

Conservatives plan to bring back mandatory National Service

Jennifer McKiernan & Emily McGarvey – Abridged from BBC – 25 May 2024

Twelve months of mandatory national service would be reintroduced by the Conservatives if they win the general election. Eighteen-year-olds would be able to apply for one of 30,000 full-time military placements or volunteering one weekend a month carrying out a community service.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said he believed bringing back compulsory service across the UK would help foster the "national spirit" that emerged during the pandemic. Labour criticised the plans, expected to cost about £2.5bn, as "desperate" and "unfunded".

The Conservatives want the first teenagers to take part in a pilot from September 2025, with details to be worked out by a Royal Commission. The armed forces placements would allow young people to learn about cyber security, logistics, procurement, or civil response operations. Non-military volunteering would involve 25 days with organisations such as the fire service, the police and the NHS.

Mr Sunak said: "This is a great country but generations of young people have not had the opportunities or experience they deserve and there are forces trying to divide our society in this increasingly uncertain world. "I will bring in a new model of national service to create a shared sense of purpose among our young people and a renewed sense of pride in our country." He added it would help young people learn "real world skills, do new things and contribute to their community and our country".

The Conservatives said the move would help ensure young people who were not employed, in education or training, or at risk of getting involved with crime, would be diverted away from "lives of unemployment and crime".

They were unable to say what sanctions those not taking part could face. Instead, they argued, national service would provide "valuable work experience" and "ignite a passion for a future career in healthcare, public service, charity or the armed forces".

The party said the £2.5bn cost of national service would see £1.5bn diverted from levelling up the UK Shared Prosperity Fund from 2028. A further £1bn would come from plans to crack down on tax avoidance and evasion.

A Labour Party spokesperson said: "This is another desperate £2.5 billion unfunded commitment from a Tory Party which already crashed the economy, sending mortgages rocketing, and now they're spoiling for more. "This is not a plan – it's a review which could cost billions and is only needed because the Tories hollowed out the armed forces to their smallest size since Napoleon."

National service was introduced in 1947 after World War Two by Clement Attlee's Labour government. It meant men aged between 17 and 21 had to serve in the armed forces for 18 months. The mandatory national service scheme came to an end in 1960.

Some European countries, including Sweden, Norway and Denmark, already have a form of conscription for their armed forces. Conscription requires young men and women to serve for a limited time in uniform. It means that some of the population will have had some military training - and can then be assigned to reserve units should war break out.

507 words

Debunking misinformation failed. Welcome to ‘prebunking’

Cat Zakrzewski, Joseph Menn, Naomi Nix, Will Oremus – Abridged from The Washington Post – May 2024

Election officials and researchers from Arizona to Taiwan are adopting a radical playbook to stop falsehoods about voting before they spread online, amid fears that traditional strategies to battle misinformation are insufficient in a perilous year for democracies around the world.

Modeled after vaccines, these campaigns — dubbed “prebunking” — expose people to weakened doses of misinformation paired with explanations and are aimed at helping the public develop “mental antibodies” to recognize and fend off hoaxes in a heated election year.

In the run-up to next month’s European Union election, Google and partner organizations are blanketing millions of voters with colorful cartoon ads on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram that teach common tactics used to propagate lies and rumors on social media or in email. One animation features a fake news campaign in which “visiting tourists” are blamed for a “litter crisis.” It is meant to educate voters about “scapegoating,” a disinformation technique that places unwarranted blame for a problem on a single person or group.

Google has no plans to launch such a campaign in the United States, where former president Donald Trump and his allies are spreading falsehoods about voter fraud in the 2020 election, laying the groundwork to cast doubt on the results of Trump’s rematch with President Biden in November. Instead, humbler campaigns are springing up in locations across the nation, including Arizona’s Maricopa County, where election officials are enlisting local celebrities such as the Phoenix Suns basketball team to promote voting and explain the procedures. Federal agencies are encouraging state and local officials to invest in prebunking initiatives, advising to “build a team of trusted voices to amplify accurate information proactively.”

“Communicate early and transparently about the elections process to the American people,” said Cait Conley, an election security expert at the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, which has conducted dozens of practice runs with local officials that include misinformation scenarios. The moves come after nearly a decade of floundering initiatives to stem voting misinformation, leading researchers to a sobering conclusion: It is nearly impossible to counter election misinformation once it has taken root online.

Since the revelations that Russia tried to undermine the 2016 elections by stoking divisions on Facebook and other social networks, the most prominent tactics to battle misinformation largely have been reactive. But even fact-checking social media posts has become more difficult as major tech companies pull back resources for labeling false claims about voting on their platforms.

In a year when law enforcement officials are warning that artificial intelligence could supercharge election threats, election officials say prebunking could be their best hope. Prebunking draws inspiration from “inoculation theory,” developed by the social psychologist William J. McGuire in the 1960s. McGuire posited that you could prepare people to reject a misguided argument by first exposing them to a weakened form of that argument, along with a strong refutation of it — sort of like a vaccine for the mind. Then when people encounter that argument in the wild, the theory goes, they recognize it and are less likely to fall for it.

Scarlett Johansson Said No, but OpenAI's Virtual Assistant Sounds Just Like Her

Tripp Mickle – Abridged from The New York Times – May 2024

Days before OpenAI demonstrated its new, flirty voice assistant last week, the actress Scarlett Johansson said, Sam Altman, the company's chief executive, called her agent and asked that she consider licensing her voice for a virtual assistant.

It was his second request to the actress in the past year, Ms. Johansson said in a statement on Monday, adding that the reply both times was no.

Despite those refusals, Ms. Johansson said, OpenAI used a voice that sounded “eerily similar to mine.” She has hired a lawyer and asked OpenAI to stop using a voice it called “Sky.”

OpenAI suspended its release of “Sky” over the weekend. The company said in a blog post on Sunday that “AI voices should not deliberately mimic a celebrity's distinctive voice — Sky's voice is not an imitation of Scarlett Johansson but belongs to a different professional actress using her own natural speaking voice.”

For Ms. Johansson, the episode has been a surreal case of life-imitating art. In 2013, she provided the voice for an A.I. system in the Spike Jonze movie “Her.” The film told the story of a lonely introvert seduced by a virtual assistant named Samantha, a tragic commentary on the potential pitfalls of technology as it becomes more realistic.

Last week, Mr. Altman appeared to nod to the similarity between OpenAI's virtual assistant and the film in a post on X with the single word “her.”

OpenAI is at an important juncture as it prepares to make its voice assistants available to customers with support from its latest technology, known as GPT-4o. On Monday night, Mr. Altman said in a statement that “the voice of Sky is not Scarlett Johansson's, and it was never intended to resemble hers.”

“We cast the voice actor behind Sky's voice before any outreach to Ms. Johansson,” he continued. “Out of respect for Ms. Johansson, we have paused using Sky's voice in our products. We are sorry to Ms. Johansson that we didn't communicate better.”

She is the latest high-profile person to accuse OpenAI of using creative work without permission. Over the past year, OpenAI has been sued for copyright violations by authors, actors and newspapers, including the Authors Guild of America and The New York Times, which sued OpenAI and its partner, Microsoft.

It is the second time in recent years that Ms. Johansson has taken a public stand against a prominent company. In 2021, she sued the Walt Disney Company, accusing it of breaching her contract because it released the film “Black Widow” simultaneously in theaters and on Disney+. Ms. Johansson reached a settlement with the company.

In September, Ms. Johansson said, Mr. Altman first reached out to her about providing her voice for OpenAI's future assistant.

“He told me that he felt that by my voicing the system, I could bridge the gap between tech companies and creatives and help consumers to feel comfortable with the seismic shift concerning humans and A.I,” she said in her statement. “He said he felt that my voice would be comforting to people.”

Anthony Horowitz: writers should not be told to make books more diverse

Lucy Knight – Abridged from The Guardian, 24 May 2024

The children's author Anthony Horowitz has said writers should not be instructed to make their books more diverse.

The author of the Alex Rider novels has previously sparked controversy over his views on the subject. In 2017, he was criticised by other children's authors when he claimed he had been "warned off" writing Black characters in his books.

Speaking at the Hay festival in Powys, he said he was aware of reflecting diversities in his work but said the need to be inclusive should not be imposed.

"There are as many female murderers in my books as male ones," he said.

"I am very pro equal opportunities, I am very pro multiethnic, I am very pro books being about as much of the world as you can fit into a single book. What I'm not pro is anybody telling me that that is what I have to do. There is a difference."

Horowitz has written three James Bond continuation novels authorised by the Ian Fleming estate: *Trigger Mortis* (2015), *Forever and a Day* (2018) and *With a Mind to Kill* (2022).

When asked at the Hay event whether he had modern sensitivities in mind when writing these, he was adamant that he did not "update [Bond] for a modern audience".

"I'm not so stupid that I'm going to write something that is going to offend an ethnicity or a community of people," he said, but added he had not "given in" to any temptation to make the protagonist more palatable. "He is still a womaniser, he is still a smoker, he is still a killer. I mean, he's not a very nice man, James Bond," he said.

The writer also said he was firmly against the practice of making changes to old books to take out offensive passages, as in the case of Puffin's new editions of Roald Dahl books, which caused controversy last year. It was also announced last year that reissues of Fleming's Bond novels were to be published with a number of racial references removed.

"My position on this is very simple," Horowitz said. "When you start bowdlerising books, when you start chopping out stuff that offends you ... I think that you are actually shooting yourself in the foot.

"When you read an original Ian Fleming, there are passages in it that will offend you. In *Casino Royale* there's a famous passage which is entirely misanthropic, and I wish Ian Fleming hadn't written it. But chopping it out doesn't make the book better. All it does is it takes away the memory of how far we have come. Now here we are in the 21st century, and we know that we don't say certain things about ethnic groups or about mothers-in-law ... We don't make jokes about people with disabilities.

"That's gone, and we can be proud of the progress we've made. And the only way to know about that progress is to keep in mind how we were 30 or 40 years ago."

More than half the world cannot speak freely, report finds

Sharp rise in number of people facing a crisis in freedom of speech, while authors particularly alarmed by deterioration in India under Narendra Modi

by Kaamil Ahmed, The Guardian, May 22nd, 2024

Half the world's population cannot freely speak their mind according to a new report on freedom of expression. In its annual report, the advocate group Article 19 found the number of people facing a "crisis" in freedom of speech and information was the highest this century after a sharp rise from 34% in 2022 to 53% in 2023.

"At no point in the last 20 years have so many people been denied the benefits of open societies, like the ability to voice opinions, access a free media or participate in free and open elections," said Article 19's executive director Quinn McKew. The report's authors were particularly alarmed by deterioration in India during the past 10 years under the rule of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, changing its classification from "restricted" to "crisis".

Ethiopia was also re-classified as in "crisis" while eight other countries also saw a deterioration in freedoms last year, including Burkina Faso, Senegal and Mongolia. "Violations of freedoms happen every day and around the world, as leaders degrade our freedoms one by one. Many do so through subtle policy changes presented in the name of 'public safety', 'morality' or 'national security' – tightening the net until there is no room left to breathe," said McKew.

The report deems a country as in crisis when its freedom of expression and information are at the worst levels, with citizens unable to express themselves freely or express dissent without punishment, and media is censored and attacked.

In Kashmir, one of the regions in the world where journalists have described harsh crackdowns on their ability to work – including the stripping of their passports and bans on exiting the country – one source said: "I think 10 times before going to any particular place because of my identity – as a Muslim and a journalist. I don't even mention I'm a Kashmiri – that's altogether a new game."

They said they fear being attacked by Hindu nationalists while reporting. "It's very hard as a Muslim reporter to go to vulnerable places now," they said. The source said their passport was taken by authorities, meaning they can no longer travel for reporting or training. "It has been suffocating," they said. "I've lost a lot of work. My opportunities have reduced so much that sometimes I feel like I want to leave journalism."

While Article 19 lamented the state of freedom of expression globally, the report was hopeful about improvements in Brazil since Jair Bolsonaro was voted out of power, classifying the country now as "open" after having previously labelled it "restricted".

Maria Trajan from Article 19 Brazil said: "Brazil's example gives us hope that change is possible. But it's also a reminder that rights and freedoms must never be taken for granted – the work to guarantee, strengthen and improve rights must always continue."

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Biden and Trump clinch nominations, heading to another general election rematch (abridged)

by Gregory Krieg, CNN, March 13th, 2024

Donald Trump has clinched the Republican nomination for president setting up a rematch with Joe Biden, the incumbent president who secured the Democratic nomination earlier Tuesday night.

In a post to the social media platform X, Biden celebrated his status as his party's presumptive nominee, in a new campaign video. "Today's a day, a call to action with your voice, with your power, with your vote – come November, we will vote in record numbers, and can do it, we have the power to do it. Are you ready? Are you ready to defend democracy? Are you ready to protect our freedom? Are you ready to win this election?"

Trump's campaign posted a video on X of the former president later Tuesday, shortly after he clinched the nomination. "This was a great day of victory. Last week was something very special – Super Tuesday – but now we have to get back to work because we have the worst president in the history of country. His name is Joe Biden, sometimes referred to as crooked Joe Biden, and he must be defeated," Trump says in the video.

The shorter slate of elections follows last week's Super Tuesday, when Biden and Trump dominated across the map, putting both on the cusp of winning a majority of the delegates needed to be crowned their parties' presumptive nominees. Their rematch – long anticipated, but hardly clamored for – is broadly expected to mirror the 2020 campaign, though Trump will run this time under the specter of 91 felony charges related to allegations that he plotted to overturn his 2020 election defeat; played a lead role in the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol; illegally took classified documents from the White House; and covered up hush money payments to an adult film star ahead of the 2016 election.

Though he now has a record of accomplishments and missteps for voters to weigh, Biden is so far running a similar campaign to 2020 – appealing to concerns over Trump's authoritarian behavior and a middling economy.

Biden's main opposition has come not from any candidate but from more general intraparty anxiety over his age and from progressives' outrage over the administration's support for Israel during its monthslong war against Hamas in Gaza. On the GOP* side, Trump has long been seen as the prohibitive favorite despite competition from a collection of GOP challengers, including governors, senators, right-wing provocateurs and his own former vice president, Mike Pence.

The last to succumb was former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, who left the Republican race last week after a string of losses but did not endorse Trump on the way out. Haley said the former president needed "to earn the votes of those in our party and beyond it who did not support him." Similar to Biden, Trump will need to win over skeptical portions of his own base to match past levels of support.

"My lifetime has taught me to embrace the future of freedom and democracy," Biden said at a rally in Atlanta. "But we all know Donald Trump sees a different America, an American story of resentment, revenge and retribution. That's not me, that's not you."

*The GOP: Grand Old Party, a nickname for the Republican Party.

Young people tend to underestimate how worried older people are about climate change

by Lauren Boland, The Journal (www.thejournal.ie) May 17th, 2024

Young people tend to underestimate how worried older people are about climate change, a new study has found. Research by the Economic Social and Research Institute (ESRI), funded by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) tested young people's perceptions of how older people feel about climate change and whether focusing on generational differences motivates people to take climate action.

The research found that around three quarters of young people estimated older people's concern about climate change to be lower than what older people themselves reported when they were asked. Dr Cotter, Director of the EPA's Office of Evidence and Assessment, said in a statement that "responding to the climate crises requires collective action across all segments of society. This research provides valuable insights to help inform the design of effective climate communications strategies that motivate different generational groups to act collectively".

A sample of 500 young people aged 16 to 24 years old were asked to read a short text about climate change. Half were selected at random to read a version that included narratives about different generations, such as that "older generations did not do enough to stop it [climate change]" and future generations were more likely to experience the worst effects. The other half read the same text but with the generational narratives excluded.

All participants were then asked to respond to questions about how worried they are about climate change, as well as to what extent they believe older people and other young people are worried. "After rating how worried they perceived older people to be, half the participants were randomised to see the actual responses of older people to the question, based on data previously collected in Ireland. Participants then answered further questions, including about their belief in collective action for climate change mitigation (i.e., that others will play their part) and their intentions to engage in pro-environmental behaviour in the future," the research explains.

Among the participants, the young people who read the generational narrative text reported being more worried about climate change than the second group, and also reported higher levels of perceived worry among their friends or other young people. However, there was no difference in perceptions about older people's worry between the two groups. Both groups, regardless of which text they read, underestimated how worried older people are about climate change.

The study found that focusing on generational differences in contributions to climate change and exposure to its consequences can increase worry among young people but does not motivate them to take action. Instead, correcting misperceptions among young people about older people's level of worry may be of benefit.

Dr Timmons of the ESRI's Behavioural Research Unit said that "differences between generations in their contribution to climate change are undeniable", but that "focusing on these differences may contribute to existing misperceptions about the beliefs of others. Instead, communications about climate change that highlight commonalities between subgroups of the population may help to reduce eco-anxiety and foster the kind of cooperation necessary to mitigate and adapt it."

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Secondary students regularly see ‘toxic’ content on social media, survey finds

More than two-thirds report using AI tools, with almost half using ChatGPT for school-related tasks

by Carl O'Brien, The Irish Times, Wed May 15, 2024

A large proportion of secondary school students see “toxic” content on their social media feeds which they consider offensive to women, homophobic or racist on a weekly basis, a survey has found.

The findings, based on an online poll of more than 3,700 secondary school students, also indicate that most parents do not set down rules over their children’s smartphone use.

The survey by online study tool Studyclix also details the negative impact of social media on students’ body image and increased use of AI (artificial intelligence) tools for schoolwork.

More than two-thirds reported using AI tools, with almost half using ChatGPT for school-related tasks. Many of those surveyed said they used the tool to create sample questions, plan work and generate ideas for essays in subjects such as English and history.

Luke Saunders, a former secondary schoolteacher and co-founder of Studyclix, said it was great students are using AI tools in a positive way.

“However, we’re seeing that a lot of students are not as creative as they were before the advent of these technologies. The default now is to look to these tools when faced with a problem, rather than think creatively and independently about a solution,” he said.

Overall, it found that more than three-quarters (80 per cent) of teenagers are worried they are using their phones too frequently.

Most students (79 per cent) said their parents allowed them to have their phones in their bedroom at night, while nearly two-thirds of students (64 per cent) are using their phones more than three hours each day, while more than a third (39 per cent) have four hours or more of screen time per day.

Snapchat was the most popular platform among those surveyed, followed by Instagram, YouTube and TikTok.

While TikTok ranked fourth in terms of popularity, it accounted for the most screen time among users with four out of five users reporting spending at least an hour on the platform daily, with many logging usage far in excess of this.

In terms of content, just more than half of students see content they consider offensive to women on platforms at least once a week, while nearly half see content they consider homophobic or racist. A third of students (34 per cent) reported seeing anti-immigrant content.

Large numbers also said social media has made them worry about their body image.

More than half said they see Botox promoted at least once a month, while a majority see the promotion of fillers, plastic surgery and weight-loss supplements at least once over the same time frame.

In addition, six in 10 are seeing the promotion of dental procedures such as veneers and composite bonding on their social media once a month, while almost a third see ads for tanning injections.

(Word count: 498)