

Expert Briefing: 'Rhetoric, Disorder, and the Crisis of Democracy'

Key takeaways from a parliamentary panel discussion, 15th June 2026

On 15th June 2026, the [Foreign Policy Centre](#) (FPC), the [Global Disorder Group](#) at City St. George's, University of London (City), [Shout out UK](#) (SOUK), and the [All-Party Parliamentary Group \(APPG\) on Political and Media Literacy](#) co-hosted a discussion examining the relationship between political rhetoric, information disorder, and democratic resilience.

The event was chaired by **Susan Coughtrie**, FPC's Executive Director, and brought together an expert panel including: **Dr Sasikumar Sundaram**, Senior Lecturer at the Department of International Politics at City; **Professor Inderjeet Parmar**, Professor of International Politics at City; **Effie Webb**, reporter on The Bureau of Investigative Journalism's (TBIJ) Big Tech team; **Amelia Fairney**, SOUK's Head of Strategy and Communications; and closing reflections from **Matt Bishop MP**, Chair of the APPG on Political and Media Literacy.

The discussion explored how increasingly polarised political rhetoric, widening inequality, AI-driven misinformation, and fragmented media ecosystems are reshaping democratic discourse. Speakers examined the structural drivers of democratic strain, the role of technology in amplifying division, and practical approaches to strengthening political and media literacy.

"Democracy depends on freedom of speech, just as a democratic international order depends on the free flow of ideas and dialogue. Yet rhetoric has become a mainstay of power politics, displacing democratic dialogue. The rhetoric of civilizational glory, decline of the West, technological inevitability, and ideological discontentments among others reflect deeper inequalities between states, societies, actors, and institutions. Specifically, rising wealth inequalities and oligarchies have displaced state entrepreneurship aimed at public well being, which is driving rhetoric, disorder, and the crisis of democracy. Political and media literacy should therefore cultivate social purpose and critical judgment, asking not only how we communicate, but what kind of good life and accountabilities democratic societies ought to pursue."

- **Dr Sasikumar Sundaram**

"The challenges posed by misinformation, AI, and polarised rhetoric cannot be separated from the wider political economy of contemporary democracy. Extreme concentrations of economic and technological power have contributed to growing public distrust and of political exclusion and alienation. There is a widespread legitimacy crisis which fosters dangerous political movements. Political and media literacy are therefore not optional additions to democracy; they are vital democratic infrastructure. However, lasting democratic resilience will depend not only on helping citizens navigate information environments, but also on addressing the inequalities and imbalances of power that erode trust in the first place."

- **Professor Inderjeet Parmar**

This briefing outlines key themes and insights from the parliamentary panel discussion:

- Political rhetoric is a symptom of deeper structural transformations.
- The concentration of economic and technological power is reshaping democratic discourse.
- AI is accelerating existing vulnerabilities in the information ecosystem.
- Political and media literacy must be treated as democratic infrastructure.
- Strengthening democratic resilience requires systemic responses.

1. Political rhetoric is a symptom of deeper structural transformations

Speakers cautioned against viewing political polarisation and inflammatory rhetoric as isolated phenomena. Instead, they argued that contemporary democratic tensions reflect broader structural changes in both domestic and international politics.

The discussion highlighted the proliferation of competing political narratives across the world. These include claims about the decline of the liberal international order, the emergence of a multipolar world, the erosion of Western influence, growing demands for strategic autonomy, and narratives centred on perceived threats to national identity and culture. Such narratives are increasingly shaping both public opinion and policymaking, often framing political challenges in existential terms.

A recurring theme was that rhetoric should be understood not simply as political language, but as a form of political power. Narratives influence how citizens understand crises, identify political enemies, and assess the legitimacy of institutions. As a result, rhetoric has become a central battleground in contemporary politics, both within states and across the international system.

These developments are closely linked to growing economic inequality. Drawing on findings from the 2026 World Inequality Report, speakers noted that a tiny proportion of the global population now controls a disproportionate share of global wealth.¹ This concentration of economic power has contributed to widespread perceptions of exclusion and unfairness, creating fertile ground for populist mobilisation and political distrust.

Accordingly, the ‘common denominator’ underpinning the rise of both radical right and radical left political movements is the persistence of hyper-inequality and the sense that existing political and economic systems no longer serve large sections of society.

2. The concentration of economic and technological power is reshaping democratic discourse

Economic and technological transformations have altered the way information is produced, distributed, and consumed. The increasing concentration of power within global finance and technology sectors has enabled a relatively small number of corporations to exert growing influence over both economic

¹ World Inequality Lab, World Inequality Report 2026, June 2026, <https://wir2026.wid.world/>

outcomes and information flows.² Particular attention was given to the role of major technology companies and social media platforms, whose business models often prioritise engagement and visibility over accuracy or democratic value.

Participants argued that these dynamics have contributed to the emergence of an information environment in which emotionally charged, divisive, and sensational content is often rewarded by platform algorithms. This has created powerful incentives for political actors to adopt increasingly provocative rhetoric, reinforcing cycles of outrage and polarisation.³

The discussion suggested that concerns about misinformation cannot be separated from questions of political economy. The challenge is not simply that false information exists, but that the underlying architecture of the digital information ecosystem, which rewards engagement including specifically through monetisation, frequently amplifies it. In this sense, information disorder was characterised as a structural feature of contemporary digital environments rather than merely the result of individual bad actors.

3. AI is accelerating existing vulnerabilities in the information ecosystem

While misinformation and disinformation are longstanding features of political and social life, AI has fundamentally altered the scale, speed, and sophistication with which misleading content can be created and disseminated.⁴

Generative AI is lowering the barriers to producing convincing, but false content, making it increasingly difficult for citizens to distinguish between authentic and synthetic information. The challenge is no longer limited to isolated instances of misinformation, but extends to an entire information environment in which trust itself is becoming harder to maintain. Effie Webb referenced TBIJ's investigation into 'Danny Bones', an AI-generated rapper whose content attracts millions of views online and was subsequently linked to political campaigning by the far-right party Advance UK.⁵ The case illustrates how synthetic personalities can be deployed to disseminate political narratives, cultivate online communities, and blur the distinction between entertainment, influence, and political communication.

However, AI should not be viewed as the root cause of democratic disorder. Rather, it is acting as an accelerant, amplifying existing weaknesses in media ecosystems already characterised by declining trust, political polarisation, and fragmented sources of information. The speed at which AI-generated content

² Tech Policy Press, Tech Oligarchy Imperils Democratic Information Flows, June 2025, <https://www.techpolicy.press/tech-oligarchy-imperils-democratic-information-flows/>

³ UK Parliament Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, Social media, misinformation and harmful algorithms, July 2025, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/48745/documents/258221/default/>

⁴ World Economic Forum, Global Risks Report 2025, January 2025, <https://www.weforum.org/press/2025/01/global-risks-report-2025-conflict-environment-and-disinformation-top-threats/>

⁵ The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, Meet the AI rapper funded by a far-right party, March 2026, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2026-03-12/danny-bones-meet-the-ai-rapper-funded-by-a-far-right-party/>

can be produced and circulated has significantly escalated the challenge facing regulators, journalists, educators, and policymakers alike.

The discussion also highlighted the growing risk of AI-generated content during election periods, where manipulated images, fabricated audio, and synthetic news content may undermine public confidence in democratic processes even when subsequently debunked. As participants noted, the mere possibility that information may be fabricated can itself contribute to public uncertainty and distrust.

4. Political and media literacy must be treated as democratic infrastructure

A particular area of consensus was the importance of political and media literacy in helping citizens navigate complex information environments.

Speakers emphasised that media literacy should be understood as more than simply identifying misinformation. It must also involve developing critical thinking skills, understanding how democratic institutions function, recognising persuasive techniques, and engaging constructively with differing viewpoints.⁶

Drawing on the work of Shout Out UK, the discussion highlighted the importance of equipping young people with the skills needed to navigate online spaces where misinformation, conspiracy theories, and sophisticated forms of manipulation are commonplace. Participants noted that resilience to misinformation cannot be built solely through regulation; it also requires citizens to feel confident in assessing information independently.

The discussion further emphasised that political and media literacy should not be treated as optional educational initiatives, but as a form of democratic infrastructure. As digital technologies continue to reshape public discourse, investment in civic education and critical thinking skills will become increasingly important to the long-term health of democratic societies.

5. Strengthening democratic resilience requires systemic responses

The discussion concluded with a broad consensus that democratic disorder cannot be addressed through any single intervention. Political polarisation, misinformation, declining trust, and technological disruption are interconnected challenges that require coordinated responses across government, civil society, academia, media, and the private sector.

These responses must reflect the distinct mandates and legal powers of the bodies involved. For example, the Electoral Commission's role is focused on the integrity of elections, campaign rules,

⁶ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Countering Disinformation Effectively: An Evidence-Based Policy Guide*, January 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/01/countering-disinformation-effectively-an-evidence-based-policy-guide>; House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee, *Media Literacy*, 1st Report of Session 2024–25, HL Paper 163, April 2025, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5901/ldselect/ldcomm/163/163.pdf>

spending, donations, and imprints, whereas Ofcom's powers relate more directly to online services, platform accountability, and media literacy.⁷ Government-led initiatives to counter foreign interference, including the Foreign Influence Registration Scheme and wider defending-democracy arrangements, address a different but related set of risks.⁸ This means that strengthening democratic resilience is not only a question of developing new policy ideas, but also of reviewing whether existing institutions and schemes are adequately coordinated, sufficiently resourced, and being implemented effectively in practice.

Speakers argued that policymakers must move beyond diagnosing the problem towards implementing practical solutions. Potential areas for action identified during the discussion included improving political and media literacy education, increasing transparency and accountability for digital platforms, supporting independent and local journalism, and addressing the underlying social and economic inequalities that contribute to political discontent.⁹

Participants also highlighted the importance of bridging the gap between academic research and policymaking. While significant scholarship exists on rhetoric, political narratives, information disorder, and democratic resilience, these insights do not always translate effectively into public debate or policy development. Creating stronger links between researchers, policymakers, journalists, and practitioners was therefore identified as an important priority.

The parliamentary discussion ultimately concluded that democratic resilience depends not only on protecting institutions, but also on rebuilding public trust, strengthening civic participation, and creating information environments that support informed and constructive democratic engagement.

⁷ Ofcom, What we do, <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/what-we-do>; The Electoral Commission, Our role and responsibilities, <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/about-us/our-role-and-responsibilities>

⁸ UK Government, National Security Act 2023: Foreign Influence Registration Scheme (FIRS), updated April 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/foreign-influence-registration-scheme>

⁹ Read more on the APPG on Political and Media Literacy and Shout Out UK's recommendations here: <https://www.shoutoutuk.org/appg/>