on norms, precedents, and regulatory decisions from the US – and which, therefore, have not been subject to democratic decision making in the UK. This is due to the US's foundational contributions to internet technology and its dominance in the tech industry.⁷⁷

The US has historically taken a hands-off approach to internet regulation, influenced heavily by First Amendment protections. Section 230 of the Communications Act 1934 is a landmark piece of legislation that shields online platforms from liability for third-party content, except in cases of copyright infringement, anti-terrorism laws, and sex trafficking. Moving into the 21st century, Section 230 has been upheld allowing US-based social media companies to operate with minimal content moderation requirements and setting the stage for harmful and misleading content to flourish online globally. Meanwhile antitrust enforcement in the US technology sector has been lax since the 1990s,⁷⁸ enabling global market dominance by the tech giants that control these platforms.

UK regulation falls short

Other countries can enact legal requirements to protect citizens and information supply chains, even banning US-based platforms if they fail to comply. To avoid losing the UK market, tech companies are likely to conform. Brazil's approach with X/Twitter is illustrative: after Musk refused to suspend accounts accused of spreading disinformation, Brazil blocked the platform.⁷⁹ Despite Musk's resistance, Brazil persisted in its policy until X/Twitter paid a \$5 million fine, removed the accounts, and X/Twitter was reinstated.⁸⁰ Rule of law is effective.

The EU has created a comprehensive system of regulation of social media through the Digital Services Act (DSA)⁸¹ and the Digital Markets Acts (DMA).⁸² UNESCO has produced Guidelines for Governance of Digital Platforms.⁸³ Both of these sets of rules use the international human rights framework as a starting point.

The UK has attempted to regulate online harms, but its legislation falls short in addressing information threats. While the EU's DSA and DMA impose strict obligations on major platforms to combat disinformation, the UK's Online Safety Act (OSA) lacks comprehensive measures.⁸⁴ The OSA primarily targets specific illegal content that causes harm to individuals, omitting wider harms to society. Its False Communications Offense (FCO) laid out in Section 179 criminalises

77 Abbate (2000). *Inventing the Internet*. MIT Press. <https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262511155/inventing-the-internet/>

78 The 1990s saw landmark antitrust cases like *United States v. Microsoft Corp.*, in which Microsoft was sued for anti-competitive practices in the home computer market, which ultimately resulted in Microsoft having to obey a Consent Decree. In the years between then and the early 2020s, however, similar actions were not taken when opportunities arose. The US technology sector is now dominated by around five 'Big Tech' firms which hold the majority of market share - Apple, Microsoft, Google, Amazon, and Meta - as well as substantial geopolitical power and control over information flows

79 Li (2024). 'Regulatory disputes between Brazil and X'. King's College London. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/regulatory-disputes-between-brazil-and-x>

80 Derico & Wells (2024). 'Brazil lifts ban on Musk's X after it pays \$5m fine'. BBC. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y06vzk3yjo>

81 European Commission (2025). 'The Digital Services Act'. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act_en

82 European Commission (2025). 'About the Digital Markets Act'. https://digital-markets-act.ec.europa.eu/about-dma_en#what-does-this-mean-for-gatekeepers

83 UNESCO. "Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms." <https://www.unesco.org/en/internet-trust/guidelines>

84 Full Fact (2025). 'The Online Safety Act and Misinformation: What you need to know'. <https://fullfact.org/policy/online-safety-act/>

knowingly spreading false information with intent to cause harm,⁸⁵ but enforcement challenges – such as proving intent and jurisdictional limits – will render it largely ineffective against widespread misinformation or foreign influence.

The National Security Act 2023 aims to counter covert foreign interference but faces similar enforcement barriers.⁸⁶ Foreign disinformation campaigns often operate subtly, and prosecuting overseas actors is impractical. Moreover, influential figures like Elon Musk, who engage in online political discourse from abroad, likely fall outside its scope. As a result, the UK lacks a robust framework to counter systemic threats to information integrity.

No plan for election interference

Finally, the UK also lacks a clear plan to handle cases of suspected election interference. Past incidents, such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal⁸⁷ and allegations of foreign interference in other countries like the US,^{88,89} highlight the risks to democratic processes. The UK also has a serious problem with online intimidation of participants in elections. The Electoral Commission reported in its review of the 2024 General Election that “candidates and campaigners, and some electoral administrators, reported being subject to increased and unacceptable levels of abuse and intimidation online, on the campaign trail, at hustings, and at count venues. Ongoing international tensions in some cases led to an increase in antisemitic and Islamophobic abuse directed at candidates.”⁹⁰

While some nations, like Canada,⁹¹ have established protocols for managing election-related crises, the UK has yet to implement a comprehensive response strategy. If the UK only decides what to do as a reaction to an incident, there is a risk that its response could increase distrust in the government’s handling of elections rather than build confidence before the incident occurs.

Any plan for protecting UK elections from interference may also need to involve rethinking the government’s period of discretion during electoral campaigns, known as the “pre-election period of sensitivity” (or ‘purdah’).⁹² This principle directs local and national government bodies to avoid making announcements, policy decisions, or statements which could affect voters. However, there may be exceptional circumstances in which the government must break this silence in order to counter a credible allegation of electoral interference.

85 HM Government (2024). Online Safety Act 2023 Section 179. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/50/part/10>

86 HM Government (2023). National Security Act 2023. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/32/contents>

87 Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison (2018). ‘Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach’. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election>

88 Nakashima & Harris (2018). ‘How the Russians hacked the DNC and passed its emails to WikiLeaks’. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/how-the-russians-hacked-the-dnc-and-passed-its-emails-to-wikileaks/2018/07/13/af19a828-86c3-11e8-8553-a3ce89036c78_story.html; Abrams (2019). ‘Here’s What We Know So Far About Russia’s 2016 Meddling’. Time. <https://time.com/5565991/russia-influence-2016-election/>; Federal Bureau of Investigations (2018). Russian Interference in 2016 U.S. Elections’. <https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/cyber/russian-interference-in-2016-u-s-elections>

89 Wendling (2024). ‘Trump campaign says its internal messages hacked by Iran’. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4ge30ze4dpo>

90 Election Commission (2024). Report on the 2024 UK Parliamentary general election and the May 2024 elections. <https://www.electioncommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/our-reports-and-data-past-elections-and-referendums/report-2024-uk-parliamentary-general-election-and-may-2024-elections#campaigning>

91 Government of Canada (2024). ‘Cabinet Directive on the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol’. Government of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/democratic-institutions/services/protecting-democracy/critical-election-incident-public-protocol/cabinet.html>

92 Johnston (2024). ‘Pre-election period of sensitivity’. House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn05262/>

CHAPTER THREE

WHY NOW?

In the original 2020 epistemic security report, the authors laid out hypothetical crisis scenarios fueled by epistemic insecurity that at the time felt far-fetched, almost dystopian.⁹³ However, since publication of the 2020 report, one of the scenarios – “Xenophobic Ethnic Violence” – came to pass in the UK by frighteningly similar mechanisms. In the hypothetical case, a xenophobic radical far-right group stages a chemical attack near a school and circulates online misinformation blaming members of a minority refugee community.

That hypothetical narrative was not a far cry from the events of the Southport riots in the summer of 2024. On 29 July 2024, news broke that a man had murdered three young girls and injured 10 others in a dance class in the town of Southport.⁹⁴ Police announced the arrest of a suspect, but in the absence of further information, rumours went viral on social media within hours. The attacker was alleged to be “a Muslim immigrant”, according to a far-right account on X/Twitter called ‘European Invasion’ – the post was seen by close to four million users.⁹⁵ The influencer Andrew Tate reiterated the narrative in a video shared with his 9.8 million followers, saying the attacker was an “illegal immigrant”.⁹⁶

None of these claims were true. As revealed on 1 August, the attacker was a British citizen born in Cardiff, and not a Muslim. The truth did not, however, prevent anti-immigrant and Islamophobic rhetoric from being at the fore of a wave of public disturbances across the UK.

Riots broke out between 30 July and early August 2024.⁹⁷ They started as protests in Southport – which quickly turned violent and led to an attack on a mosque⁹⁸ – before spreading to London,

93 Seger et al. (2020). ‘Tackling threats to informed decision-making in democratic societies: Promoting epistemic security in a technologically-advanced world’. The Alan Turing Institute.

94 Ibrahim & Robins (2024). ‘How Anti-Immigrant Riots Flared in the U.K.’. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/08/world/europe/uk-riots-southport-timeline.html>

95 BBC Bitesize. ‘Timeline of how online misinformation fuelled UK riots’. BBC. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zshjs82>

96 BBC Bitesize. ‘Timeline of how online misinformation fuelled UK riots’. BBC. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zshjs82>

97 Cobham (2024). ‘Dozens of far-right rallies set to target immigration centres, lawyers’ offices and charities across country’. The Independent. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/far-right-uk-riots-police-keir-starmer-b2591472.html>; Euronews & Associated Press. ‘Anti-racism protesters take to UK streets following far-right riots that swept nation’. Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/2024/08/11/anti-racism-protesters-took-to-the-streets-of-the-uk-following-far-right-riots-that-swept>

98 The Guardian (2024). ‘Southport stabbing: chaotic scenes as police clash with far-right protesters outside mosque – as it happened’. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/live/2024/jul/30/southport-stabbing-latest-knife-attack-children-hospital-merseyside?page=with%3Ablock-66a9494d8f08bbdfa9de03a1#block-66a9494d8f08bbdfa9de03a1>

Manchester, Belfast, Rotherham, Hartlepool, and other locations across the country.⁹⁹ The events continued to be fueled by a deluge of anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, racist, and conspiratorial content online, including incitements to racial violence,^{100,101} false claims about government detention camps for protesters¹⁰² and a cover-up of violence by immigrants.¹⁰³

There were of course differences between the hypothetical scenarios posed by the researchers and what happened in Southport. For instance, the 2024 attack was not staged with intent to frame minority immigrants and the framing that did ensue did not seem to be the work of a centrally coordinated effort. But nonetheless, the striking similarities in how events unfolded should serve as a stark warning about the lack of moderation on major social media platforms, the perils of news information voids, and the weakness in our epistemic security. What was framed as a dystopian and remote likelihood for academic analysis just a few years ago is now part of our lived reality.

While the Southport case highlighted the domestic challenge of misinformation, the recent and dramatic change with the new US administration offers an unprecedented international imperative to act now. UK information ecosystems are at a tipping point with rapidly changing media habits – 71% of UK adults consume their news online and 52% through social media, up from 47% in 2023.¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile democratic backslide grips the US and influences the UK through damaging and divisive narratives spurred on through attention-seeking, poorly regulated online information environments and unchecked influence of platform controllers.

We cannot afford to normalise the democratic emergency that is unfolding before us. The trends are clear: declining trust in government institutions, increasing polarisation, the massive rise in social media and search in our information supply chain, a lack of trusted local news and the weaponisation of misinformation. The resilience of our epistemic security and information pipelines must be prioritised, and action must be taken now to prevent further erosion of trust in the information supply chain that underpins our democracy.

99 Halliday (2024). 'The areas in England where riots have broken out since Southport attack'. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/aug/01/the-areas-in-england-where-riots-have-broken-out-since-southport-attack>

100 Precey (2024). 'Racial hatred post did not break X rules'. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn8ljjjmpg5o>

101 BBC News (2024). 'Man jailed after inciting racial hatred online'. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cvgxw1xj4z0o>; Sky News (2024). 'First men jailed for riot-related social media posts'. Sky News. <https://news.sky.com/story/jordan-parlour-facebook-user-jailed-for-riot-related-social-media-posts-13193894>

102 Daisley (2024). 'As an ex-Twitter boss, I have a way to grab Elon Musk's attention. If he keeps stirring unrest, get an arrest warrant'. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/aug/12/elon-musk-x-twitter-uk-riot-tweets-arrest-warrant>

103 Casciani & BBC Verify (2024). 'Violent Southport protests reveal organising tactics of the far-right'. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cl4y0453nv5o>

104 Ofcom (2024) "News consumption in the UK: 2024". <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand-research/tv-research/news/news-consumption-2024/news-consumption-in-the-uk-2024-report.pdf?v=379621>

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NEW EMERGENCY – AND OUR POINTS OF RESISTANCE

Democracies are in crisis worldwide and reaching the tipping point of emergency. Voter turnout remains low across many European democracies,¹⁰⁵ showing sharply lower turnout among younger generations.¹⁰⁶ Election outcomes are also increasingly disputed. Between 2020 and 2024, the losing candidate from one in five national elections publicly rejected the election outcome.¹⁰⁷ In 2021 the United States was classified as a “backsliding democracy” as it grappled with weakening checks on government, declining rule of law, and the January 6th riots which sought to undermine credible election results.¹⁰⁸

The UK population is similarly disaffected with democracy. Trust and confidence in government is at a record low.¹⁰⁹ Half of Gen Z (age 13-27) would prefer a “strong leader” to a democratically elected one.¹¹⁰ Electoral turnout is declining.¹¹¹ That sense of democratic disenchantment has a wider, dragging effect on national wellbeing.¹¹²

But the UK has also so far resisted the same extent of troubles now seen in the US and parts of Europe. For instance, recent data from the Electoral Commission reflects the public’s high

105 European Parliament (2024). ‘Turnout. 2024 European Election Results.’ European Parliament. <https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/turnout/>

106 Dressler (2024). ‘Youth turnout in the 2024 European elections: a closer look at the under-25 vote’. Foundation for European Progressive Studies. <https://feps-europe.eu/youth-turnout-in-the-2024-european-elections-a-closer-look-at-the-under-25-vote/>. Also Charlton (2024). ‘5 charts that show the state of global democracy in 2024’. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/07/global-democracy-charts-2024-trends-insights-election/>

107 International IDEA (2024). ‘The Global State of Democracy 2024’. International IDEA. <https://www.idea.int/gsod/2024/>

108 Agence France-Presse in Stockholm (2021) “US added to list of ‘backsliding’ democracies for first time.” The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/nov/22/us-list-backsliding-democracies-civil-liberties-international>

109 NatCen (2024) “Trust and confidence in Britain’s system of government at record low” <https://natcen.ac.uk/news/trust-and-confidence-britains-system-government-record-low>

110 Channel 4 (2025) “Gen Z Trends, truth and trust” https://assets-corporate.channel4.com/_flysystem/s3/2025-01/Channel%204%20-%20Gen%20Z%20Truth%20Trust%20and%20Trends%20-%20SUMMARY%20AND%20CALL%20TO%20ACTION%20-%20FINAL%201.pdf

111 Sturge (2024). ‘2024 general election: Turnout’. House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/general-election-2024-turnout/>

112 Paylor (2024). ‘Life in the UK 2024’. Carnegie UK. <https://carnegieuk.org/publication/life-in-the-uk-2024/>

confidence in our electoral system with 73% of voters believing that UK elections are run well and 80% confident in the voting process itself.¹¹³ This trust is precious but also precarious; it is essential to well-functioning democracy but vulnerable to damaging rhetoric as demonstrated in the US.

The UK has some advantages to its media and political environment which may explain its resilience so far. For example, the US's democratic slip has been exacerbated by a national news media owned and operated by private and politically opinionated media moguls.¹¹⁴ The UK, by contrast, has a robust regulatory environment at least for broadcast media, administered by Ofcom. It also has a number of trusted and reliable information sources, including the BBC, which is the most trusted news platform globally, as well as other generally reliable broadcasters such as ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky News. The UK's constituency level parliamentary elections also facilitate a closer relationship between government and citizens, forcing national politics to remain at least somewhat responsive to local interests and concerns and thus providing a potential mechanism for fostering greater citizen engagement and trust in politics.

However, there is no guarantee of future democratic stability. In 2024, voter turnout in the UK fell to its lowest point since 2001,¹¹⁵ and polls indicated that trust in politicians reached the lowest point in 40 years.¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, far-right factions with explicitly anti-democratic views continue to gain a foothold, capitalising on distrust and unrest.¹¹⁷ Threats to epistemic security that facilitate the spread of false and misleading information, that sow distrust in government and news sources, and that drive citizens to ever more polarised viewpoints, only drive the wedge deeper, undermining enriching democratic discourse and narrowing our window of opportunity to intervene.

So in the face of growing democratic instability and epistemic threats thereto, we have good reason to worry: by the next general election in 2029, will citizens be discussing real issues like the state of the economy and public services, or will they be caught up in misinformation and conspiracy? Will the credibility of our elections be preserved and declining trust in politicians and democracy reverse its course, or will the UK, like many democracies around the world, succumb to a backslide fueled by the weaponisation of information?

We are facing a growing democratic emergency: a confluence of conditions has left the UK vulnerable to epistemic threats, coupled with actors motivated to use those conditions to their advantage. Improving the UK's epistemic security is therefore an urgent task, and one where we can set an example for the world if we act now.

The UK has the potential to resist and lead the response to the democratic emergency. Epistemic security is one crucial line of defence.

113 Electoral Commission (2024) "Public attitudes 2024". <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/public-attitudes/public-attitudes-2024>

114 Bell (2024). "Can billionaire media moguls be trusted in Trump's America?" <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/dec/13/can-billionaire-media-moguls-be-trusted-in-trumps-america>

115 Sturge (2024). '2024 general election: Turnout'. House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/general-election-2024-turnout/>

116 According to Ipsos, just 9% of the British public said they trusted politicians to tell the truth in 2023. Clemence & King (2023). 'Trust in politicians reaches its lowest score in 40 years'. Ipsos. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-trust-in-professions-veracity-index-2023>; Polling by Demos during the 2024 General Election suggested that no politicians were trusted by the majority of the public to be honest about the challenges the government faces. Huband-Thompson and Kapetanovic (2024) Trustwatch 2024: polling on trust". Demos. <https://demos.co.uk/blogs/trustwatch-2024-polling-on-trust/>

117 BBC Wales (2024) "Far-right group exposed in undercover BBC investigation." BBC. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn8xykr5v95o>. Also Lawrence (2024). 'Patriotic Alternative: Flagging Fascist Group Finds New Funding Stream'. Hope Not Hate. <https://hopenothate.org.uk/2024/10/09/patriotic-alternative-flagging-fascist-group-finds-new-funding-stream/>; Lawrence (2024). 'A Home For Cranks: the rapid growth of the fascist Homeland Party'. Hope Not Hate. <https://hopenothate.org.uk/2024/11/25/a-home-for-cranks-the-rapid-growth-of-the-fascist-homeland-party/>; Kendix (2024). 'Scottish far-right splinter group registers as political party'. The Times. <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/scotland/article/scottish-far-right-splinter-group-registers-as-political-party-9r5g3jmd9>; van der Meer and Janssen (2025) "The static and dynamic effects of political distrust on support for representative democracy and its rivals". Political Behaviour. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11109-024-09994-y>

CHAPTER FIVE

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper is a provocation for urgent action. Below we make the case for seven areas of focus and some first steps that the UK government could take now in each.

1. FRESH THREAT ANALYSIS

First, we must better understand the threats to epistemic security we face today and the trends for the future. Deep holistic analysis of UK information supply chains by a community of diverse experts is needed to specify the most pressing vulnerabilities and propose the most effective intervention points. The hypothetical scenarios explored by researchers in 2020 have happened much more quickly – and accurately – than anticipated. In other areas of national security, such scenario planning is routine practice. It is now critical in the field of epistemic security for predicting the near-term future when global events and technology are moving so fast.

TABLE 1
FRESH THREAT ANALYSIS

ACTION	DESCRIPTION
<p>1a) Instigate fresh systems mapping and crisis scenario Red-Teaming research.</p>	<p>Established expert groups from civil society, academia, regulators, and government departments should map the threat landscape in order to develop targeted tools to most effectively address vulnerabilities and counter threats. We recommend the use of extended hypothetical scenario-mapping and red-teaming exercises (deliberately exploring a scenario from an adversary’s perspective) as conducted in the 2020 epistemic security report to help think more holistically and into the future.¹¹⁸</p> <p>Government should invest in building multidisciplinary epistemic security research groups and expert networks. Epistemic security experts are embedded within separate and diverse professions and often have limited capacity to respond to (or to help to pre-emptively mitigate) epistemic threats.</p>
<p>1b) Facilitate data access for researchers conducting epistemic security research.</p>	<p>At present, social media platforms provide very little information about their inner workings. This makes it very difficult to hold them to account for actions that contaminate our information supply chains. While some transparency reporting will be required via the Online Safety Act, this does not enable access to the kind of data needed for epistemic security research, such as user-generated data, platform curation data and platform decision-making data.¹¹⁹ Some user-generated data access has existed in the past, but has in many cases been removed or locked behind prohibitively expensive paywalls.</p> <p>The Data (Use and Access) Bill, Clause 123 ‘Information for research about online safety matters’, that would amend the Online Safety Act, presents an important opportunity to require platforms to provide access to such crucial data. However, because the Online Safety Act does not include societal harms caused by disinformation within the scope of ‘online safety matters’, this can only be effective if the OSA is also updated to include requirements relating to disinformation which include actual or foreseeable impact on democratic processes, civic discourse, electoral processes, public security and public health (see Recommendation 3a).</p> <p>The UK government should mandate all platforms to make such data available, at no additional cost via a secure online access environment available to vetted public interest researchers complying via an independently facilitated request system and Code of Practice – much like the system initiated by the EU’s Digital Services Act Article 40.4 and 40.12. Crucially, by ‘vetted public interest researchers’, we include not just researchers based at academic institutions, but civil society organisations who play a crucial role in identifying harmful content.¹²⁰</p>

118 Seger et al. (2020). ‘Tackling threats to informed decision- making in democratic societies: Promoting epistemic security in a technologically-advanced world’. The Alan Turing Institute

119 ISD (2025) “Data Access”. <https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/data-access/>

120 Reset (2021) “Evidence to Online Safety Bill Committee”. <https://bills.parliament.uk/publications/46677/documents/1886>

2. MAKE GOVERNMENT READY FOR THE TASK

Responsibility for protecting epistemic security needs greater focus and clarity in government. At the moment there are multiple teams, across different departments, responsible for different aspects of epistemic security. There are groups concerned with online safety, electoral integrity, social cohesion, the health of the news ecosystem and not enough focus on societal resilience. Given the raised level of threat this needs to be better coordinated across government.

TABLE 2

MAKE GOVERNMENT READY FOR THE TASK

RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
<p>2a) Revamp the Defending Democracy Taskforce. Clarify where responsibility for epistemic security sits in government and strengthen its influence.</p>	<p>Repurpose and reinforce the work of the Defending Democracy Taskforce to orchestrate a collective endeavour to improve epistemic security through the UK.¹²¹ This should involve appointing a responsible party for the taskforce at a ministerial level and establishing an Defending Democracy Cabinet Committee.</p> <p>Place the work of the National Security Online Information Team (and any other central government teams engaging with social media platforms on disinformation) on a statutory footing with appropriate transparency and oversight.</p>
<p>2b) Introduce a cross-party, four nations, and civil society element to the Defending Democracy Taskforce’s work.</p>	<p>Government must take more responsibility for defending democracy as set out above. But it will be even more effective if it has four nation and English Mayoral representation to ensure it has the muscle of the wider state engaged.</p> <p>Civil society is also an invaluable partner in epistemic defense. As a window into the citizenry, it is often the first to detect where epistemic threats arise. The government should support and engage with a multidisciplinary Epistemic Defence Network (see conclusion) as an advisory body to the revamped Taskforce.</p> <p>In establishing the remit of the revamped taskforce, the government should examine whether the organisational structures used to counter civil contingencies can be replicated for epistemic defence.</p>

121 The Defending Democracy Taskforce, first established in 2022, is a cross-government group charged with reducing the risk of foreign interference to the UK’s democratic processes, institutions and society.

RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
2c) Review government communication channels and strategy	<p>Citizen trust in government lessens when citizens cannot see the actions being taken in their service. Government can combat this by communicating accurately about its activities in a non-partisan manner and on platforms that can support democratically enriching discussions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Review and identify online communications platforms that are effective, suitable, and safe for broadcasting to the public and facilitating democratic engagement. All national and local governments and MPs should agree to communicate announcements first on these platforms before extending elsewhere. ii. Government at all levels should put renewed effort into communicating clearly and objectively what the outputs and outcomes are of its actions. This is simple transparency. The UK's long tradition of politically neutral government communication has been allowed to decline in recent decades but should be restored as a critical part of our information supply.

3. NEW AND RENEWED REGULATION

There are some clear steps the Government can take to begin bolstering epistemic security through regulation.

TABLE 3

NEW AND RENEWED REGULATION

RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
Online safety	
3a) Update the Online Safety Act 2023 (OSA) to establish broader requirements for social media platforms to mitigate negative impacts of false and misleading information spread online.	<p>Given their huge influence on society, social media platforms with large user bases should be held to higher standards that reflect their influence on society, as dominant media have in the past. There are strong precedents for these standards in other forms of media. The OSA should be recast to require societal standards for Category 1 services in a similar manner to broadcasting codes. We have adapted the following suggestion for the internet from OFCOM Broadcast Code Section 2 Harm and Offence:¹²²</p>

¹²² Ofcom (2024). 'Section two: Harm and offence'. <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/broadcast-standards/section-two-harm-offence/>

RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
	<p><i>'Generally accepted standards must be applied to the operation of a social media or search services so as to provide adequate protection for members of the public from the inclusion in such services of harmful and/or offensive material. At a system level, social media and search services should be designed and operated so that portrayals of factual matters do not materially mislead users'.</i></p> <p>Following a similar course to the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA), government should consider updating the OSA to establish requirements for, at minimum, Category 1 services (large online platforms) to assess and mitigate 'systemic risks' from disinformation on their platforms including actual or foreseeable impact on democratic processes, civic discourse, electoral processes, public security and public health.</p>
<p>3b) Close the OSA loophole for content moderation on small but harmful platforms.</p>	<p>OSA legislation currently exempts 'small but harmful' platforms from regulation. These are platforms that lack a user-base to meet the threshold for the OSA's Category 1 or 2B, but which have an outsized role in spreading harmful content. Examples of these sites include 4Chan and 8Chan/8Kun. These are often the source of dangerous misinformation and disinformation that spreads to other bigger platforms. The UK should place these platforms which have a small user base but which are assessed to have a 'very high' risk of hosting harmful or illegal content in Category 1.</p>
<p>Foreign ownership</p>	
<p>3c) Review foreign ownership of media rules to incorporate transparency requirements for social media companies operating in the UK.</p>	<p>Current rules concerning foreign ownership of media in the UK are intended to ensure there is a "sufficient plurality of providers" of broadcast media services.¹²³ However, they do not address the significant role now played by social media platforms. The government should review whether foreign ownership rules should apply to social media and search, and as part of this review, consider specific transparency requirements regarding the beneficial ownership of social media companies that operate in the UK. This would extend the UK's existing beneficial ownership requirements, which apply to companies registered in the UK, to social media platforms which provide a service in this country.</p>

123 UK Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (2024). 'Consultation on updating the media mergers regime'. <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-updating-the-media-mergers-regime/consultation-on-updating-the-media-mergers-regime>

4. BOOST OUR DOMESTIC INFORMATION SUPPLY CHAIN

Media policy is critical as a lever to help promote democratically important information in the supply chain, as opposed to regulation which is about limiting damaging effects. There has not been enough focus on this as a lever and it is urgently needed to shore up the strengths of the UK's news environment.

TABLE 4

BOOST OUR DOMESTIC INFORMATION SUPPLY CHAIN

RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
<p>4a) Review and reinforce Public Service Broadcasting.</p>	<p>The UK's strong media industry provides an excellent defence against epistemic attack. A strong domestic media working to high standards effectively onshores and secures an important part of our information supply chain. The UK market intervention to produce public service broadcasting goods is very large by international standards. The government should undertake a fundamental re-examination of the whole public service broadcasting ecosystem and re-order it to prioritise epistemic defence, drawing on the new threat analysis and defence network recommended above. The upcoming BBC Charter Review is a vehicle for this work. It needs to put epistemic security at the heart of the purpose of public service media.</p> <p>This should include contestability of some of the money raised by the licence fee (to support Local News Funds as below (4.b), for example); a greater proportion of the licence fee spent on news, factual and current affairs; stronger regional/local factual and current affairs programming; and a reexamination of the role of neglected BBC local radio.</p>
<p>4b) Provide targeted funding to stimulate a new era of vibrant local news in 'news deserts'.</p>	<p>There are now whole areas of the country that are not covered by high quality local news provision.¹²⁴ While we recognise and support the recommendations for tackling broader news financial sustainability proposed by the House of Lords' Future of News report, greater targeting is required for areas that need it most.¹²⁵ Central government should provide a funding package – blended with other sources of funding, e.g. from philanthropists and big tech funds – to help stimulate a new era of vibrant local news, starting at £50 million a year, and focusing on these 'news deserts'.</p>

124 Public Interest News Foundation (2024). 'UK Local News Mapping Report'. <https://www.publicinterestnews.org.uk/local-news-map-report-2024>

125 House of Lords Communications & Digital Committee (2024) "1st Report of Session 2024-2025: The future of news." <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5901/ldselect/ldcomm/39/39.pdf>

RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
	<p>Demos, in collaboration with the Public Interest News Foundation, has provided detailed recommendations for how this can be achieved previously via Local News Funds and accompanying supporting infrastructure in a way that avoids political influence and creates opportunities for media diversity and local innovation and co-creation.¹²⁶ This funding should not create perverse incentives for poor-quality journalism or clickbait but should be geared towards the needs and interests of local communities. Funding could be geared towards helping these outlets build long-term sustainable business models, with a healthy blend of revenue streams.</p>
<p>4c) Adapt broadcast ‘must carry’ rules for ‘public interest news’ on social media platforms.</p>	<p>Online platforms use opaque methods to determine which content gets to which users. It is not clear on what basis platforms are promoting certain content to people. Organic reach has also been displaced in favour of paid-for reach. The distribution of TV in the UK and EU has for decades been regulated to ensure content with public service value is given due prominence to users. These principles, including, for example, ‘must carry’ duties, should now be applied to online platforms to ensure that ‘public interest news’ (not just public service broadcast content), and particularly local news, is able easily to reach British users and be seen by them.¹²⁷</p> <p>Big tech platforms could be legally required to negotiate in good faith with public interest news providers whose content they carry to ensure they are treated on fair, reasonable and nondiscriminatory terms, including in the distribution of relevant data and revenue.</p> <p>The Digital Markets, Competition and Consumer Act has already afforded new powers to the Digital Markets Unit, a division of the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), to oversee negotiations between designated big tech platforms and the third parties that rely on their services, including news providers. We recommend that the CMA should monitor the outcomes of the legislation against the principles agreed at the Big Tech and Journalism conference in Johannesburg in July 2023, which include public interest, plurality and diversity of news.¹²⁸</p>

126 Demos (2024) “Driving Disinformation: disinformation, democratic disformation and the Low Traffic Neighbourhood policy - a portrait of policy failure”. pages 104-105. <https://demos.co.uk/research/driving-disinformation-democratic-deficits-disinformation-and-low-traffic-neighbourhoods-a-portrait-of-policy-failure/>

127 Such duties go beyond the existing ‘temporary must carry’ requirement in the Online Safety Act that offers recognised news publishers a right of appeal before removing content.

128 Gordon Institute of Business Science (2023). ‘Big Tech and Journalism - Principles for Fair Compensation’. <https://www.gibs.co.za/news/big-tech-and-journalism---principles-for-fair-compensation>.

RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
	<p>We recognise that existing debates on which news gains prominence on social media platforms, including via visual cues and ordering in users' feeds, have centered around which media outlets or what level of quality should be afforded such treatment.¹²⁹ We recommend this contestation is settled via a citizen-led definition of 'public interest news' (recommendation 4d) as a route to establishing such a definition and criteria.</p>
<p>4d) An independent commission should run a deliberative process for a citizen-led definition of 'public interest news'.</p>	<p>In order for the government to fund public interest news, and for social media companies to give it due prominence, we need a shared definition of 'public interest news'. It is not the role of government to define this, and industry is not independent enough. This needs a democratic approach. The government should establish an independent commission to run a deliberative process to create a definition led by citizens.</p>

129 For example, House of Lords Communications & Digital Committee (2024) "1st Report of Session 2024-2025: The future of news." Pages 28-29, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5901/ldselect/ldcomm/39/39.pdf>

5. SECURE ELECTIONS, DEFEND CANDIDATES

The following recommendations are intended to help the UK improve the resilience of its electoral system by establishing mechanisms to call out suspected foreign influence; improving protections for candidates against online threats and intimidation; and restricting the scope of political advertising.

TABLE 5

SECURE ELECTIONS & DEFEND CANDIDATES

RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
Election policy	
<p>5a) Establish a mechanism for responding to suspected foreign influence during elections.</p>	<p>The UK remains vulnerable to large-scale attempts at election interference by foreign powers, as has been seen in countries like the US and Romania. To challenge suspected foreign interference activities in its elections, the UK needs a timely, transparent, and democratically accountable mechanism for security services to notify the public about such incidents independently of the government of the day. In the event that such a notification becomes necessary, there would need to be procedures in place for the notification to be acted on with due propriety.</p> <p>Canada has a system in place called the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol from which the UK could take inspiration.¹³⁰ In a worst-case scenario – such as a critical cybersecurity attack – the result may require a delay in an election.</p> <p>Such a mechanism would require careful checks and balances to uphold democratic oversight and win public trust. For example, more transparency is needed from the security services regarding their work to safeguard elections. One solution could be to require the services to regularly publish electoral threat assessments for public viewing alongside summaries of steps being taken to prevent an incident. These would need to be published before, during, and after elections. Moreover, there must be pathways open for civil society to trigger foreign interference investigations. Under the National Security Act 2023 the public can write to the police alleging foreign interference for investigation by appropriate authorities but the decision to prosecute remains with the Attorney General, a government appointee. If there is no decision to prosecute then any investigation remains confidential and unpublished. Any process would require oversight by elected representatives in Parliament (when Parliament is sitting). This scrutiny could come via Select Committee hearings, Parliamentary debates, or similar procedures.</p>

¹³⁰ Government of Canada (2024). 'Cabinet Directive on the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol'. <https://www.canada.ca/en/democratic-institutions/services/protecting-democracy/critical-election-incident-public-protocol/cabinet.html>

RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
<p>5b) Force social media companies to better moderate content during crises and elections.</p>	<p>Elections are foreseeable high-risk events for epistemic security. Neither are adequately provided for in UK online safety legislation, whereas the EU DSA Article 36 and the UNESCO Guidelines do make provision. Where social media platforms provide the vector for these high risks they should bear the costs of assessing and mitigating them.</p> <p>The UK should introduce such crisis-specific mechanisms, including both crisis-specific risk assessments and crisis responses, in a manner which is clear, easy to understand, proportionate and open to public scrutiny. Indicative examples of such mechanisms include the EU DSA Article 36 and Article 48, and the Global Internet Forum Counter Terrorism Content Incident Protocol.¹³¹</p> <p>Any mechanisms will require carefully considered safeguards and high thresholds restricting their use. For example, they could be restricted to only being available whilst the UK is in its pre-election period of sensitivity ('purdah'), or while the UK is in a State of Emergency as defined by the Emergency Powers Acts, or following the issuance of a critical national security alert by the National Cyber Security Centre about an imminent or ongoing cyberattack. Moreover, the decisions made using these mechanisms should be challengeable in court and should be open to Parliamentary scrutiny.</p>
<p>5c) Update legislation prohibiting threats, intimidation, and violence against electoral candidates to reflect online harms.</p>	<p>The UK has seen a rise in violent and threatening online behaviour aimed at election candidates. Abuses can include death threats, the generation of deepfake pornography, and the exposure of a candidate's personally identifying information (also known as 'doxxing'). The extent of the problem is so serious the UK has set up a Speaker's Conference¹³² to understand and act on the risks.</p> <p>The Elections Act 2022 includes penalties for those threatening or acting violently towards electoral candidates: anyone found to have attempted to intimidate an electoral candidate can be disqualified from public office for 5 years,¹³³ Additionally, some forms of threatening behaviour, hate speech, and verbal harassment are criminalised.¹³⁴</p>

131 GIFT (2025) "Content Incident Protocol" <https://gifct.org/content-incident-protocol/>

132 The Speaker's Conference was established on 14 October 2024 and will consider the factors influencing the threat level against candidates and MPs and the effectiveness of the response to such threats. It will make recommendations about arrangements necessary to secure free and fair elections and the appropriate protection of candidates at future UK-wide parliamentary elections and of elected representatives thereafter.

133 HM Government (2022). Elections Act 2022 Section 30. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/37/section/30/enacted>

134 Crown Prosecution Service (2024). 'Responding to intimidating behaviour in elections and public office: a CPS guide'. <https://www.cps.gov.uk/publication/responding-intimidating-behaviour-elections-and-public-office-cps-guide>; Crown Prosecution Service (2025). 'Verbal abuse and harassment in public'. <https://www.cps.gov.uk/crime-info/verbal-abuse-and-harassment-public>

RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
	<p>A new system is required for the civil regulation of elections and online media to assess and mitigate the risks to candidates and other election participants. At this point, no comprehensive review of online risk to candidates has ever been published. A regulatory system could bring the Electoral Commission and the National Police Chiefs Council into the Online Safety Act regime to work with OFCOM and platforms to assess the risks of harm to victims and then put in place systems to mitigate those risks enforced by those regulators.</p> <p>The UK must introduce guidance and legislation to address online harms against candidates. To disincentivise such behaviours, these measures should go beyond the penalties in the Elections Act and could include fines or prosecution.</p>
<p>5d) Place stricter limits on online political advertising.</p>	<p>The UK should strongly limit online political advertising of all kinds in order to protect the quality of information available to voters during elections. In recent years, it has been convenient for major political parties to have little regulation of online advertising on which they can spend tens of millions of pounds.</p> <p>The UK has several options for reforming political advertising:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Apply the same rules that exist for broadcast political advertising to online political advertising. These rules set stringent caps on the quantity, time period, and levels of expenditure that can be used for political advertising on television and radio. It makes little sense to treat online advertising differently. 2. Set a (very low) cap on online political advertising spending for political parties. 3. Ban political ads from ‘allied’ organisations during election periods. 4. Ban political advertising altogether. This is the option taken by France, which prohibits all paid political advertising.¹³⁵ 5. Set out transparency requirements for <i>all</i> online advertising. Required information could follow typical ‘Know your Customer’ checks, such as who ultimately owns or controls the customer and/or the person on whose behalf the transaction is being conducted, and how much was spent.¹³⁶ Such a measure would circumvent the need to distinguish political advertising from non-political advertising, with the added benefit of forcing disclosure on political advertising spending in a way that is consistent with other basic activities such as opening a bank account.

135 Furnémont & Kevin (2020). ‘Regulation of political advertising: A comparative study with reflections on the situation in South-East Europe’. Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/study-on-political-advertising-eng-final/1680a0c6e0>

136 UKStop Ad Funded Crim (UKSAFC) (2024) “Written evidence submitted by UK Ad Funded Crime” <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/131552/pdf/>; UKGov (2016) “Know your customer guidance”. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/know-your-customer-guidance/know-your-customer-guidance-accessible-version>

6. DEMOCRATISE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STATE, CITIZENS AND THE MEDIA

The measures outlined above will help fortify epistemic security. As we outlined above there are much broader factors driving the democratic emergency than the media environment. Democracy is most vulnerable when its citizens feel insecure, under-served, and unheard. Perceived neglect and prolonged dissatisfaction raises doubts about the ability and political will of a government to serve its people. The doubts lead to unrest, distrust, and division providing a foothold for false, misleading, and manipulative information that resonate with people’s concerns to drive the wedge deeper. Growing discord and division increasingly undermines the kind of enriching public discourse needed to maintain a well-functioning democracy, and a downward spiral takes root, feeding on itself all the way down.

At Demos we make the case to expand and enrich democracy through deliberative and participatory approaches in the relationship between the state and citizens in order to improve policy making, increase trust and strengthen citizenry. All of these effects are essential to tackling the democratic emergency. Currently, there is a new deliberative wave in policy making in government with participatory processes being embedded in the work of the government’s missions and some of its key plans.

TABLE 6

DEMOCRATISE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STATE, CITIZENS, AND THE MEDIA

RECOMMENDATION	DESCRIPTION
<p>6a) Expand on the current wave of participatory policy making by embedding these ways of working in key decisions about the country’s future.</p>	<p>Demos has created a roadmap to embed participatory policy making in central government in our <i>Citizens’ White Paper</i>.¹³⁷ We urge the government to adopt this as part of its operating model to reconnect with citizens on the key questions facing the country today.</p>
<p>6b) Revamp the UK’s approach to media literacy in schools to serve epistemic security.</p>	<p>The UK needs a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to empowering its citizens to navigate the complexities of today’s information landscape. We suggest adopting a model similar to Finland’s, where media literacy is integrated as a core component of the national curriculum.¹³⁸ From primary school onward, media literacy is woven into various subjects, helping build resilience against misinformation and foreign influence, and Finland is now considered Europe’s most resilient nation to fake news.¹³⁹ In the UK, Ofcom’s inclusion of teacher training in its three-year media literacy strategy, alongside the Department for Education’s ongoing Curriculum and Assessment Review, presents a key opportunity to redesign the approach to civic, digital and media literacy across subjects. We recommend consulting with practicing teachers and teacher training bodies to identify the support they need to best operate in this evolving environment.</p>

137 Levin et al. (2024). ‘Citizens’ White Paper’. Demos. https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Citizens-White-Paper-July-2024_final.pdf

138 Gross (2023). ‘How Finland Is Teaching a Generation to Spot Misinformation’. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/10/world/europe/finland-misinformation-classes.html>

139 Open Society Institute Sofia (2023). Media Literacy Index. <https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/MLI-report-in-English-22.06.pdf>

CONCLUSION

The UK has an opportunity – indeed, a responsibility – to take a leadership role in this global struggle to safeguard epistemic security at a point when some influential people are now privately arguing that the information supply chain in the US is so corrupted that it must be considered a lost cause.

By addressing the vulnerabilities in our information systems, we not only put ourselves in a position to protect the integrity of our own democracy but also set an example for others to follow.

NEXT STEPS EPISTEMIC DEFENCE NETWORK

This provocation paper is the first in a longer collaborative programme of work on Epistemic Security that will be anchored at Demos. At the heart of this will be the **Epistemic Defence Network**, a cross-civil society group convening to drive this agenda forward and deepen and expand on the recommendations set out above, to engage with the government on taking them forward and to develop some pilot research and practice programmes.

If you are interested in being involved please email the programme leads elizabeth.seger@demos.co.uk and hannah.perry@demos.co.uk.

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