

# Spotlight

Thought leadership and policy

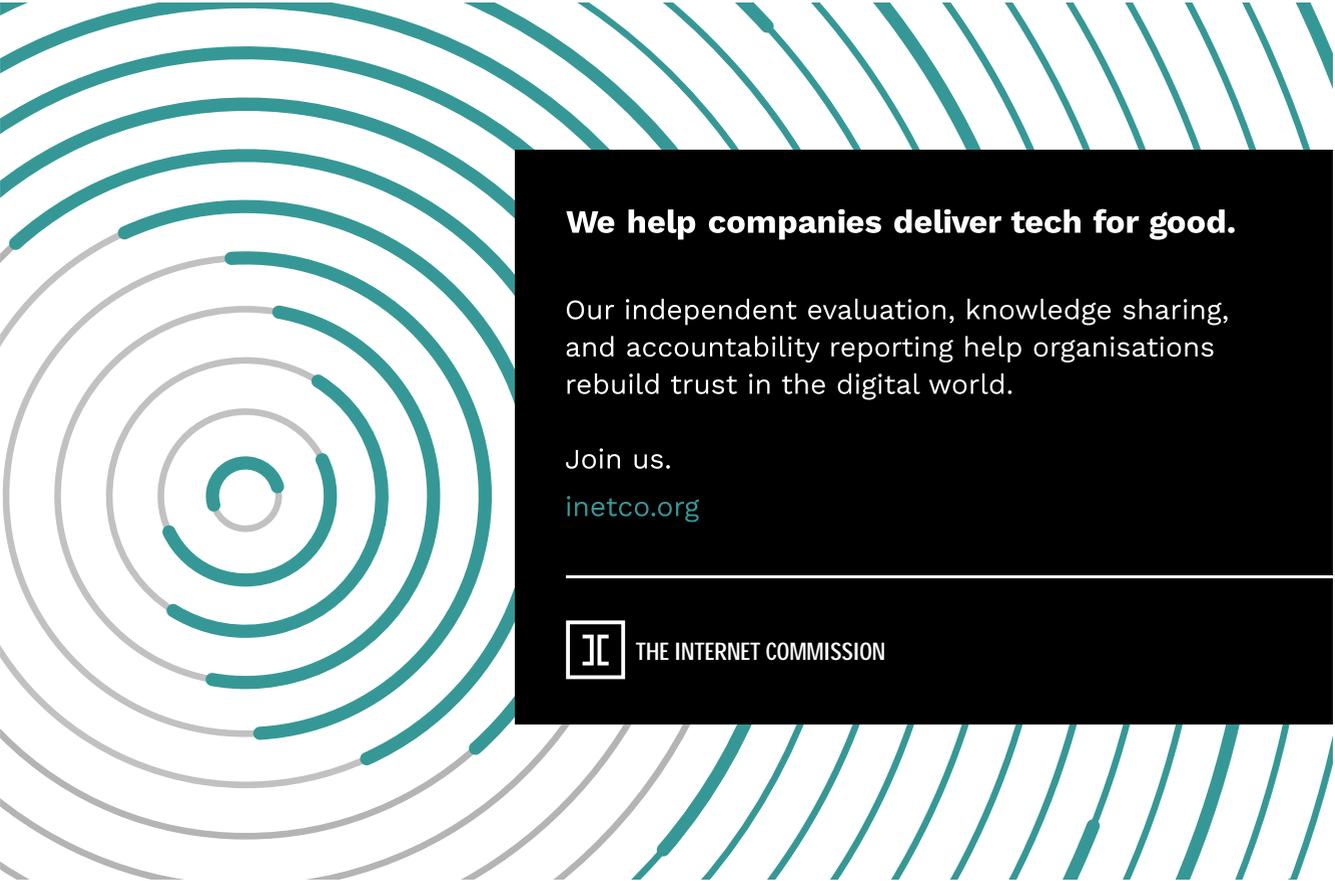
## Internet Safety: Building a better online world

Damian Collins MP

Margaret Hodge MP

Chris Philp MP





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# Moderators must not be treated like machines

In June 2017, the German Bundestag passed what came to be known as the Facebook Act. It was a landmark moment: the law represented the first attempt by a democratic nation to legislate against the spread of hate speech and fake news online.

The legislation introduced major financial penalties for rule-breakers. Under the terms of the act, social media companies that fail to swiftly remove prohibited content face fines of up to €50m. The law sparked a hiring spree for content moderators; one in six of Facebook's moderators now works in Germany.

The UK's forthcoming Online Safety Bill promises even steeper penalties. Companies such as Facebook and Google could be fined up to 10 per cent of their annual global turnover under the new legislation. For Google this could theoretically amount to a fine of £19.3bn.

It is unlikely that such a large penalty would ever be issued – handing a foreign company a penalty of this size would be tantamount to economic warfare. But Nadine Dorries, the Culture Secretary, has also warned that social media executives could face jail time if they fail to comply with the new regime.

This might also seem unlikely, but together the twin threats reflect a level of aggression that social media firms rarely face in other jurisdictions. They are likely therefore to take dramatic steps to ensure that they do not fall foul of the new legislation. One possible response is that, like in Germany before, the tech firms will hire legions of moderators to handle the threat.

Such a move would be welcome. Although automation can play a major role in content moderation, human oversight remains essential. Moderators, however, are too often treated like the machines they oversee. In 2020, Facebook paid out £40m after moderators suffered mental health issues linked to their work, which requires regular reviews of graphic imagery.

There are legitimate concerns that the Online Safety Bill could lead to over-zealous moderation. Providing moderators with the support they need to handle the stresses of their work isn't just the right thing to do – it will also enable them to make better decisions under pressure. ●

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## Spotlight

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## Cyber-flashing to be made illegal under Sexual Offences Act

People who send unsolicited genital photos are to face time in prison under new legislation to be added to the Sexual Offences Act. The practice, known as cyber-flashing, involves the sending of obscene images over peer-to-peer electronic networks such as AirDrop, often to strangers on public transport or in public spaces.

Previously, ministers had been considering outlawing cyber-flashing under the Online Safety Bill, following the recommendations of MPs, including parliament's joint committee on the legislation, chaired by Damian Collins (see pages 8-10).

The *Times* reports that the decision to clamp down on the practice under the Sexual Offences Act, a smaller piece of legislation, is borne of fears that the Online Safety Bill will otherwise struggle to be passed this year. Last year, appearing before the House of Commons liaison committee – a group made up of the chairs of all the Commons' select committees – the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, said he was in favour of a specific ban on cyber-flashing as part of a package of measures to combat violence against women and girls.

Once the bill is passed, the offence will be treated on a par with similar crimes such as upskirting, which was banned in 2019 and can carry a sentence of up to two years in prison. Those found guilty can also be added to the sex offenders register.

Young people are known to be particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment on the internet, and last year a survey by YouGov found that 14 per cent of British women had received indecent, suggestive or unsolicited messages either online or in person. An even higher proportion of 18 to 24-year-olds reported that they had been victims of the practice. ●



## Online abusers face five years in jail under new proposals

The draft Online Safety Bill, currently making its way through parliament, will be amended following recommendations from the Law Commission – an independent body which reviews the law – and MPs.

The Law Commission found that legislation had not kept pace with rapid advances in communications technology, social media and smartphones, so recommended that new offences be created and legislated for in the bill – including an offence “designed to better capture online threats to rape, kill and inflict physical violence” – and provide specific protections for celebrities and public figures who receive messages threatening their safety.

Under the legislation, online abusers and trolls could be jailed for up to five years. People deliberately spreading disinformation, such as hoax bomb threats or fake Covid-19 treatments, could face up to 51 weeks in prison.

The draft legislation follows on from 2019's Online Harms White Paper, which was produced by the government to consider “online content or activity that harms individual users, particularly children, or threatens our way of life in the UK, either by undermining national security, or by reducing trust and undermining our shared rights, responsibilities and opportunities to foster integration”. ●

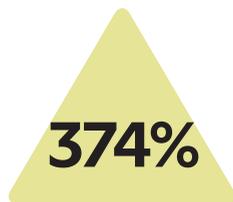
## Internet celebrity scams costing victims millions of pounds

In the UK, 300,000 people a year are falling victim to online subscription scams for products advertised using fake celebrity endorsements, the BBC has reported.

Scammers are using Facebook, Google and other major websites and platforms to market a range of questionable products, including subscriptions to the alternative pain relief remedy, cannabidiol, or CBD, in “gummy” form. Web users are enticed by special offers set out as cheap one-off payments, which are then continuously taken out of victims’ bank accounts.

On average, people who fall prey to these online fraudsters are losing £250 each, meaning the scams are thought to generate around £75m from 300,000 annual UK victims.

Last year, the consumer watchdog Which? accused Facebook and Google of failing to take down scams on their sites. Researchers reported that Google was hosting 34 per cent of scam adverts even after they had been reported, and Facebook 26 per cent. Google said it had taken down over three billion. ●



Increase in the amount of content uploaded by children online between 2019 and 2021



Number of adverts removed by Google for breaking its terms



The compulsory personal boundary between avatars in the metaverse

## Meta to enforce compulsory distancing between avatars

Meta, the multinational tech company that owns Facebook, has said it will enforce compulsory distancing between avatars. The decision was made after a user on Horizon Worlds, a virtual reality (VR) app owned by the company, reported instances of sexual harassment and groping online, and called for a mandatory exclusion zone around their avatar.

The 4ft boundary will prevent anyone “invading” an avatar’s personal space, says the company.

The move comes just months after Facebook announced it was adapting its business model to focus more on virtual and augmented reality worlds it calls the “metaverse”. Although the plans are in their early stages, chief executive Mark Zuckerberg has invested heavily in apps, technologies and platforms that facilitate face-to-face meetings and socialising in online worlds using VR headsets. Demand for the headsets has boomed over the pandemic, a result of successive lockdowns and enforced social distancing.

Critics of Meta’s proposals note that VR will add further opportunities for problematic behaviours online. Instances of abuse have also been reported on VRChat, another metaverse product, and have been condemned by child protection charity the NSPCC. ●

## Children are now at a greater risk of online grooming, charity claims

The children’s charity Barnardo’s Cymru has warned that children have become more trusting online as a result of lockdowns and acclimatising to internet-based socialising and learning. A spokesperson from the charity claimed children were now more accessible online and that many online spaces had normalised harassment, with perpetrators hiding behind anonymous accounts.

The Internet Watch Foundation last year found that the amount of content uploaded by children had increased by 374 per cent since 2019.

The charity, which aims to minimise the availability of online sexual abuse content, said lockdowns had seen a massive increase in “self-generated material” and reported a 235 per cent increase in URLs with self-generated sexual imagery of children. ●



# The public deserves protection from social media giants' greed

No one law will fix all of the internet's problems, but we must set the global gold standard

By Chris Philp MP

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Social media websites and search engines have come to be dominant forces in how we communicate. But the tech companies running these services currently operate without any rules to follow beyond their own. In developing our new online safety laws, which will soon begin their passage through parliament, we've heard from countless young victims of a digital world that often prioritises profit over people's safety. Tech companies have had ample chances to regulate themselves and have failed to do so. It is time to use the force of the law to make them behave responsibly.

The substantially updated Online Safety Bill we will shortly present to parliament is carefully designed and flexible, so it can deal with the rapid pace of technological change. It balances the need for a free and open internet with protections for children and vulnerable people.

The UK's tech industries are blazing a trail in investment and innovation and so we have also designed a pro-competition and proportionate system to make sure we embolden the finest technological minds from around the world to build successful tech businesses in the UK. We will be placing duties on online platforms that host user-generated content, and the most powerful companies will be subject to the strictest rules to protect young people, prevent illegality and make sure harmful content – such as that promoting suicide – is properly handled.

The way to enforce laws is to arm regulators – in this case Ofcom – with tough new powers. It will have unprecedented sanctions at its disposal, including the ability to hand out multi-billion-pound fines if Big Tech fails to act, and the power to hold senior managers personally liable for some breaches. Ofcom will also be able to lift the bonnet and inspect the engines of these companies, including how their algorithms work – something that they have so far kept hidden.

We are not requiring anything unreasonable in getting major social media platforms to remove and limit the spread of content or activity that is against our laws. They must tackle child sexual abuse, hate crime and terrorist material, and do far more to protect children from being exposed to inappropriate material. All sites that



Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg testifies to the US Senate about fake news

host or display pornography will have to put effective measures in place to prevent children from accessing it – for example, by using age verification technology.

Importantly, the bill does not censor free speech; in fact, it will consolidate public discourse online, which is currently subject to the whims of powerful private companies that can remove content arbitrarily and wield significant influence over what people are looking at.

Robust new legal duties in the bill will mean in-scope companies have to take steps to protect people's free speech, and the regulation will not require companies to remove specific pieces of legal content. Ofcom will have duties to safeguard freedom of expression while carrying out its work.

We believe people should be able to speak as freely on the internet as on Hyde Park Corner. But there is a growing list of toxic content and behaviour on social media that falls below the threshold of a criminal offence but which still causes significant harm.

This includes racist abuse and the promotion of self-harm and dangerous disinformation designed to deter people from taking the Covid vaccine. These things are already expressly forbidden on the biggest and most popular social networks. But time and again it is

allowed to stay up or, worse, is actively promoted to reach huge audiences. The firms should not be allowed to host or amplify such harmful content – which they say they don't allow – without there being consequences.

Thanks to our work, companies will have to proactively assess the risks to their users from legal but harmful content. They will need to set out clearly in their terms and conditions which forms of legal but harmful content is acceptable for adults to see on their sites, as well as the systems and processes they have in place to mitigate it if they decide to prohibit it. If content breaks their terms and conditions, they will have to take it down. Ofcom will judge whether their decisions on taking down content are adequate or not. Users will be able to appeal if they feel their content has been removed without good reason.

## There is a growing list of toxic content on social media

Therefore, the bill does not force online platforms to remove legal free speech. Freedom of expression means nothing if not also the right to offend, and under our new laws adults will be free to read and post things online others may disapprove of. But the overall effect of these measures will be to close the gap between what these companies say is allowed on their sites and what happens in practice.

No single piece of legislation is going to fix all the problems the evolution of the internet has thrown up. But we want to make digital companies fix their systems and be more transparent, without stifling the hotbed of innovation and investment that is the UK's tech industry. The Online Safety Bill has been designed with suitable and transparent checks and balances so that Ofcom's implementation of it delivers on the objectives decided and is scrutinised by our democratically elected parliament.

Of course, the government doesn't have a monopoly on wisdom, which is why we gave the draft bill to a cross-party group of parliamentarians for scrutiny. In December, this joint committee submitted its report, which included recommendations on how the bill could go further. This scrutiny is a vital part of ensuring it delivers what is needed.

I am confident the bill strikes a careful balance to achieve a global gold standard for internet safety. But we are considering the committee's recommendations, those of the Commons select committee and the thoughts of other leading parliamentarians as we substantially update the bill prior to introduction. We've already toughened it with new criminal offences and extra measures to force social media companies to stamp out the most harmful illegal content and criminal activity on their sites quicker, including revenge porn, hate crime, fraud and the sale of illegal drugs or weapons.

The public rightly demands and deserves protection from the harms created by the unfettered avarice of some large social media firms. The government, working with MPs across parliament and other parties, will deliver. ●

*Chris Philp is the minister for tech and the digital economy*

# It's time to hold Big Tech to account

## We can crack down on intolerable behaviour while still protecting free speech

By Damian Collins MP

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The last time I wrote for *Spotlight* on Big Tech and internet safety, the joint committee on the draft Online Safety Bill's inquiry was in full swing. Over the course of five months, the committee received more than 200 written evidence submissions, and took more than 50 hours of oral testimony from companies, ministers, whistle-blowers, campaigners, lawyers and professors, on how exactly the UK could successfully become “the safest place in the world to be online”, as the bill is promising.

We published our 60,000-word report on 14 December 2021, and I'm proud to say that all of our recommendations were unanimous: a clear example of how much not only both the Lords and the Commons, but also all political parties, are willing to work together to finally hold social media companies to account.

We had a simple yet daunting task: scrutinise the draft Online Safety Bill as published by the government last summer, and make sure it was fit for purpose. For me, like many others, it has sometimes felt like this bill has been a long time coming; the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) committee inquiry into disinformation and “fake news” in 2018 kick-started the process, recommending that platforms should be held accountable to a UK-based regulator. But it's also vital that we get the legal framework right, as the UK is going to be the first country in the world to legislate so comprehensively to tame the digital wild west.

Throughout the inquiry we heard concerns from all sides: that the bill was difficult to interpret for businesses and users alike; that it would give too much power to the government, or social media platforms themselves, to police free speech; and that it was unclear how it would tackle some of the most egregious harms seen in recent years, such as the disgusting racial abuse after the Euros final, terrorists and human traffickers using social media to build networks, the incitement to violence at the US Capitol, or even the promotion of self-harm among teenagers.

At the heart of our recommendations are two core principles: that online platforms and search engines should be held accountable for the design of their systems and the way they promote



GETTY IMAGES/HOLLIE ADAMS

The pandemic has seen a huge rise in disinformation and fake news spread online, causing dramatic real-world consequences

◀ content; and that regulation should be governed by democratic principles established by parliament, not just by terms of service written in Silicon Valley.

We think the best way to do this is to give the independent regulator Ofcom the power to set mandatory codes of practice, based on existing British laws, on how social media companies should make sure their systems and processes don't promote content and activity that would never be acceptable offline.

These would provide clear guidance to social media platforms on how to deal with content and activity that promotes and glamorises terrorism, facilitates child abuse, fuels online fraud, or amplifies discrimination based on protected characteristics in equalities legislation. Other codes of practice would make sure platforms promote digital literacy, freedom of expression and, above all, safety by design – ensuring devices and software are developed and designed with user safety in mind.

Nobody will benefit from a one-size-fits-all approach. This is why the committee agreed that Ofcom should also conduct a general assessment of all platform features that we heard were risk factors: live location, infinite scrolling, one-click sharing, artificial intelligence (AI) moderation, end-to-end encryption, unmoderated groups, and anonymity, to name a few.

Based on these, Ofcom will come up with different risk profiles, and match individual platforms to them. Social media companies will have to manage the specific risks that have been identified on their platforms and search engines, following minimum standards set by the regulator. This will guarantee that those businesses that have few risk factors don't have to shoulder the same burden as those with much higher risk factors.

Platforms will have to show how they are following the codes of practice and managing their own specific risks in regular transparency reports to Ofcom. If the regulator has doubts, it should be able to audit the companies, calling on external experts if needed. Also, if some companies resist or refuse to engage, not only will financial sanctions of up to 10 per cent of global turnover come into play but there could also be prosecutions. We endorsed the government's proposal to bring forward criminal sanctions, and we think they should be directed towards a named "safety controller" within a tech company, responsible for compliance with the Online Safety Act.

The committee also agreed with the Law Commission that new offences need to be created. While many of the harms we want to act against can be resolved by applying existing laws online, practices have also evolved; exposing someone to sexual images without their consent, sending people with epilepsy flashing images, and



**“The UK will be the first country to legislate so comprehensively to tame the digital Wild West – we have to get the balance right”**

**Online platforms and search engines should be held accountable**

glamorising self-harm are all new, but extremely damaging, phenomena.

We recommended that the Online Safety Bill be amended to directly include these as new crimes, again with platforms responsible for making sure they don't amplify them. In an update on 4 February 2022, the government committed to adopting some of these recommendations, and to seriously consider others. It has also announced that it will state clearly on the face of the bill all existing offences that platforms will have to mitigate – another win for the joint committee.

Other measures we recommend include mandatory age assurance on all websites likely to be visited by children, automatic exemption of recognised news publishers and of content that's in the public interest, as well as the establishment of a permanent joint committee to ensure democratic oversight of the new regime.

Together, as a package, we think they would significantly improve the bill, and ensure it finds that fine balance between protecting freedom of speech and clamping down on behaviours that parliament has decided are intolerable in a free, democratic society. I hope the government will listen and adopt changes that we think will make the bill a shining example of smart regulation in the digital age. ●

*Damian Collins MP is the chairman of the joint committee on the draft Online Safety Bill*

# Protecting publishers and promoting competition

Trusted content and digital markets regulation are fundamental to online safety

By Sebastian Cuttill

In association with

**ppa**

In response to the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 and in an era of “Taxes on Knowledge”, the Lord Liverpool government introduced the Newspaper and Stamp Duties Act, one of six acts designed to curb political radicalism and meetings and prevent another such incident.

Two centuries later and government remains worried about the degradation of society through an unchecked flow of information. This time, the concern is vast digital platforms that shape what the UK public see, say and interact with online. Yet a sustainable, free and plural media is now recognised as fundamental to our society.

The Online Safety Bill aims to make digital platforms legally responsible for preventing harm to users, but curbing harmful content alone will be insufficient. Trusted, reliable information sources must be readily available online for citizens’ well-being to be assured. Recognising this necessity, the draft bill contains protections for content created by “recognised news publishers”.

The joint committee scrutinising the draft bill recommended that the government create a definition for “recognised news publishers” that encompasses specialist publications. Business titles, such as Bauer Media’s *Rail Magazine*, are industry thought leaders that closely scrutinise their sector and are even influential in Westminster and across Whitehall. Equally, Condé Nast’s *Vogue* combines fashion journalism with expert reporting and commentary on critical social debates.

The dissemination of information online and the public’s ability to seek out information sources means the future of media lies in specialist audiences. Its sustainability will be assured by serving communities of interest and satisfying the need for trusted content. A failure to exempt specialist publishers from the scope of the bill will therefore make the exemptions progressively less effective in protecting trusted publishers over time.

Publications subject to a standards code must be protected by the bill, preserving the system of independent self-regulation of the press and ensuring that reliable information covering a range of topics will not be suppressed. A free press is fundamental to freedom of expression, and Silicon Valley tech giants should not have any agency to

cancel UK publishers. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport committee’s recommendation of a “must balance” test will allow the regulator Ofcom to assess whether platforms have considered their freedom of expression obligations for all content.

Welcome though the bill is, it will only remedy a symptom, not the root causes, of large digital platforms’ market power. Their dominance precludes any incentive to prioritise the interests of users. Instead, platforms design algorithms to maximise engagement and revenues, and are agnostic about the quality of content that retains consumers’ attention.

A truly safe online space will only be possible if citizens have a genuine choice between competing platforms, compelling tech giants to prioritise the well-being of users. It is imperative that the government gives the Digital Markets Unit (DMU) statutory powers as soon as possible, allowing the regulator to effectively target the sources of entrenched market power.

Regulation is necessary to rebalance the digital advertising market, monopolised for so long by Alphabet (the owners of Google) and Meta (which owns Facebook). Google is dominant at every stage of the intermediation process, giving rise to conflicts of interest and potential anti-competitive behaviour. For online publishing, this dominance represents a 21st-century “tax on knowledge”, raising costs for citizens and curtailing investment in trustworthy content.

Regrettably, the legislation to give the DMU its powers has yet to materialise. Europe is forging ahead but lacks the tailored codes of conduct necessary to target the disparate business models of the tech giants. “Global Britain” should seek to lead in digital regulation, yet there is an increasing danger that the UK will become a rule-taker, not a rule-maker.

The government must make digital competition legislation a priority. A failure to do so will not only limit the efficacy of the online safety regime, but also endanger the sustainability of UK media. Inevitably, a lack of funding for reliable information sources will leave a vacuum in which harmful content will thrive. ●

*Sebastian Cuttill is public affairs executive at the Professional Publishers Association*



## Encryption is not a right

We don't need a ban on encryption but we do need more legal safeguards

By Alex Towers and Patrick Grady

In association with



Some of the largest and most popular digital businesses in the world have started to market their services through an emphasis on greater privacy. They are building end-to-end encryption into their services: securing messages and data so that only the end users can see what is being shared.

The selling point is that this guarantees the user's activity cannot be hacked. However, this threatens to do more harm than good if it also makes the worst forms of illegal and harmful content impossible to track.

Privacy is not an absolute right and for good reason: the UK's Human Rights Act states that our personal information, including the messages we write or images we create, "should be kept securely and not shared without our permission, except in certain circumstances". So this is a qualified right, allowing public authorities to intervene if the interests of the wider community, or other people's rights, are affected. The right to protection from "torture and inhuman or degrading treatment", such as in images of child abuse, is an absolute right and must never be limited or restricted.

"Unbreakable" end-to-end encryption threatens to frustrate this important legal principle by enabling

nefarious actors to easily circulate the internet's most horrendous material, including images of the sexual abuse of children. Companies that implement such technology will be making it far harder to detect and remove such images. Research shows that 14 million reports of suspected child sexual abuse online could be lost each year.

The UK's Online Safety Bill, as drafted, will oblige service providers to limit the presence and dissemination of illegal content and to take responsibility for "legal but harmful" content. Some tech enthusiasts claim the bill will effectively ban end-to-end encryption and object to this as a threat to privacy.

In fact, the bill needs to go further if it is to offer adequate protection: these new services coming to market may evade the ultimate enforcement sanction – the blocking of access in the UK – or are designed in a way that will make it difficult to deliver the requirements of the bill. The risk is that these services make it very difficult for Ofcom to regulate in the way the legislation intends, and frustrate law enforcement agencies' efforts to bring online criminals to justice.

We don't need a ban on encryption, but we do need more safeguards in the bill. The Internet Commission proposes that before rolling out any new encryption technology in the UK, a tech company should at minimum be required to first assess the risks, and demonstrate how vulnerable groups can be protected and illegal content detected. Ofcom approval or licensing of encrypted services would ensure the new regulatory regime remains robust.

The bill is posing a challenge to tech companies: how can they use their resources and expertise to design services that ensure the safety of all our families as well as the privacy of their individual users? UK citizens deserve that, and the UK government should insist upon it. ●

*Alex Towers is director of policy and public affairs at BT Group. Patrick Grady is a project lead at the Internet Commission*

# The pervasive culture of violence against women and girls

We need to work together to fight endemic misogyny, abuse and harassment

It's been nearly five years since the #metoo campaign first encouraged individuals to speak up about their experiences of sexual abuse and harassment. Since then, the discussion around how women are seen and treated by society has only deepened. In 2021, the murders of Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa triggered a further outpouring of public anger and demands for change.

As more women come forward to tell their stories, we can now see that these things can happen to any of us; that sexism, abuse and violence against women is both endemic and systemic.

There is a clear spectrum of attitudes and behaviours that can lead to everyday sexism and discrimination, online and real-life sexual abuse, violence and, in some cases, murder.

The first two are made up of thousands of smaller acts, many of which might be claimed to be "jokes", the last defence of bullies everywhere. The cumulative effect is entrenched harassment of women on the internet and in real life. It curtails our lives, as it is intended to, making us afraid to participate online, step into public life or simply walk home.

Amid an online world that started out full of promise for freedom of speech and equality of opinion, it has become normal that women in the public eye experience abuse, while all women who choose to participate online risk this too – from "dick pics" to rape threats to being stalked by a controlling ex-partner or stranger. The Online Safety Bill

creates a vital opportunity to change the way we engage with each other for the better. Its requirements for Big Tech companies to uphold their own terms and conditions, tackle illegal and harmful content, and consider the safety of their algorithms and overall platform design were a good start. More recent announcements from government, such as the intention to name additional priority illegal offences in the bill, including revenge porn, harassment and sending "genuinely threatening" messages, are also welcome. The *Times* has reported that the government plans to make cyber-flashing illegal within the separate Sexual Offences Act, punishable by up to two years in prison and being placed on the sex offenders register, which we strongly support.

However, we believe the government still needs to go further, and should do two things: seriously consider calls from expert organisations such as women's charity Refuge for the regulator Ofcom to develop a specific code of practice around online violence against women and girls; and seriously consider calls from campaigners such as the MP Stella Creasy to make misogyny a hate crime. Last year, BT launched Hope United, a digital campaign to tackle online hate and racism. This year, we will campaign again, focusing on the treatment and safety of women. We want to play our part in creating a better culture. Join us. ●

*Helen Burrows is content and services policy director at BT Group*

By Helen Burrows

In association with



# Can you cure a conspiracy theorist?

## Psychology could be the remedy we need to help people who have been radicalised online

By Sarah Dawood

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Jitarth Jadeja first fell down the rabbit hole when Donald Trump won the presidential election on 9 November 2016. As an Australian who had previously lived in the US, he had developed an avid interest in American politics through Reddit. He was a Bernie Sanders supporter and the election result left him disillusioned, confused and exasperated. He had recently been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and as a university student found himself with plenty of spare time. He turned to the internet to make sense of the world around him.

He soon found Infowars – a far-right conspiracy theory website, which hosts professionally produced video interviews on YouTube with high-profile figures, including Trump himself. “I was socially isolated and had a chaotic mental state,” Jadeja tells *Spotlight*. “[Watching videos] was almost like an addiction.”

YouTube soon led him to a darker place. The algorithm recommended an interview with QAnon. Considered as more of a cult than a political movement, QAnon centres around the idea that a secret “cabal” of liberal elites, who worship the devil and run a global paedophile ring, conspired against Trump during his term in office. Jadeja says with incredulity that its beliefs extend to a “judgement day” of public executions, followed by Trump unleashing a technology-fuelled “nirvana” onto the world. “Because it was on Infowars, it gave it this air of legitimacy,” he says. He swiftly moved to fringe social media such as 4Chan and Voat, where conspiracies thrive.

Jadeja became miserable and lonely. He had been manipulated into believing that everyone else was “asleep” while he was “awake”. But his world started to unravel in 2019 when he read an article by the journalist Mike Rothschild exposing holes in QAnon theories. Over six months, Jadeja crawled his way out of the rabbit hole the same way he’d burrowed his way in – through content consumption. In June 2019, he left conspiracies behind. He had also recently started medication for bipolar disorder, a life event that he feels provided him with mental clarity.

He is now a vocal anti-conspiracy advocate and shares his experiences to warn people of QAnon’s dangers. He

says with remorse that he introduced his father to the cult, and now cannot convince him to leave. "I feel really guilty," he says. "For me, hearing any conspiracies is triggering. I really try not to think of anyone as having bad intent now, or of being a bad person."

Jadeja is one of millions who have fallen victim to social media's algorithms. What started as one video cascaded into far-right content on the deepest enclaves of the internet. He likens the internet to "junk food": "People binge and binge, and at first it's tasty, but in the end, you feel like shit," he says. "This [feature] of just offering people more of what they want is a real problem."

### Where misinformation comes from

Significant world events often lead to a spike in conspiracies. Like the presidential election, Covid-19 brought misinformation (spreading false information under the belief that it is true) and disinformation (intentionally spreading false information to deceive others) back into public consciousness again, from theories around 5G towers to vaccines causing infertility. But they are not a creation of the internet age, says Daniel Jolley, a social psychologist and assistant professor at Nottingham University. We need only look at past events such as the John F Kennedy assassination to know that rumours can thrive offline too.

The most significant change is the speed and ease at which they can spread. "Conspiracy content can now be shared within seconds," says Jolley. "Back in the era of radio and print, journalists were the gatekeepers and it would be down to an editor to publish a reader letter. Now, anyone can make an account on Twitter and start pumping out a range of ideas."

Social media has democratised knowledge; we no longer formulate our opinions based on official news alone. "Now everyone can be a publisher," says Steve Nowottny, editor of the fact-checking organisation Full Fact.

"Influencers can publish to very large audiences without the usual editorial checks and balances."

In a sense, this has been liberating, increasing our access to accurate as well as false information. But the internet's vastness means that our consumption can still be quite limited. Rather than getting a balanced view from opposing



Protesters at a Unite For Freedom anti-lockdown protest in London, 24 April 2021

sources, people become trapped within echo chambers. "The internet is a big place and it's very easy to get lost in it," says Nowottny. "It's possible to find misinformation that supports other misinformation, and spiral from there."

Jadeja thinks that information overload has polarised people further and taken away the collective feeling that used to come from ubiquitous news sources. "There is no sense of community or shared reality anymore," he says. "Ironically, by connecting with so many people, we've somehow never had less in common."

### Conspiracies in times of crisis

Distressing national or global events can cause people to try to fill information gaps where there are currently no answers, says Nowottny. Facts are also commonly manipulated to fit conspiratorial agendas. Last year, the UK Health Security Agency released data showing that there were higher rates of Covid-19 among vaccinated people. This was due to many factors, including individual behaviour. However,

this morphed into the claim that the vaccine was ineffective, proliferated by Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and consequently spread to 13 countries in 11 languages.

The impact of influential figures legitimising false claims can be frightening. The US Capitol Building riots on 6 January 2021 were fuelled by Trump tweeting allegations of voter fraud and resulted in several deaths. Boris Johnson's outburst linking Keir Starmer to a failure to prosecute Jimmy Savile resulted in the Labour leader receiving death threats and being mobbed by anti-vax protesters.

"Misinformation needs to be challenged in public forums," says Nowottny. "It's really important that the media, politicians and public figures are saying stuff that is true and are willing to correct themselves if they've said something that isn't." The spread of misinformation also has insidious longer-term effects, including increased animosity, hatred and prejudice towards minority groups, and higher levels of societal polarisation. ▶

### What makes someone susceptible?

Links have been found between conspiracy believers and those who distrust power and authority. For example, people with anti-vax views are more inclined to believe in conspiracies, be sensitive to infringement on personal freedom and support individualistic world views, according to analysis of more than 5,000 people in 24 countries.

As such, believers of one conspiracy, such as around vaccines, might be inclined to believe another, such as climate change denial. Common threads include threats to personal and global health, the need to adhere to government policy and the need to cooperate with and trust science.

However, any of us could potentially find conspiracy theories attractive, says Jolley. In times of turbulence, being able to “blame” powerful forces can help people feel temporarily empowered, although this is short-lived – the feeling that someone is “out to get you” can ultimately lead to greater feelings of mistrust and powerlessness, he says.

Anyone might also use conspiracies to satisfy psychological needs that are not being met, says Karen Douglas, professor of social psychology at the University of Kent. These could be: “epistemic”, the need to know the truth and have certainty; “existential”, the need to feel safe and have control; and “social”, the need to maintain self-esteem and feel positive about the groups we belong to. This might explain why conspiracies were so prolific during the pandemic. “People were scared and looking for ways to cope with uncertainty, insecurity and loss of social contact,” says Douglas.

A feeling of disenfranchisement or societal exclusion can also be a strong propellant for seeking support elsewhere. In 2014, Caleb Cain, who was 21 at the time, found himself spiralling into alternative right-wing content on YouTube. Growing up in West Virginia, he had liberal, left-wing views as a teenager but came from a “poor, rural” background, often had “clashes with authority” and had an unstable relationship with his family, he tells *Spotlight*. After dropping out of college, Cain became depressed and isolated from friends, and the internet became his pastime.

What started as self-help videos soon became anti-feminist, Islamophobic and



QAnon supporters at a political rally in Bucharest

racist theory. Having always been interested in counterculture, he says the anti-establishment mentality of the alt-right appealed to him and “brainwashed” him for five years. “I had a traditionalist view of the world around the decline of the West, and started picking out enemies of that,” he says. “There is a big victim complex to it.”

It was only when he watched a fierce debate between political commentator Steven Bonnell and an alt-right activist that he began to doubt his views. “This made me curious and was a gateway to other material,” he says. “The same way I went into the alt-right, was the same process that I left it.” When the Christchurch mosque shootings happened in 2019, he started a YouTube channel called Faraday Speaks to help people who have been radicalised, and he now also does academic research in this area. “I realised this wasn’t an isolated thing,” he says. “I was influencing the world – I had tried to convince my friends and family [of my beliefs]. I was a little crumb of a poisonous cookie.”

Research suggests that trauma, whether personal or collective, can attract people towards conspiracy. Simon\*, an NHS health analyst, says that when his brother died in 2019, his

sister-in-law’s behaviour started changing. The first Covid-19 lockdown then “turbocharged her descent into libertarian-style thinking” where she opposed restrictions and started consuming conspiracy content online. She has since abandoned her family to join a cult in the US called 5D Full Disclosure. Simon believes that the ease with which unverified, one-sided information can spread is dangerous, and worries that broadcasters such as Fox News, and now GB News, exacerbate cultural division. “We have been devastated,” says Simon. “It has torn our family apart. I think [the fact that] the UK is following the US is an existential threat.”

Full Fact’s Nowotny argues that free speech is as fundamental to democracy as the right to balanced, substantiated information. He is wary of unscrupulous removal of content and thinks there should be an emphasis on promoting accuracy, as much as there is on censoring false information. “The Online Safety Bill could do more to mandate the filling of information vacuums or gaps,” he says. “The absence of information can be as harmful as misinformation itself.” Recent features such as Twitter’s prompt to read an article before sharing are helpful additions, he says, as they

provide “friction”, encouraging people to re-evaluate and slow down.

While Jadeja thinks that algorithms need to be drastically altered, he does not believe that conspiratorial content should be banned outright. “You can deplatform a person but you cannot deplatform an idea,” he says. “These people don’t just disappear. They move to other more unofficial Telegram or Signal groups where it’s harder to keep track of them.”

### Teaching emotional resilience

There is an argument that there should be better education in evaluating online sources. Nowotny says there are core principles that can guide people: think before you share; pause if something gives you a strong emotional reaction; and if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

But this goes beyond digital literacy. Holistic education around societal tensions would help people have a more balanced world view, says Cain, such as explaining why racial divisions exist or why crime rates are high. Perhaps controversially, he also believes that conspiracy videos should be shown in school followed by a discussion about why they are wrong.

With such strong links to psychological vulnerability, therapy should also be instilled into prevention and rehabilitation, he says. Cain himself now sees a therapist and thinks that teaching young people about emotional resilience, empathy, narcissism and sociopathy would help them become less reactive and stop them getting drawn in.

A more understanding approach is key to getting through, he says: “Liberal friends would just call me a racist – that didn’t work. It just pushed me further away.” Jadeja agrees that ostracising indoctrinated individuals does not encourage them to reintegrate. Discussing their behaviour – such as why they are isolating themselves from friends – can be more effective than chastising their beliefs. “We need to offer a path back into society for these people,” he says. “They need an incentive – they shouldn’t just be maligned, ignored and made fun of.”

Psychologist Jolley says that exhibiting empathy, through asking about the reasons behind someone’s beliefs and whether they feel anxious about something, can be more

productive. “Having a humanised conversation [can be more effective] than instantly debunking what they’ve said,” he says.

### A psychological “vaccine”

While there is not much in the way of official conspiracy deradicalisation programmes, there are experimental projects. Sander van der Linden, professor of social psychology at the University of Cambridge, has co-created a novel approach to tackling misinformation, which involves treating it as a cognitive “virus”. He uses epidemiological models to assess the rate at which information “pathogens” spread online and their “infection” rate based on shares and size of online network. His research has found that falsehoods spread at six times the rate of facts on Twitter.

He has gone further to develop a psychological “vaccine”, which involves exposing someone to a “weakened” form of misinformation to trigger “cognitive antibodies and develop psychological immunity”. The misinformation is then followed by a “strong refutation”, often using humour or sarcasm, and exposes the manipulation techniques used by conspiracy groups. People may then require a “booster” as their cognitive “immunity” – or memory – fades.

Linden says that treating people early is most effective, as over time misinformation can settle more “deeply” in the brain and individuals continue to retrieve false details from memory. An example is the now disregarded link between autism and the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine, which has been difficult for scientists to debunk because it took 12 years for the *Lancet* medical journal to retract the original study.

This technique may seem maverick and maybe even controversial. But Linden’s team has conducted 15 trials

and results show that it helps people spot fake news, makes them more confident at doing so and limits their sharing of false information. The research was realised through *Go Viral*, a game launched in 2020 jointly by the government and Cambridge University that helps people spot Covid-19 misinformation through a social media simulation.

The university previously launched another gamified study called *Radicalise*, which uses this same “psychological inoculation” technique to prevent people being recruited by extremist groups online. It uses a fictitious WhatsApp conversation to teach players about radicalisation methods used by terrorists. The study found that it significantly improved people’s ability to spot manipulative messages. Such interventions could be used to help people who have been radicalised develop empathy and “cognitive flexibility”, says Linden – the ability to adapt their thinking and behaviour to new situations.

Social media needs to be “fundamentally reshaped” to better incorporate similar psychology-based interventions, he says. Authority figures can also use techniques such as “ethical persuasion” – where you let people know you’re persuading them and explain why – and offering a more balanced view to empower people to make their own decisions. “People with the most negative attitudes towards vaccination react much less negatively if you tell them the vaccine is not 100 per cent effective and explain the [possible] side effects,” he says. “It’s about being a trustworthy actor and persuading people at the same time.”

There is no single solution to solving the proliferation of “fake news”. But whether malicious or unintentional, it is unanimous that there needs to be a humanised approach to confronting this. It is clear that tech giants have a duty to better control the insidious nature of their algorithms, but governments also have a role to play in reintegrating people back into society. Whether it is the rise in white nationalism or a widespread aversion to a life-saving vaccine, this is not an internet issue – it is a real-world problem and it impacts all of us. ●

*\*Name has been changed to protect identity*

“You can deplatform a person but not an idea”





## **Bullies in their bedrooms**

Children's lives are defined by the internet, but whose job is it to keep them safe?

By Zoë Grünewald

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Semina Halliwell was just 12 when she took her own life last summer. The Merseyside schoolgirl had spent the months leading up to her death subject to a relentless campaign of bullying and harassment from her peers after she had reported to the police that another student had raped her.

Though Semina had been subject to this behaviour both online and off, her mother, Rachel Halliwell, believes social media played a critical role: “If she hadn’t been online, [the] boy would not have been able to groom her.”

To this day, bullies incite abuse against Semina and the family online.

“It [is] endless,” says Halliwell, who since her daughter’s death has become a vocal campaigner against online bullying. “For instance, [someone posted on] a Snapchat account ‘£10,000 for anybody to go to Semina’s grave, smash it up and video it.’” The grave was desecrated two weeks later.

Bullying and harassment in schools is epidemic. In June 2021, Ofsted published a damning review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges, stating that “for some children, incidents are so commonplace that they see no point in reporting them”.

Nearly 90 per cent of schoolgirls and 50 per cent of schoolboys reported some form of online sexual abuse and harassment. The Ofsted report noted that the problem was so severe, that even where schools may not have evidence that there is an online sexual abuse and harassment problem for their pupils, “leaders should take a whole-school/college approach to developing a culture where all kinds of sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are recognised and addressed”.

In 2021, after sharing her own experiences on Instagram, Soma Sara started the Everyone’s Invited movement to expose rape culture in schools, highlighting the extent to which young, mainly female, pupils fall victim to sexual assault, abuse and harassment from other pupils. Though a significant number of the testimonies on the movement’s website involved online harassment, many of the incidents illustrated where schools were complicit, either in the cover-up or in fostering an environment that encouraged these behaviours. Though the movement recognises online sexual

## “This is an invasion of your person, not your property”

harassment as a problem, the site states that the issues run much deeper, in “attitudes, behaviours and beliefs” that “have the effect of normalising and trivialising sexual violence”.

While it would be wrong to say social media is responsible for these behaviours, it is difficult to argue that it has not exacerbated the problem by giving bullies unfettered access to their victims. Halliwell says that as soon as Semina had access to social media, she was at risk of harassment, and unlike playground bullying, online bullying followed her home. “You close the door, [and previously] those bullies couldn’t get to you. Now, because of social media, they’re in their bedrooms.”

Hannah Ruschen, policy and public affairs officer at children’s charity the NSPCC, is concerned that the online world is designed in a way that actively enables this behaviour, through “easy access to harmful content” and design features such as disappearing messages. Halliwell also points to the role of anonymity in the treatment of Semina. As social media accounts can be created without proof of identity, the police found it difficult to trace the source of abuse, and this allowed for



**Semina, 12, took her own life after being bullied online**

multiple unnamed and unregistered accounts to pop up to harass Semina. “You can open [a social media account] without any form of identity, create a fictitious IP address or use an unregistered mobile phone number, and put people through levels of torment and suffering that effectively are crimes,” says Halliwell.

In May 2021, the government published the draft Online Safety Bill, which intends to clamp down on illegal content, as well as legal but harmful online content, such as misinformation and cyberbullying. However, the bill is not without its critics. As *Spotlight* reported last year, safety campaigners have criticised the definition of “bullying” as “wishy-washy”, making it easy for tech firms to avoid fines and leave citizens subject to confusing rules and little protection.

In December, a parliamentary committee examining the bill published a report that called for firmer protections, making individual acts, such as sharing content with the intent of causing physical or severe psychological harm, punishable by law. The committee also called for more regulation, giving Ofcom the power to introduce fines and prison sentences for specific individuals within tech firms who would be designated liable for offences, to ensure the tech companies weren’t just self-policing.

Halliwell believes, however, that the failure to protect her daughter lies not just with tech companies. She says, for instance, that the school failed to separate Semina and her brother from the bullies, which led to the brother being assaulted on its grounds.

Halliwell and her sister, Claire, also believe the police failed to appreciate the gravity of Semina’s experience. Claire believes the behaviour Semina faced should be subject to tighter laws. “If you get burgled you would have a dedicated team,” she notes. “This is an invasion of your person, not your property, and it’s not treated as seriously.” When the online abuse was reported to the police the sisters were told nothing could be done. “They said ‘we can’t trace it’... and it carried on and on and on and on,” says Claire.

In response, a spokesperson for the police says that “on 23 March 2021, Merseyside Police received a report that



The NSPCC believes that children should be taught how to be a “digital native online”

a 12-year-old girl had been raped in the Southport area on 25 February. We also received further reports of both online bullying and assault against the same alleged victim. Investigations into these allegations were launched. As part of these investigations, on 24 March, officers contacted the school attended by the alleged victim. Police liaised with the school’s safeguarding lead to discuss concerns and ensure that safety plans were put in place.

“Extensive enquiries remain ongoing in relation to this investigation, and it would therefore be inappropriate to comment further on the specifics of the case at this stage. We take reports of online bullying and harassment extremely seriously, conduct full investigations, and have a number of Safer Schools Officers who work within schools across our region to raise awareness of and educate young people on the impact of such crime.”

The NSPCC would prefer education to increased criminalisation, to prevent the actions that led to Semina’s death. Ruschen says it is a “very fine line to tread when thinking about where children sit within that broader legislative picture”, and rather than make children criminally culpable,

the NSPCC would rather see tech companies taking responsibility for removing harmful content, and schools ensure that children are being properly taught “what it means to be a digital native online”. “We want to make sure that children have an understanding that if you share a self-generated sexual image, you might be sharing that consensually, but it’s very, very difficult to keep track of who has the image, who it’s being sent to, who has screenshot it and [have an] understanding about how some of those dynamics play out in the online space,” Ruschen explains.

The Department for Education has produced a variety of advice for school staff to deal with bullying and harassment, and children are now subject to relationship and sex

**“It is vital that schools lead the way in keeping children safe”**

education in schools. However, the news site *Vice* reported in November 2021 that despite the new curriculum becoming mandatory in September 2020, there were serious concerns that the majority of schools had not downloaded key parts of it, including modules covering topics such as online consent, pornography and intimate sexual relationships. It also reported that prior to the curriculum change, teachers had flagged serious concerns that their school would be unable to deliver the necessary education, in part due to their lack of confidence in their own ability to teach it.

Ruschen points to what she refers to as a “generational gap” between students and teachers, where teachers and policymakers might not be understanding and sympathetic “of what it’s actually like to be a child growing up in the era of social media”. She says that though the NSPCC is pleased with the mandatory relationship and sex education, there needs to be a more concerted effort to relate it to the online world, “not just specific classes on things like consent, but also linking that with [the children’s] digital education and what they know about the online space”.

The chair of the House of Commons education committee, Robert Halfon MP, agrees that schools have a major role to play in dealing with this issue: “There needs to be an overhaul in safeguarding, to reflect much more the sort of awful things going on for these kids.” He points to schools that had been given “good” and even “outstanding” ratings by Ofsted, despite obvious failures in safeguards for children in this respect. Halfon also says he wants to see more parental involvement in what children are seeing online: “I think there needs to be much better parental engagement – so that you would have a safeguarding induction for parents and engagement programmes.”

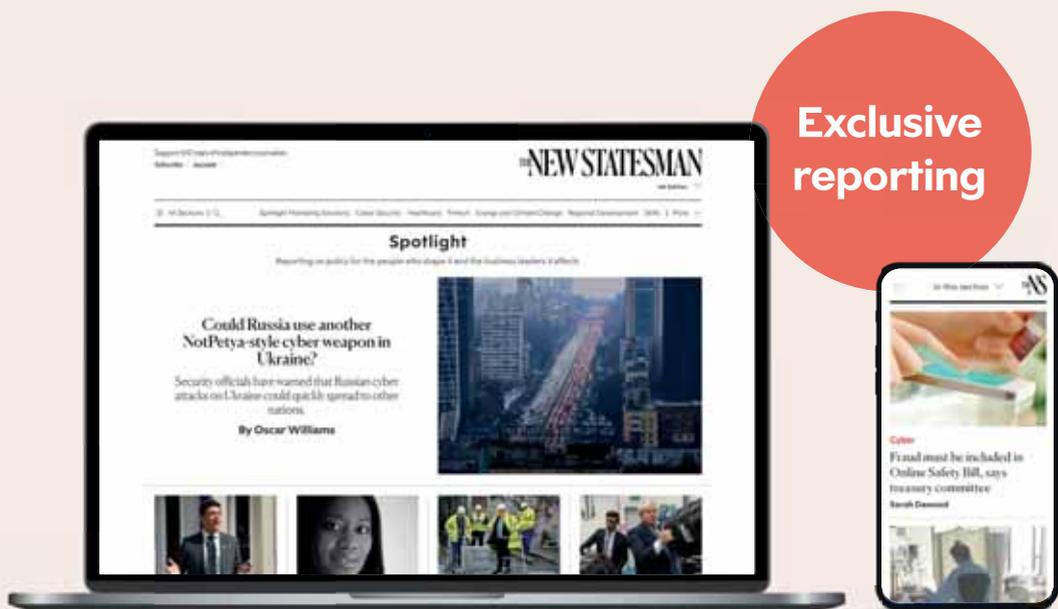
If Semina’s story teaches us anything, it is that online bullying and harassment of children by children needs to be taken seriously – not just by tech companies, which have a responsibility to protect individuals from harmful content, but also by parents, teachers and the police, who should all be leading the way in keeping children safe online. ●

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**Margaret Hodge**  
Labour MP for  
Barking

# “I was forced to think again about the impact of social media”

In the early days of social media I enthusiastically championed this new way of sharing ideas and information, believing it would advance democratic participation. Social media enabled more people's voices to be heard more equally.

But after experiencing a torrent of vitriol and abuse as I campaigned against the scourge of anti-Semitism in the Labour Party, and after talking to people of colour and young people about the impact harmful online abuse has on them, I was forced to think again.

In just two months after the Equality and Human Rights Commission report on Labour's anti-Semitism was published, I received 90,000 mentions online. Most were anonymous and many were abusive. The posts painted me as a hateful person – a paedophile, a racist, a tax-avoider and a Palestinian child murderer. By portraying this

false image of me as a bad person, people hoped to delegitimise me and the work that I do. They posted abusive lies online to shut my voice down and so undermine my democratic rights. I know from talking to others that fear of abuse stops them from going online, silencing their voices too.

Much of online abuse is anonymous, so if we want to bear down on it – and if we really do want to promote healthy democratic debate – we need to tackle the misuse of anonymity.

We all want anonymity online, particularly for people like whistle-blowers and victims of domestic violence or child abuse. But anonymity is a privilege. If individuals misuse that privilege to harm others they should lose it. It is anonymous abuse, not anonymity that needs to be tackled.

The platforms need to create a system whereby a third party holds the identity details of all users. This way people remain anonymous to the platform but can be identified if they post harmful abuse online. We know this is possible because every PayPal user's identity is known. There are plenty of organisations that already hold data on individuals, like banks, who could provide the third-party verification needed. Then individuals can be traced if they post harmful abuse, but their anonymity can be protected if they don't.

If this obligation to trace people is coupled with the Law Commission's proposals to introduce a new, stronger offence that would make posts that are likely or intended to cause harm illegal, we could start to tackle harmful online abuse.

The social media platforms will not act without being compelled by the law. Their business model depends on maximising traffic to maximise advertising revenue. As harmful online abuse sadly encourages use, it is not in the platforms' commercial interests to remove it.

Sadly, Nadine Dorries' recent proposal will not give us the protection we need. The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is suggesting that we will all have the right simply to block any anonymous posts from our personal account. That means you will not personally see abusive content but abuse and lies about you will continue to be seen by others and your character attacked. The police advise that it is important that all abusive content is monitored so that they can assess whether there is a real and present threat to you personally; blocking anonymous postings will obviously mean that abusive content cannot be monitored.

So we need stronger action. We need to grasp the opportunity of the government's Online Safety Bill to tackle online abuse in a pragmatic and effective way, not by undermining anonymity or freedom of speech, but by ridding the social media platforms of anonymous and harmful abuse. ●

Spotlight Debates

# Will the Online Safety Bill make the internet safer?

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Speakers: **Damian Collins MP**, chair of the joint parliamentary committee on the draft Online Safety Bill; **Alex Towers**, director of policy and public affairs at BT; **Ruth Smeeth**, chief executive of Index on Censorship; and **Annabel Denham**, director of communications at the Institute of Economic Affairs.

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