



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba



Scotland's Futures Forum  
Fòram Alba air Thoiseach



## Information and Disinformation: Transcript

It is often said that the first casualty in war is truth. In Ukraine, competing narratives of the current conflict play out on social media throughout the world. With this comes a greater international awareness of the impacts of the war than ever before.

What does the Ukrainian Government's approach tell us about the way we share information? What can we learn from conflicts in history, such as the invasion of Tibet? And what implications do these have for our democratic future?

This event, which took place at part of the Festival of Politics, considered the use of information and disinformation in armed conflict, as well as the role of citizen journalism and digital communication in our world today.

**THURSDAY 11 AUGUST 2022, at the Scottish Parliament**

## Panel



**Dr Joanna Szostek** is a lecturer in political communication at the University of Glasgow. She is also an associate fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs.



**Dr Tsering Topgyal**, is a lecturer in International Relations at the University of Birmingham. He is a political scientist with research interest in Chinese politics and foreign policy and Asia-Pacific affairs with attention to security and ethno-nationalism. Dr Topgyal's latest book is *China and Tibet: The Perils of Insecurity*.



**Olga Robinson** is assistant editor at BBC Monitoring, which reports and analyses news from media around the world. An experienced Russian media analyst, she specialises in information manipulation and disinformation techniques. A native Russian speaker, Olga has most recently been covering the war in Ukraine.



**James Blake** is Head of Media and Humanities at Edinburgh Napier University. He has worked on the ITV News at Ten; as a specialist home affairs producer for Channel 4 News; as a news reporter for Channel 4; and worked as a reporter and programme producer for STV News and the STV Scotland Tonight current affairs programme.

## Chair



**Ross Greer** is the Scottish Greens MSP for West Scotland and the Education, Finance and External Affairs spokesperson for the Scottish Greens. When Ross was first elected in 2016, he was the youngest ever MSP. Ross previously served as a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament and worked for Yes Scotland in the run up to the 2014 referendum. He is currently convener of the Cross-Party Group for Tibet.

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## Transcript

**Ross Greer:** I start with a question to frame our discussion—I put it to Olga Robinson in the first instance. From your perspective, what is disinformation? What is it that we are talking about and trying to grapple with this afternoon?

**Olga Robinson:** That is a very good question—it is one of the classic questions that I get asked, as a disinformation expert.

Disinformation, in the way that we tackle it, is the spread of false or misleading information with the intent to benefit personally, financially or politically. The element of intent—the deliberate spreading of misleading or false information—is how we distinguish it from misinformation. At a time of crisis or in a breaking-news situation, a lot of people spread misleading or false information, but they do so without necessarily having some nefarious intent. That is how we define the two different types and differentiate them in our work.

**Ross Greer:** Joanna, how would you distinguish between the new challenge that we face and the misinformation that we have always seen in political communication, in particular in geopolitics?

**Dr Joanna Szostek:** Misinformation and disinformation are not new problems. We can go back to World War One or World War Two; rumours and misleading information were used back then, and probably even further back. What is new is the environment in which disinformation and misinformation now circulate. We might think about the speed with which misinformation and disinformation can spread, the number of people whom it reaches and how easy it is to put misinformation and disinformation out there, which means that pretty much anyone with a device connected to the internet can be part of the problem, or fuelling it.

A major change over the past few decades has been the fragmentation of audiences. These days, people can self-select into niche groups—we call them bubbles—and surround themselves with one worldview in which disinformation plays an important part.

**Ross Greer:** Tsering, I come at this issue as someone who has had a long-term interest in the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the fate of the Tibetan people. Quite a lot of folk will have become somewhat more familiar with the issue of information warfare in recent months as a result of the situation in Russia and Ukraine. Can you tell us a little bit about how information warfare has been used in the context of China's territorial claims to other territories such as Tibet?

**Dr Tsering Topgyal:** Historically, China has had a tradition, or practice, of controlling information. The use of both misinformation and disinformation played out even during the imperial period, with the burning of books, and successive dynasties writing the history of the preceding dynasty to benefit themselves. During the current period of the People's Republic of China, in which China has been ruled by the Communist Party, we see that one of the three main pillars of power is the propaganda department. There are the military and internal security dimensions, but the third element is the propaganda department, and control over that is crucial in order for the top leader of the Communist Party to retain power.

In Tibet, in other places such as Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and clearly in Taiwan, and in other territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, the use of both misinformation and disinformation is a very strong element of China's

strategy. In fact, the information war and psychological warfare are crucial elements of China's strategies towards Taiwan and other territories that it is contesting with other countries.

**Ross Greer:** James, you have substantial experience in what we now call “traditional” media. Most traditional media outlets have, certainly in this country, been experiencing a long-term decline in levels of public trust and satisfaction. That decline is not consistent, but there have been significant challenges. How are traditional media outlets responding to the new challenge of disinformation, whether it comes from state actors or from more organic conspiracy theories on social media?

**James Blake:** My background has been mostly in broadcasting, first in radio and then in television, so I come at this very much from a TV point of view.

There is an important role for traditional media outlets, which is focused on trust. Given where we are in the digital landscape, with more and more people watching online and on social media, and with so many people engaged in creating multimedia content, it is really important that we can turn to organisations and individuals that are telling stories and creating content that we can trust. That is a hugely important role, and it is becoming more important, in particular now that we have a big conflict in the heart of Europe, where truth inevitably disappears. We need people—journalists and reporters, with programmes and content—whom we can turn to and whom we can trust.

I am not talking about telling the truth, because that is a hard thing, but we need them to tell stories that are fair and accurate, and as balanced as much as they can be. There is a real opportunity for journalists here: we have so many people—I do not like the term “citizen journalists”—who are using their devices to film things, interview people and tell stories about the community they are in. It is important, for example, that people in Ukraine can tell those stories. There is a real opportunity for traditional media organisations to reach out to those people: to work with them, partner with them and enable their stories to be told.

Equally, however, we have to make sure that we can trust the people with whom we are working, which can be difficult. Yes, we might get video content or interviews from established media players and agencies such as Reuters, Associated Press and so on, and we have fixers on the ground with whom we work, but what happens when somebody approaches you unsolicited, with a really interesting story or content? How do you verify that, if you are sitting at a desk in London or Edinburgh? There are real opportunities here, but there are real dangers for journalists.

**Ross Greer:** Absolutely. Now that we have—I hope—set the scene around the general challenge, we can look at a couple of specific situations, starting—as you would expect—with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I should declare an interest at this point: last week, the Russian Government sanctioned me, for reasons that I do not quite yet understand, so I apparently now have a personal stake in all this. I can't say that it has massively disturbed my holiday plans—I wasn't planning on going to Vladivostok any time soon.

Perhaps Olga can start. It would be interesting to hear your observations about how the Russian and Ukrainian Governments have been trying at all sorts of levels, both with their own populations and globally, to control the narrative around the war. It

would be interesting to hear from you about the ways in which they are trying to do that and the relative success that each country is having.

**Olga Robinson:** The question of success is very interesting and complex. I will give you a brief overview of what Ukraine and Russia have been doing to control the narrative.

Obviously, both sides have been involved in an information war around the actual invasion. As some of my BBC Monitoring colleagues who cover the situation have pointed out, Ukraine has so far deployed things like memes and urban myths—for example, the now-famous story of the ghost of Kyiv that has been doing the rounds. It has gone viral; the only problem with it is that the fighter jet pilot doesn't actually exist. It was more of a collective image of the defenders of Kyiv at the beginning of the war, as Ukrainian officials admitted in the end.

When it comes to memes, almost everybody knows about the Russian warship meme—let's translate it as, "Go away, Russian warship", although it was a bit ruder than that. It is now used everywhere; I have even seen it on merchandise. Those punchy memes and feel-good stories really stick with people—we hear about them over and over again. In a way, that is a success for them.

Earlier today, as satellite images were coming out of Crimea showing the Russian airfield that was hit, the Ukraine Ministry of Defence released a tongue-in-cheek video on Twitter—it has already been watched one million times; I just checked—encouraging Russian tourists, in an ironic way, not to come to Crimea because it may no longer necessarily be safe. That kind of approach is very different from what we see coming out of Russia.

Whenever attacks or incidents such as the killing of civilians in Bucha are blamed on Russia, what we see in response from Russia is—as one of the disinformation researchers has described it—a firehose of disinformation. The whole ecosystem of the Russian media, and a number of disinformation actors affiliated with it, are trying to pollute the information space with a number of—as many as possible—confusing, and at times contradictory, theories. Those responses are not necessarily aimed at convincing anyone that this or that particular theory is correct; they are more likely to be about confusing people and making them think, "It's just too much information—I'm going to switch off and nobody knows the truth; we'll never know."

Whether or not that is having an impact is an interesting question. On the one hand, when I speak to people who still live in Russia—some people I know, and some we have interviewed for various stories—we hear them echoing some of those allegations and theories. They say, "Well, how about this? We are not being told anything—we may not necessarily know the whole truth." The question whether that is because they are bombarded with that kind of information as they live in an information bubble, or because it is psychologically difficult for them to accept that what the Russian soldiers are doing in Ukraine may not necessarily be what they think—whether they are experiencing the impact of that psychological effect rather than believing in disinformation—is really difficult to answer.

However, we know that, as is evident even from independent polls that have been conducted, quite a lot of people in Russia—the majority of the population—support the invasion. The most likely assumption, therefore, is that the propaganda that is coming out of the Russian media, and the whole Russian state media echo system, is having an impact for sure.

**Ross Greer:** You mentioned one or two interesting examples of Ukrainian Government propaganda, the first being the “Russian warship, Go f— yourself” Snake Island incident. That was aimed primarily at the Ukrainian population to inspire resilience among them, and globally among Ukraine’s allies.

You also mentioned that the Ukrainian Government has produced propaganda directed at the Russian population, in that case about Crimea as a tourist resort. The occupation and annexation of Crimea was a real high point for Putin’s domestic popularity, so any attempt by Ukrainians to undermine Russian public confidence in his ability to hold it would be really important.

I think that it is fair to say that the first of those memes, attempting to inspire the Ukrainian population and Ukraine’s global allies, has been successful. How much evidence is there that Ukraine’s propaganda is reaching the Russian population and having the desired effect of undermining confidence in the operation, the Government and Putin himself?

**Olga Robinson:** If we look at the information ecosystem that exists in Russia, we see that it is, overall, fairly difficult for Ukrainian messaging to reach vast numbers of the Russian population. Let us not forget that the majority of Russians still use state television as their main source of news, and obviously that kind of messaging from the Ukrainian side is not going to appear on Russian television unless Russia wants to mock it or present it in a way that suits it.

Online, things are slightly different. You can find alternative information online, but you have to look for it. YouTube is not banned in Russia, and the former lawyer and opposition activist Feygin has a fairly popular YouTube channel where he does interviews with Ukrainian officials. You can access the channel from Russia, but you need to know where to find it, or you have to go and look for it. An ordinary Russian who uses YouTube only to find recipes or funny videos of cats won’t necessarily be served information about Ukraine. If you have no doubts that what is happening in Ukraine is a “special military operation”, as the Russian soldiers are calling it, you won’t simply go to YouTube and find that information. We know that access to Twitter and Instagram is restricted in Russia. Yes, people can use virtual private networks—VPNs—but, again, they would have to be fairly tech-savvy. Not many people in the smaller towns and villages would know how to use VPNs.

The issue is a bit tricky. It is possible that the information coming out of Ukraine is reaching some people in Russia and is trickling into the information space, but I find it hard to believe that it is reaching masses of the population, given the Kremlin’s efforts to control the narrative in the country.

Let us not forget that, even when people in Russia check the weather on the Yandex search engine, which is the largest search engine in Russia, millions of them will see, on the front page, the top five news stories from Russian media, which come from pro-Kremlin sources and present what is happening in Ukraine in a very particular way. Those people, even though they are not necessarily looking for anything related to Ukraine, are passively consuming the Russian messaging. They just look at the site and they see that on the front page—they can’t get away from it. We shouldn’t underestimate just how complex the Russian authorities’ efforts are to try to control the narrative in the country, both in the traditional media and online.

**Ross Greer:** Joanna, how would you rate the success of the Russian propaganda so far? I am particularly interested not just in Russia’s domestic efforts, but in its

attempts to shape the narrative globally. For a lot of folk here, if any of us were to see Russian propaganda around the war, we would find most of it so laughable that it would be pretty easy to dismiss from our perspective. However, that is a very Anglo-centric or European perspective; there is a lot more to the world than that. Has Russian propaganda around the war had more success in other parts of the world, such as the former Soviet republics?

**Dr Joanna Szostek:** It is always hard to judge the impact and effects of any media content or propaganda, and to distinguish those effects from pre-existing views and opinions. There are certainly parts of the world where certain elements of Russia's narrative resonate and fit with how people understand the world. China is a particularly interesting case. Many Chinese citizens and Government officials share that negative view of the west, and of NATO and the United States, so when Russia blames them for what is happening in Ukraine, and uses very anti-western rhetoric, that has a certain resonance within China. Can we say that that is an effect of Russian propaganda? Probably not, because the Chinese information space is so restrictive that I'm not sure we could give Russian propaganda credit for that. There are other parts of the world, and certain audiences even within the EU, such as in Hungary, where elements of the Russian narrative resonate.

Globally, however, when it comes to public opinion, Russia has been in a losing position from the start, simply because not violating the borders of a neighbouring state, and not bombing civilians and levelling cities, are such fundamental basic principles of what it means to be decent and human. Russia has violated those norms and values, and trying to persuade people that it is somehow in the right was always going to be a mammoth task for the Russians outside Russia itself.

**Olga Robinson:** When we talk about whether Russian efforts have been effective in the west and in Europe in particular, it would be fair to say that largely, in mainstream society, they have not. Let us not forget, however, that there are conspiracy circles and people on the fringe who have already been primed to accept those kinds of ideas. There are people who are somehow suspicious of the establishment and the west, and who have very strong anti-western and anti-US sentiments. We are seeing—we see it a lot on Telegram—that those people are quite receptive to Russian messaging.

One of the most successful messages that I have seen claimed that US-funded “biolabs” in Ukraine were somehow involved in the production of biological weapons. That has been widely debunked, but we keep seeing it mentioned as a factor in QAnon circles in Europe and elsewhere, and in other fringe conspiracy and anti-vax circles. Yes, those are fairly small numbers, and fringe communities, but we shouldn't ignore that factor altogether.

**Ross Greer:** Absolutely—as a relatively low-profile politician who has spoken up for Ukraine, I get messages every single day, across social media platforms and in my email inbox, from such people. They are convinced, for example, that the reason that the Ukrainians were fighting to the death for Mariupol and Azovstal was because there was a lab underneath the steel plant with three Canadian generals in it who were coordinating a chemical weapons programme. That claim is patently ridiculous, but there was a very online community of people who bought into it for the reasons that Olga mentioned, such as already being massively disenfranchised and mistrustful of the western establishment.

Tsering, I turn to you on the comparison between the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which is a very modern war in which we are getting blow-by-blow updates—no pun intended—and observing what is happening in real time through social media, and the Chinese occupation of Tibet, which happened decades ago. Tibet is now the least free place on earth, with the greatest restrictions on information.

I realise that this is a far-fetched hypothetical, but if the Chinese invasion and occupation had happened now, how differently do you think it would have played out? When you look at how China's aspirations for Taiwan are being observed in the media right now, and at the situation with Russia and Ukraine, do you think that the situation with Tibet could have been very different if the information flow and the technology that we have now had existed back then?

**Dr Tsering Topgyal:** First, it is important to note some striking similarities between how the invasion and the current rule of Tibet by the Chinese has played out and what has happened in Ukraine. In the early days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine—not the Crimea invasion but the current one—when President Zelenskiy was scrambling to rally his country and trying to seek international support, and military support in particular, my thoughts went back to the situation in 1949 and 1950, when the People's Republic of China declared through radio broadcasts that Tibet and Taiwan were to be “liberated”—they used that exact word—and that it was only a matter of time before Tibet would be liberated. My thoughts went to how the Tibetan leaders might have felt at that time.

There are striking similarities, in the sense that China decided to invade and justified the invasion and on-going occupation as a liberation. The question that many people asked at that time was, liberation from who? From the Chinese point of view, Tibet was being run by a small section of feudal lords who were in turn being masterminded by imperialists: British imperialists, Americans and also the Indians. The Chinese invasion was about liberating the Tibetan “serfs”, as they called most Tibetans, from those feudal lords and imperialist actors. They also tried to justify it by rewriting the history of Tibet and China. Similarly, Putin tried to justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine, going back into history and talking about the existence of Nazis and the need to liberate Russians and Ukrainians from them. There are some important similarities.

There is also the action-reaction dynamic: Chinese information and disinformation on the one hand and the reaction by Tibetans on the other. There are Tibetan exiles—there is something like a Government in exile in India, which Tibetans call the Central Tibetan Administration, and there is an information and international relations department within it, so it has its own information strategy. It is important to remember, however, that even Tibetans inside Tibet, despite the strong censorship and control by the Chinese authorities, have managed to speak back and react to the Chinese propaganda and information strategy. There are some significant similarities with Ukraine, but Tibet is really under Chinese control, while Ukraine—at least most of it—is still independent, so it has more agency and can act with more independence. It is important to keep that in mind.

With regard to how the invasion would have played out if it had happened now, it is important to point out that it may have made a difference. If Tibetans from the whole Tibetan plateau had been able to see what the Chinese were doing in different places in Tibet, it would have allowed them to unite more quickly and strongly and present a united front. The Tibetan leaders and the Government at that time may



have been able to mobilise the population much more strongly, like Zelenskiy did, and get more international support, and international public opinion may have been more supportive. Ultimately, however, I wonder whether all those benefits of information would have overcome the realpolitik.

If we look at the British policy towards Tibet in the 19th and 20th centuries, when Britain ruled India, we see that the most common refrain was about avoiding the wrath of China. Colonial officials such as the political officer in Sikkim and later the British representative in Lhasa, the Tibetan capital, knew the situation on the ground; they interacted more with the Tibetan Government and Tibetan officials, and they were much more sympathetic to the Tibetan position.

However, the India Office—the colonial Government of India—had its own interest, which was to protect India from the northern threat from Russia and elsewhere. Moving up the hierarchy to London, the Foreign Ministry was dealing mostly with China. From the ministry’s point of view, China was much more significant as an economic and strategic partner, and Tibet did not, at that point, have the resources and things like that to justify stronger British support.

We can also look at the Indian Government’s response to the Chinese invasion of Tibet. India was of course a new republic, as it became independent only in 1947. When China decided to “liberate” or invade Tibet in 1949, after the establishment of the PRC, India was most directly affected by the Chinese occupation of Tibet. For example, we see the border dispute, which is still going on, the clashes in the Himalayas and all the other threats to Indian security from China’s position in Tibet. If we look at the communication between the Indian and Chinese Governments, we see that, in those days, India’s main communication with Beijing was to say, with regard to “liberating” or invading Tibet, “You’re doing it at the wrong time.” At that point, India’s thinking was to get the People’s Republic of China into the United Nations; that was the main interest of the international community, and of India and Asia. India was telling the Chinese that they were doing it at the wrong time because it wanted China to become a United Nations member, and China’s plan to invade or “liberate” Tibet was going to jeopardise all that. There was, at that point, no desire to protect Tibet, Tibetan interests or Tibetan sovereignty.

I come back to my point: whether all the benefits of information would have overcome the realpolitik calculations of the countries involved is a big question.

**Ross Greer:** As a result of Russia’s invasion, quite a lot of speculation has, understandably, now turned towards China and its aspirations—never ceded since 1949—for Taiwan. The Chinese and Taiwanese Governments are both very closely observing the situation with Russia and Ukraine and the wider global response to it. What lessons do you think that they are both learning, in particular on communication and misinformation?

**Dr Tsering Topgyal:** Information and psychological warfare is a crucial part of the People’s Liberation Army’s plan to take over Taiwan. That goes back to the imperial period, when the use of deception, misinformation and disinformation as a military strategy was very strong. It is an important element of the PLA’s strategy to take over Taiwan. The Taiwanese have been living with the effects of those strategies, such as hackings and denial-of-service operations. That happened recently when Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan; the Taiwanese Government was not able to use its internet and information systems for a while. Taiwan is particularly vulnerable

because its only access to the internet is through an undersea cable that runs from China. If the Chinese cut that cable, the Taiwanese are very vulnerable. That is why the Taiwanese Government is trying to develop satellite-based alternatives in order to become less dependent on China.

That is a very important part of the Chinese strategy, but the Taiwanese have lived with it for a while, and they are developing counter-strategies. From the Taiwanese perspective, one of the good things arising from China's recent military drills around Taiwan is that the Chinese have revealed what kinds of assets they are going to deploy, and how they are going to isolate Taiwan and keep the Americans away, and try to take over. The Taiwanese and the Americans, and other interested parties, will have learned lessons from that. They have learned about and closely observed China's strategies, and are developing counter-strategies.

**Ross Greer:** James, how are broadcasters grappling with this issue? I am interested in particular in how the tradition—in the UK's case, the requirement—for impartiality in broadcasting comes up against a situation such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in which there is clearly an aggressor and a defender. How does it come up against particular theories, some of which, although they might be objectively false, a significant group of people may believe in? How do broadcasters wrestle with the balance between providing fair and accurate coverage and fulfilling their duty and obligation to be impartial and balanced?

**James Blake:** There is a lot in there. It is really interesting to see how the discussion has moved on to China and Tibet. I will come to answer your question by a slightly longer way.

I talked earlier about how citizen journalism can be a real opportunity. The fact that most people—almost everybody—will have a camera in their pocket can be a really good thing. I have lost count of how many demonstrations, riots and protests I have been on, but it has been wonderful to see that ordinary people are there, filming what is going on. That means—I hope—that the police or the army, or whoever is in a position of power, will think twice before they overstep the mark and are too violent against the protesters in front of them. I have seen it happen, and I think that that is wonderful, and really important: we have citizens who are there as witnesses on the ground and are recording what is happening.

We saw that in Tibet in 2009. There were some images of a big demonstration against the Chinese invasion, with grainy footage of Chinese officials and authorities being quite violent against protesters, monks and so on. What then happened was that the Chinese said that those images were fake, and they released their own images of what they claimed were Tibetan protesters destroying property. One of the important things about the climate of disinformation, which is a real shame, is that it enables people who are in positions of power, and who have been caught and filmed doing something wrong, to say that the footage is fake. Even though the evidence is there, they need only say that it is fake—that plants a seed of doubt, and people start to say, "Oh well, maybe it didn't happen in quite that way."

That goes back to what Olga and Joanna were saying about the success of the propaganda operation that is coming out of Russia. All you need to do is get people questioning it. That feeds into conspiracy theories, but then other people start talking about it. Although propaganda might be quickly debunked by media organisations and BBC Monitoring, and by journalists who are doing a wonderful job, the fact that it

is in the public domain and we are talking about it, and it is spreading, means that it has done its job. That is a real shame.

To go back to the question about what media organisations can do, I think that they can help to debunk videos in particular where those videos are false. BBC Monitoring does a fantastic job, as do other fact-check services. There are also independent organisations that do the same, which is really important.

More widely, we are all becoming experts in video-based forensic analysis, which is interesting. We now actively look at video footage that we see online and—I hope that this is true of most people—think, “Is this true? Is this right? Let’s look into it.” A lot of the video footage that is coming out now is actually old footage—it is from the 2014 conflict, not the current one—or it has been treated or slowed down. That is really interesting. A recent video from Ukraine showed a fire at a fuel depot; people online started to say, “Hang on a second—that must be fake”, because some of the firefighters had “Edmonton, Canada” written on their backs. It turned out that the Edmonton fire department had donated a lot of fire jackets to firefighters in Ukraine. However, the fact that it was doubted and that people raised that question is a good thing. It is good that we are watching videos and looking at content with critical eyes. If it turns out to be true, that is great.

It behoves us all to be a bit sceptical and to do our own legwork to decide what we trust and, importantly, what we share, and which organisations, journalists and reporters we go to for stories about the world.

**Ross Greer:** Joanna, there is currently a lot of focus on this issue, but the focus is on Governments that would be considered hostile to our own—for example, we are talking about Russian and Chinese disinformation and censorship. However, the reality—certainly in the post-Second World War era—is that Britain and America have engaged extensively in those practices too, whether by tilting the scales in elections in Italy and France when the Communists were surging or overthrowing Governments in South America.

Is the current focus on Russia and China distorting the scale and frequency of state-sponsored disinformation campaigns globally? Is the reality simply that every Government is capable of doing this and is, to a greater or lesser scale, doing it all the time?

**Dr Joanna Szostek:** I agree that many Governments, including our own, have, at various points in history, engaged in spreading disinformation. Books have been written about the UK’s experience of that during the Cold War, which is quite interesting to read about. However, I would not want to be too relativist about it and say, “Oh, everybody does this—what the Russians are doing, we do it too; everybody does it, and it’s not that bad.” That is a slippery slope.

The Russian Government likes to draw parallels between western media assistance in certain countries that are trying to democratise and its own efforts to spread anti-democratic values in other countries. Values are central to this. To be honest, I don’t think that disinformation should be spread in any context, but is it sometimes right for western Governments to sponsor news content for audiences in other parts of the world? I would say that, if those audiences aren’t being served well by domestic media, then it absolutely is. I am unashamedly pro-democracy, and if supporting journalism in other parts of the world and encouraging reporting about the sort of topics that are important, including corruption, is part of encouraging the

development of free speech, I would be supportive of that. However, the other side of the fence is that those are sovereign states. That is the argument that we get from countries such as Russia and China, which is, “The UK, the US and the EU should mind their own business and stay out of our information environment.” You pick your values and take your position on that, I guess.

**Ross Greer:** Where there is a deliberate effort by a media institution, whether it is the BBC World Service or Voice of America, to ensure that news and information is reaching countries where that perspective would not otherwise be heard, is there a need for a greater level of democratic scrutiny of those services here in Britain and America compared with how the BBC is typically scrutinised at either UK or Scottish level? Does that require something different, because it is about intervening directly in another sovereign state?

**Dr Joanna Szostek:** Oversight is critically important. In the past, mistakes have been made in terms of the level of oversight given to various western-funded broadcasters. I teach a class at the University of Glasgow in which we look at the 1956 Hungarian Revolution; Cold War broadcasters from the United States were accused of fuelling revolution there, which led to a severe crackdown and people losing their lives. There has to be critical thinking, and good oversight and monitoring of how western broadcasters and news providers operate, what their aims are and what kind of content they are sharing, because we are talking about complex and complicated stuff.

On the claim that western Governments shouldn't help to fund some kinds of journalism for audiences in non-democratic countries at all, I would personally not support cutting that off entirely.

**Ross Greer:** I throw this question open to everyone on the panel. Quite often in recent years, in particular since the election of Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, or since Brexit, some extreme claims have been made about the new wave of disinformation: that these new techniques are an existential threat to democracy, or least the western ideal of liberal democracy—the post-war end-of-history idea that we have reached a point of stability. What is your perspective on that take? Are we facing an existential threat to democracy as we understand it, or are we simply moving into a different phase—a more and robust and combative phase, certainly, but one which democracy can certainly withstand?

**James Blake:** I fear Governments getting involved in stopping the spread of disinformation, because that is a dangerous and slippery slope to go down. Who then decides what is true and what is not true? Is it the Government? What happens if the Government decides that anything that is negative about it is disinformation? We have seen that happen quite recently. In Pakistan, there is quite a worrying rule from 2020 that is tied up with preventing online harm and abuse. It says that the Pakistani Government decides what is disinformation and that it can cut it out. There is a similar rule in Vietnam.

It is really dangerous to have Government clamp down on the spread of disinformation. We should be free to criticise the Government, and it should not be able to stop that under the guise of stopping disinformation. What we can do is encourage education, and encourage people to be critical about what they watch. More media organisations need to have a duty to stamp it out. I think that social

media organisations have a duty to police their own platforms; I don't think that that should be left to Government.

**Olga Robinson:** I am a practitioner, and disinformation is a daily threat for me—it is my job. On whether it is a threat to democracy, I would leave that question to academics, because I think it is a more comfortable area for them.

I absolutely agree on the point about media literacy, which is so important. Part of the remit of my team involves what we do at a time of crisis in particular, when there is a lot of footage pouring in from various places. At the start of the Ukraine war, we saw an absolute avalanche of videos and footage from Ukraine, as well as footage that was not from Ukraine but was presented as such. In that kind of situation, my team, along with the wider disinformation unit at BBC News, tries to produce and air digital videos to explain and offer tips to people on how they themselves can spot what is wrong with footage, and how they can spot disinformation and track it. It is good to hear feedback from ordinary people who say, “Thank you for doing this, because it is really helping.”

I have a quick anecdote on the story about bio labs. I felt really strongly about the need to push back against the bio labs claims. They might sound quite “out there” but, as somebody who is experienced with disinformation, I know that Russia has been spreading disinformation about bio labs on its borders for years, so it was nothing new to me when Russia started talking about that again at the start of the invasion. However, my friend got in touch and said that her mother-in-law was scared of Ukrainian bio weapons and was nearly having panic attacks about the possibility of Ukraine developing such weapons in those laboratories. Hearing that made me feel that there is a need, in the public interest, to push back against such claims. Yes, it may seem that it is not worth unpicking them or giving them more oxygen. However, if they have already reached people so widely around the world, and in Russia itself in that particular case, we have to step in and provide the context. My friend was trying to talk to her mother-in-law and explain that the claim about bio labs was not true, but she didn't have all the arguments, so the conversation fell apart and became very emotional.

Part of what media organisations can do—we have been doing this at BBC Monitoring; our disinformation correspondent Marianna Spring is amazing at it—is to explain to people how to talk to those who believe in conspiracy theories and who have been affected by disinformation, including their loved ones. We often tend to dismiss those people and say, “You should just laugh at them or completely disengage”, but it is so important to empathise with and talk to them. Media organisations can help people by giving tips and explaining how it might be best to do that.

**Ross Greer:** Tsering, do you think that democracies face different threats depending on where in the world, and at which stage of democratic development, they are? I'm thinking of the bold claims that are being made about the existential threat to democracy in the US, for example, in comparison with India, which is a relatively robust democracy but which has a Government that is becoming increasingly censorious. Is the challenge different depending on the local context?

**Dr Tsering Topgyal:** First, I will go back to a previous question. I was hesitant to come in because I am not a specialist in media or journalism, but I have watched

developments in Europe and America and in India—all of which are democracies—with both interest and concern.

We should be vigilant in the UK and America, and in India, in protecting our rights, protecting democracy and all of that. However, there is a crucial difference between what is going on in Europe and America today and what Russia and China, and other such countries, are doing. In the UK, Europe and America, there are a lot of media organisations with different ideological inclinations and interests. Unless they break the law, they are free to operate; the British Government or the American Government does not persecute you if you write or say something against the prime minister or the president. Those Government are not persecuting scholars, either at home or abroad, just for doing their jobs. Take my case, for example. I was born in Tibet, and I write about and do research about Tibet. I work in a British university, but I have family back home. I am exhibit A in terms of a particular Government trying to control what I say and what I write, not just by surveilling and controlling me but by using my relatives and family back home. I say that to prove my point; I don't want to say too much, as it would create unnecessary problems. I think that it is important to make the distinction.

To go back to the question, there is a big distinction to be made between stable, advanced and consolidated democracies and countries that have gone into democratic transition only recently. The role that democracy plays in fostering peace and stability, or violence, is quite complex. The more advanced and consolidated a democracy is, and when its institutions are strong, the more it can have a peaceful and stabilising influence. However, in a new democracy where the institutions are not strong, competitive elections with freedom of expression for candidates and supporters—the freedom to criticise and malign other members of a group just because you need to win awards from your own group—creates, in particular when society is divided along religious or ethnic lines, a combustible mix that can create violence and instability.

With regard to India, I note the recent development of a particular prime minister and a party using religion in a way to poison the political system to some extent. However, we also know that India has gone through these kind of crises before. There was more or less a dictatorship declared by Indira Gandhi in the form of the emergency, when individuals were persecuted, but India overcame that and moved on. India has a vibrant electoral culture, a vibrant media system and quite strong courts—although there are flaws there—which probably puts it in a different category from newly democratised societies.

**Ross Greer:** I have one final question to everyone on the panel before I throw open the discussion to the audience, because I am keen to hear from other folk in the room.

James and Olga mentioned the importance of media literacy. In the UK, there is quite a lot of emphasis on the topic of media literacy for children and young people, and how we can deliver it through schools—looking, for example, at the great work that has taken place on that in Finland. However, if the development of media literacy is an urgent question, are young people the right generation for us to focus on? Are those who have grown up as digital natives actually the most susceptible to disinformation, or should we be focusing on the generations who are well past the point of being a captive audience in the education system?

**Olga Robinson:** The most important thing for us to understand when it comes to audiences is—to repeat what a conspiracy expert said to me the other day—that absolutely anyone is susceptible to disinformation. Your age, gender, level of education and background do not matter. We are all human and we are all susceptible to disinformation, because a lot of it feeds into our own biases, and we might not even realise that we have them.

It is important to focus on young people, but in my department, whenever we think about this, we think about media literacy for everyone. It is equally important for both the younger generations and older generations to know the basics: how to distinguish what is false and what is fake from what isn't, and how to use that understanding practically. We are a small team and we can debunk only so much. There is so much disinformation and misinformation out there, and people need to be prepared for the challenge of living in an online world.

**Ross Greer:** I am particularly interested in how we go about doing that. From a personal perspective, I feel that a lot of our focus on equipping children and young people with the skills to think critically and to spot and evaluate disinformation comes from the fact that it is the easiest age group for us to do that with. Young people are a captive audience, and we can design lessons around media literacy and include it in the curriculum.

The question of how to educate the adult population on any issue is far more difficult, simply because they are not in full-time education. How do we go about equipping the adult population with the critical thinking skills—James made this point—to enable them to evaluate things themselves rather than have the Government tell them what is or is not correct?

**James Blake:** There is a role for social media organisations and digital media companies, because a big problem is that the algorithms that operate the systems mean that we are subjected to, or see, only stories that—as Olga said—play to our existing biases. If we are not seeing other stories that might contradict where we are coming from, we are not learning anything. We need stories that cut through those algorithms—we need to say that teaching people to engage critically with media content is more important than just playing to their desires and whatever their search history has thrown up in the past. Social media organisations have a real part to play in making sure that everyone that Olga was talking about, across all ages and genders and across society, gets sight of and engages with that kind of content.

**Dr Joanna Szostek:** I agree with what Olga said: we are all, from time to time, susceptible to absorbing disinformation and misinformation. That applies to every generation. Of course, as Ross Greer said, older generations who have already left the education system are harder to reach with warnings and so on.

As James said, platforms can help, and some steps that have already been taken have been quite effective. For example, Twitter's reminder that says, "Have you read this article?" before you circulate it further has been shown to introduce friction to the system and slow down the spread of potentially misleading information, so it has been relatively effective. All the little labels that have been added to say that a certain broadcaster is funded by the Russian Government or the Chinese Government are helping to educate people in the process of using social media, online sources and so on.

In addition, we need continuing conversations like this one, in which people have the opportunity to discuss the issues and learn from each other. There is no silver bullet for the problem, but education is super-important at every level. Just because the current younger generation is the digital generation, it does not mean that they know everything, so it is important to include some kind of media literacy and training in the curriculum.

As a concluding thought, I don't think that it should be all about teaching people to fact check—it should also be about teaching them to value check. It is not just the untruth of the Russian narrative that is the problem, but the fact that Russia promotes hate. We need to get people to think about that when they are reading the news and consuming this or that source: about what is it doing to them emotionally—to their psychology, as it were. We need to get them to take a step back from hate-filled content. Media literacy is about not just checking facts, but checking your own emotional reaction and not being led into these hate-filled bubbles.

**Ross Greer:** On that point, I note that Twitter has a relatively new system of marking state-sponsored media outlets and political candidates in some countries but not others. Is that a sustainable model? It essentially relies on the good judgment of social media platforms. For example, Twitter will clearly label a “Russia Today” propagandist but, from the Russian Government's perspective, Olga is a propagandist for the British Government. How sustainable is it for us to rely on Twitter to show enough good judgment to flag up the dangers of RT, Sputnik et cetera, and to recognise the difference between them and what we would consider to be free media?

**Dr Joanna Szostek:** I noticed on YouTube the other day that the BBC now has a label to say that it is a UK public broadcaster. Labels can be attached to all kinds of news organisations, not just those from the foreign Governments with which we have difficult relationships.

In general, informing people about the nature of the source that they are consuming, whatever that source might be, is a good idea, but we have to be careful not to put ourselves in a position in which we could be accused of applying double standards. The question of who does what—what the Government's responsibility is and what a private platform's responsibility is—is an on-going conversation. I know that we have at least one person from Ofcom in the room today who might want to continue that conversation afterwards. It is difficult, because in some ways the platforms have greater expertise, and perhaps even greater power, than Governments to make suggestions for change. It is a conversation that needs to continue.

**Dr Tsering Topgyal:** It is important not only to bring about media literacy but to increase access to higher education. I have been reading about the correlation between people with parochial or racist attitudes and their level of education, both in America and in the UK. It is important for Governments to bring about greater access to higher education, so that people, before they become fully fledged adults, have been trained to recognise misinformation, disinformation and all that.

It is also important to strengthen the power of deterrents in order to deter people from engaging in spreading disinformation. I am thinking about Alex Jones and the court cases that he has been facing in the US for talking about the Sandy Hook school shooting, and the fact that he now has to pay millions of pounds. The laws need to be strengthened to deter people.



To go back to the question of what media companies and social media networks can do, the American and UK Governments classified many Chinese media organisations as foreign agents, and YouTube and other social media organisations have had to put up notifications to say that they are fully or partly funded by the Chinese Government, the American Government or something like that. However, the Chinese Government has been very clever in responding to that by hiring Western experts and influencers to make videos giving access to official sources to Xinjiang, Tibet and various parts of China. They make videos that are supportive of the Chinese Government's policies and the CCP's lines. In fact, many of them are hired as stringers by China Global Television Network and other Chinese media agencies. They have various types of relationships with the Chinese Government and those media organisations, but YouTube and Twitter do not classify them as Chinese agents who are talking about and putting forward Chinese lines.

There are a lot of things that Governments, media organisations and social media organisations can do to start to fight disinformation.

**Ross Greer:** I hope that everybody found that an interesting and enlightening discussion. We have about 20 minutes left in which to take some questions from the floor.

**Question:** Does any of the panel have any comment to make on the role of Bellingcat in all of this?

I say to Dr Tsering Topgyal from Tibet that I feel a deep and lasting shame as to the United Kingdom's stance on Tibet.

**Ross Greer:** Perhaps Olga would like to kick off on the role of Bellingcat, and how the landscape has changed quite radically in the period in which it has been operating.

**Olga Robinson:** Bellingcat is a very well-known organisation right now. It is well known among journalists for the sheer amount of work that it is doing and its ability to dig really deep into open-source investigations. It has played a big role in promoting the idea of citizen journalism and open-source investigations, and it has even inspired newsrooms. It has been so successful at documenting war crimes and wrongdoing in war zones—in Syria and now in Ukraine—that that has prompted at least some newsrooms to invest in developing similar skills themselves. I know that some of the Bellingcat experts have even been working on investigations together with journalists from the BBC, for example at BBC Africa Eye.

Bellingcat is definitely seen as a world expert when it comes to open-source investigations. It is hard to underestimate the impact that it has had over the past few years on the development of the open-source intelligence—OSINT—community.

**James Blake:** Connected to that, we are already seeing bigger collaborations between established journalists and not only organisations such as Bellingcat but the Bureau of Investigative Journalism in the UK and media organisations across broadcast and print. For example, Channel 4 News and The Guardian are collaborating on Cambridge Analytica, and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism is working with other media organisations.

Bellingcat showed us that while big, ambitious, investigative journalism can have a big impact, it is expensive and takes time, and it takes a group of people with unique

skills who can dig into the dark web and so on. Such big collaborations will—I hope—become more common as we need those kinds of big, ambitious investigations.

**Question:** Olga, what you said earlier about YouTube and how it can filter into Russia in some way piqued my curiosity, and it links in with what was said about trusting the judgment of social media organisations. Should there be a moral responsibility on organisations such as Google, which owns YouTube, to push what we would class as true information in Ukraine? Do those organisations have a responsibility to push such information to Russian visitors to their websites?

Again, it is about the trusting the judgment of social media companies. Could that approach possibly end up backfiring and resulting in a blanket ban for YouTube? That would mean that anything that is currently getting through the cracks would end up being stopped.

**Ross Greer:** That is a really interesting question: do these platforms have a moral obligation to be an active participant in situations of conflict?

**Question:** The general statement was made that all democracies can tolerate opposition, and by and large I agree with that. The current Conservative Government is considering selling off Channel 4, which would likely make it less incisive. How should we, or can we, react or respond to that?

**Question:** This relates very much to the question that has just been asked. Leaving aside the BBC's constraints in terms of impartiality, I take the view that one of the biggest spreaders of disinformation in this country is our own mainstream media, because they allow politicians—I am talking mostly about Westminster politicians—to come on and talk total bollocks, and they do not challenge them. I think that the media is split in two, between those whose key skill is reading out loud and those who are skilled journalists. Channel 4 falls into that category, and I wonder if that is why the Government is so keen to change its remit.

**Ross Greer:** Would anyone like to dive in on any of those questions?

**Dr Joanna Szostek:** I don't mind taking the one about YouTube and Russia—I will leave the domestic politics to other people.

I think that social media platforms, in Russia and in other authoritarian states, have a tricky line to walk. To what extent do they comply with laws in those repressive states, and to what extent do they try to push boundaries and give people access to information that the Governments there do not want them to see?

Thinking hypothetically, YouTube is already an important source of—well, I don't know what you would call it: perhaps alternative news that doesn't align with the position of the Russian Government within Russia. YouTube is already playing an important role, and I am personally quite surprised that the Russian Government hasn't yet banned it. Olga might have something to say about why it has not done so.

I am not sure that we can place on the tech platforms the responsibility to reach audiences in hard-to-reach places. The fundamental problem in Russia is that, while you can put information out there—there are a lot of people trying to convince the Russian audience via YouTube videos of the reality of what is happening in Ukraine—the resistance within the Russian population to consuming that kind of critical content and taking it seriously is like a wall. Russians have constructed a nationalist wall in their heads that says that anybody who criticises Russia must, by

definition, be lying. The West and Ukraine are waging an information war against Russia, and therefore Russians are not to take seriously any kind of criticism. Russian propaganda is out there telling the Russian population that their first duty is to support their country and not to bother about critical thinking. No matter who has that responsibility, it is a very difficult task.

**Olga Robinson:** Russia and YouTube is a fascinating story. I find it fascinating that Russia has still not banned YouTube—it is freely available, and it provides a glimpse into the reality of war in Ukraine. If you searched for things on Yandex relating to the Ukraine war, you would very often see links to YouTube that would provide that glimpse. Such links are one of the very few things that are not just programming.

I don't know the answer to the question of why Russia has not banned YouTube. One speculative answer would be that YouTube is incredibly popular in Russia and banning it would probably make a lot of people angry. We also need to understand how people in Russia use YouTube: it is largely for entertainment purposes rather than to get news. If people are living in bubbles where they look for recipes and cat and dog videos and they are not specifically looking for information on Ukraine, the algorithms are not going to start, all of a sudden, leading them down a rabbit hole of Ukraine news.

That might be one explanation, but the real reason might be completely different. The fact that it might make a lot of people angry would be a logical explanation. We know that there is a Russian version of YouTube, called Rutube—as far as I know, it is not popular at all, and nobody I know watches or uses it. In general, the curious case of YouTube in Russia is fairly interesting.

**James Blake:** I have a question for the person who asked about Channel 4. When you talked about the reason why the Government wants to shut down Channel 4, did you mean that it is because Channel 4 challenges politicians?

**Questioner:** Yes—Channel 4 uses journalists rather than newsreaders.

**James Blake:** Okay—that is good. I have spent most of my career at Channel 4 News, so that is a disclaimer, but I have also worked at ITV news and the old “News at Ten” with Trevor McDonald, and I've worked at the BBC, including BBC radio and so on. I have worked across different broadcast outlets, and I feel strongly that we need a diverse broadcast media. We need media organisations and institutions that are doing different things and telling different stories in different ways to different audiences.

What the BBC does is great, but it cannot be our only big media organisation. What the commercial broadcasters do—ITV news, Channel 5 news and so on—is fantastic, but Channel 4 is in a unique position. It is a public service broadcaster that is funded not by a licence fee but by advertising, and it has a very specific public service agenda, which is to foster new talent and tell stories for and by minorities in the UK and so on. That is really precious. I don't think that there is any other media organisation in the world like that, with the same agenda. I think that Channel 4 is a really important part of our media landscape in the UK—but I would say that, wouldn't I, because I work for Channel 4 News.

I fear Channel 4's sell-off, therefore, because I fear that it will become a commercial broadcaster and I fear what will happen, depending on who buys it and who owns it. I don't speak for Channel 4 or ITN and so on, but from my point of view, diversity has

to come first. That is really important, and I think that we would be throwing away something precious if we were to sell Channel 4.

**Ross Greer:** Can I be slightly provocative here? Is there perhaps an issue with our traditional media being too self-congratulatory or too defensive? Whenever we discuss misinformation and disinformation, there is often a slightly reflexive response from journalists, whether they are in print or broadcasting. They say that those are the problems of social media, whereas they exist in a much more noble profession that is not quite infallible but perhaps much closer to it than the public might think.

I certainly see that. As politicians, we get feedback in our inboxes—it is typically about the BBC rather than about other public service broadcasters, and it is not always fair. We tend to see currents coming from different political perspectives, but a common theme is that people feel that the journalists who are interviewing the politicians are the same kinds of people who went to the same schools and universities and who live in the same streets in the same London suburbs, so there is an element of groupthink that results in a lack of challenge. Is that fair?

**James Blake:** I think that that is fair. When I talk about diversity, I am talking not only about diversity in the organisations and in ownership; but about the idea that we need our journalism and our media staff to be diverse so that we can tell stories from across the various areas and communities the UK and make sure that they are all covered.

I don't agree that it is only Channel 4; I think that pretty much most of our mainstream broadcasters do a good job of challenging politicians in particular. However, there are a couple of problems. There is a problem with politicians, and a problem with the way that we tell stories.

We might think about a conventional news bulletin. It is a half-hour programme, whether it is on BBC, ITV, Channel 5 or whatever, and within that, there is generally a reporter package that is usually two-and-a-half or three minutes long. Within that reporter package, you are supposed to tell the story. To comply with Ofcom rules, you have to make sure that there is a balance, so if you interview one politician, you have to interview a politician from the other side.

That is fine, but in reality the logistics of it mean that you have only two-and-a-half or three minutes in which to tell a story, with two or three soundbites. Each soundbite is around 15 or 20 seconds long, and you need one soundbite from one politician on one side and one soundbite from another politician on the other side so that you are balanced, accurate and fair. The politicians know that; I have run out of patience, given the amount of times that I have interviewed a politician and asked a question and, because they know that I'm only going to use one soundbite, they do not engage with the question at all. They just give me the answer that they want me to use—do you see what I mean? I need to use a soundbite from them, and they give me the soundbite that they want me to use. As a journalist, that is really frustrating. I ask the question again, and they give me the soundbite that they want me to use again.

That is really difficult. I don't have the time to be seen to be challenging the politician, because I have only two minutes and 30 seconds in which to tell the story. What do I do? Either I decide not to use the soundbite at all—I have done that quite a lot in the past because they have not engaged with my question at all—or I use the soundbite that they want me to use, or I write something into it or whatever.

**Questioner:** Just don't interview any of them.

**James Blake:** But we are telling a political story, and these are our representatives. It is difficult. Digital platforms and social media enable us to do something good. If I were to do an interview and use only 20 seconds of it for broadcast, what is to stop me taking the whole unedited interview and putting it up on Twitter or Facebook? I can say, "See how they didn't answer the question, and how they dodged what I was trying to ask. Look at how I was trying to challenge them, but they weren't answering."

With social media, there is a real opportunity to show a bit of the reality of how these things work behind closed doors. I think that politicians are beginning to realise that, and to realise that they need to engage with the question. That doesn't mean to say that they don't still want you to use their soundbite—of course they do—but I hope that politicians are, more and more, engaging with a question and being challenged by it, rather than just seeing it as an opportunity for them to get their 20-second message on TV. Nonetheless, you can see how there is a problem with the bulletin and the programme format.

Channel 4, along with "Newsnight" and other programmes on Sky and so on, enables us to do something different. If we have more time, and if we have live interviews in particular, we can get politicians in and really challenge them, and we can make sure that they don't dodge the question. That can be more successful in terms of engaging with and challenging people in authority.

**Ross Greer:** I remember that 11 years ago—it is getting on a bit now—there was an infamous clip of Ed Miliband saying, "These strikes are wrong", which is the ultimate example of what you are talking about. He had one soundbite, which was to say that a particular public sector strike was wrong. He was questioned 12 times, and his reply was just 12 different ways of rearranging the words. That answer worked perfectly when it was broadcast on BBC News, but it didn't work so well when the BBC then uploaded the full five minutes of him saying the same thing over and over again in response to different questions.

I am just as guilty of that, however, because the question then becomes, where is the incentive for politicians to give a longer-form answer? We're not on the news everyday—I have 10 seconds a week when I might be on "Reporting Scotland". If I want to get my 10 seconds across, I need to be incentivised to answer the questions that are being asked. That is a cynical way of looking at it, but that is politics.

**James Blake:** But the journalists are not blameless either. If a politician were to admit in an answer to some kind of blame for something or say "Yes, we got it wrong", that would be the bit that would end up being used, and not the positive bit that they wanted to put across. There is a real problem with conventional storytelling and conventional news in that it does not get across some of these complexities.

**Ross Greer:** Rarely is a public policy question simple enough for a 10-second answer to be adequate.

I will give Tsering the final word.

**Dr Tsering Topgyal:** I didn't want to come in on that, because I want to practice what I preach by not misinforming you about matters that I am not fully informed about myself.

On the point about how journalists conduct interviews, in the area of international affairs, it is not just that the journalists don't ask difficult questions but that they are not fully informed—they are not knowledgeable. I am not talking about all journalists, of course, but I have watched an interview with the former Chinese ambassador to the UK by Andrew Marr, and an interview with the former Chinese ambassador to the US by Christiane Amanpour on CNN, in which they were talking about the genocide and the issues in Xinjiang.

The Chinese ambassadors said, "There is no genocide, because the population of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang has doubled from 1949 to now." There are similar narratives about Tibet. The journalists let the ambassadors escape and get away with that. If they were more fully informed, they would have talked about the percentage of the population of Xinjiang that the Uyghurs compose today, which is just under 45 per cent, whereas it was almost 80 per cent in 1949. In addition, genocide is not just about the physical elimination of a people, but about psychological make-up and cultural identity—all those things should be taken into account. Both those interviewees managed to get away without being challenged.

**Ross Greer:** That is absolutely true, even at a domestic level. If you look at Scottish print publications, for example, you see that the number of newspapers in Scotland that still have education, health, environment and justice correspondents is basically nil. There are very generalist journalists trying to cover all those issues, and it is not a criticism of them to say that they don't have the depth of knowledge in every one of those fields. That makes the job easier for folk like myself, as I'm not being asked the difficult questions because the journalist is not familiar enough with the issue to be able to ask them.

We have run over time, I'm afraid—apologies to the folk who wanted to ask a question and did not have time to do so. I give a final round of thanks to Tsering, Joanna, James and Olga. I have found this a really interesting and engaging conversation, and I hope that you have as well.