Truth, Trust and Technology

Summary

- We are in the middle of an unprecedented **information crisis**. The UK's news media landscape is changing quickly, and long-held tenets of independence, verification and accountability have been undermined by the sheer variety of new ways of accessing information. Many of these are subject to the influence of special interests which could have nefarious and disruptive purposes.

- We need to better understand how media, information and news are consumed and disseminated, and how this is evolving. Rebuilding trust in media, and protecting our democracy, requires close partnerships between the Government, competing media organisations, campaigners, representatives of the public, and academics. This work needs to be catalysed by strong Government commitment to improving the current situation and tackling fake news.

- To improve our understanding of the current media landscape, and outline a route forward, the LSE set up the Truth, Trust and Technology Commission, which recently published its findings. Key recommendations are:

  - **The urgent creation of an Independent Platform Agency (IPA)**, funded by a new levy on UK online platforms' revenue, to observe, and advise Parliament on, the media landscape and encourage new initiatives to address fake news.

  - The Government should quickly bring forward an **integrated media literacy programme**, which could also be funded by the digital platform levy. As well as targeting children, arguably those most at risk from the information crisis, the programme should include digital media literacy training for politicians.

  - The Government should legislate to **regulate political advertising** before the next general election. Political advertising is currently very poorly overseen, with regulatory "blind spots" allowing for misinformation to percolate and vested interests to influence democratic processes surreptitiously.

The Independent Platform Agency

- The UK media system is becoming more complex and, arguably, more unstable. Social media is growing in importance as a space for information gathering and debate, but also as a conduit for 'fake news', 'misinformation' and 'disinformation'. Purveyors of misinformation are adapting to and bypassing new controls, and their outputs are having immediate, and structural, consequences that need to be better understood and mitigated against.

- **The new IPA would play a crucial role in understanding the new media landscape and proposing methods for tackling misinformation and fake news**. It should be independent of government but report to Parliament, funded through a new levy on UK social media and search advertising revenue.

- The IPA should be established by legislation and have duties including:

- Publicising information on trends in news and information-sharing, including data on the most shared and read stories, broken down by demographic group.
- **Reporting to Parliament on the effectiveness of self-regulation** of the largest news-carrying social and search platforms, including on trust marks, credibility signalling, filtering and takedown, and where there is need for new regulations.
- Mobilising and coordinating partners to deliver a programme in **media literacy** for children and adults, and evaluating initiatives.
- Working with Ofcom to build **evidence on the public information literacy**.
- Working with Ofcom and the CMA to monitor market dominance and the impact of platforms on media plurality and quality.

Improving Media Literacy

- LSE's research found that too little time and resource are put into improving media, digital, critical and news literacy. This must change - **media literacy should be the fourth pillar of education, alongside reading, writing and maths**. It should be thoroughly embedded in classroom education, supporting active and informed civic and political engagement of diverse kinds, for adults as well as children.

- DfE should fast-track efforts to build digital literacy by connecting the areas where literacy is addressed, such as media studies, computer studies and citizenship. As well as focusing on schoolchildren - for example through a compulsory media literacy module in citizenship classes – this work should also be targeted at adults in further and vocational education, as well as reaching out to groups not in education or training and especially hard-to-reach groups.

- Platforms and civil society organisations must be incorporated into the programme, which could include the provision and use of media literacy toolkits to integrate media literacy into wider social activism and services. The funding for the new programme could come from a portion of the new platform levy.

Regulating Political Advertising

- LSE's research found that **electoral regulation in the UK is not fit for purpose**. It is spread poorly across a number of institutions, resulting in regulatory blind spots which are easy to exploit.

- The Government should legislate for a **mandatory political advertising code** before the next election. The Electoral Commission should be given the power to act quickly in response to emerging risks, including requiring spending information and accountability on online advertisements during elections by foreign organisations and individuals. Legislation must also ensure greater transparency of the sources of information produced and circulated on the platforms during an election, and allow for heavier fines on law breakers. And Government should enable the ASA and the Electoral Commission to create a new standards code for political advertising online.