 HOUSE OF LORDS

Select Committee on Communications and Digital

Corrected oral evidence: Freedom of expression online

Tuesday 9 February 2021

4 pm

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Members present: Viscount Colville of Culross (Acting Chair); Baroness Bull; Baroness Buscombe; Baroness Featherstone; Lord Gilbert of Panteg; Baroness Grender; Lord Griffiths of Burry Port; Lord McInnes of Kilwinning; Baroness Rebuck; Lord Stevenson of Balmacara; Lord Vaizey of Didcot; The Lord Bishop of Worcester.

Evidence Session No. 10   Virtual Proceeding   Questions 88 - 96

Witnesses

I: Seyi Akiwowo, Founder and Executive Director, Glitch; Kenny Ethan Jones, Transgender Activist.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

This is an uncorrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Seyi Akiwowo and Kenny Ethan Jones.

Q88 **The Chair:** In our second evidence session today, we are joined by Seyi Akiwowo and Kenny Ethan Jones. Welcome and thank you for joining us to look at online harassment and abuse, particularly on social media. This session is going to be broadcast live and a transcript will be taken.

Seyi is the founder and executive director of Glitch, a non-profit organisation that aims to end online abuse through education and advocacy. Kenny is an activist who focuses on engaging an open and respectful conversation about all things trans, and hopes by doing so to attain equality for trans people.

Seyi, could you introduce yourself, tell people about the organisation you represent and give the committee a perspective on the broad themes we should be considering when looking at freedom of expression online?

Seyi Akiwowo: Thank you for inviting me to be here, on Safer Internet Day 2021, to talk about how we can end online abuse. It is a time when a lot of us are on social media more than we imagined we would be. I am the founder and executive director of Glitch. We are a charity based in the UK determined to make the online space safe for all. That was born of my experience of being a local councillor—one of the youngest black women to be elected at the time. A video of a speech I made at the European Parliament—when we were all friends—went viral and was posted online, and I was on the receiving end of trolling and abuse.

The response from society, law enforcement and other people in politics was to say, "Bear with it. It is part of the job. It is part of what it is like to be a woman in public life". Particularly being a black woman, I felt the response was poor. My anger, frustration and desire to see change are why I set up the charity Glitch. I want to make sure that we knock down the barriers that prevent women entering public life and engaging in debate.

Alongside calling for long-term systemic change through avenues such as this, we deliver training programmes and workshops for women and non-binary people so they can stay safe online right now. That has given us useful intel and data on how people are navigating the online space, their experience, the different kinds of online abuse and how they are quickly evolving through AI and automated decision-making. This is why it is really important that we are talking about accountability and looking at how to make sure that online abuse is not seen in opposition to freedom of expression, but that those who are disproportionately impacted by online abuse have the right to freedom of expression.

The Chair: Kenny Ethan Jones, could you give us introduce yourself and give the committee a perspective on the broad themes we should be considering when looking at freedom of expression online?

Kenny Ethan Jones: I am a writer, trans advocate and consultant. A lot of my time is spent on Instagram, using that platform to promote my

work and try to get more trans inclusivity in all aspects of life. I feel quite passionate about this topic because, as a marginalised person, I face many barriers in using social platforms. That is why I am here today.

Q89   **Baroness Featherstone:** Thank you both for coming. Seyi, I am inspired by you. That is fantastic. I do not know where we met, but you are amazing. There is a clash, in many ways, today. My follow-up question will be on the trans/feminist issue. To start with, what should not be protected by the right to freedom of expression online? Is there anything?

Seyi Akiwowo: It is about being clear that freedom of expression is not having the freedom to abuse online. We have to be clear what we mean by online abuse. We are in a unique position, because we can keep a finger on the pulse of how online abuse is manifesting. To understand online abuse, a really helpful frame is intersectionality. Intersectionality allows us to see how people's multiple identities, which are brilliant and shape our amazing online and offline spaces, also make them more vulnerable to harm. Applying an intersectional lens to online abuse allows us to see different forms that arise—for example, hate speech— and how they impact different communities, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist and so forth. We have also seen a resurgence of anti-Semitism online.

As a frame to understand online abuse, intersectionality allows us to see how trans people experience the online space, and how younger versus older people experience it. We see vulnerable adults being subject to scamming and online abuse, and the younger generations being subject to things such as "revenge porn" and the sharing of non-consensual photography. If we want to understand freedom of expression, we have to get a good understanding of what online abuse is and be clear that freedom of expression does not mean the right to do that.

Do I think that tech companies can solve this issue? No, because these are issues that also exist offline. The way that certain platforms are designed is exacerbating this. When people break the law or make mistakes, there do not seem to be clear repercussions. There also does not seem to be an incentive for tech companies to create safe platforms that are about the protection of everyone's freedom of expression. Second- and third-generation tech platforms such as Clubhouse have fewer content moderation policies than Twitter. People go on Twitter to complain about how unsafe apps such as Clubhouse are. Last year, Telegram scraped profiles and photos of strangers, hundreds and thousands of women, and put them on fake pornographic videos and content. We are seeing a race to the bottom when it comes to the technology and erosion of frameworks that make sure that freedom of expression is a principle that we all uphold, particularly for those from vulnerable communities.

Baroness Featherstone: Thank you, Seyi. That was a tour de force.

Kenny Ethan Jones: I have nothing to add to that. It was absolutely perfect. You hit everything on the head. This intersectional approach is

important. Having clear, definitive lines of what is hate speech actually is also important, so we can hold people accountable.

Baroness Featherstone: Intersectionality is interesting. For some reason, not understandable to myself, the extreme feminists take exception to the trans lobby and say that their rights have been trampled on by trans rights. This has turned into a heated, upsetting discussion for everyone. I am upset, as a feminist and a trans supporter, by this conflict. Where does freedom of expression lie there? Women will argue, "I should be free to say that trans women are not women". I do not agree with that. Where is the freedom of speech issue?

Kenny Ethan Jones: This issue most definitely needs to be approached. Trans women face so much more abuse in real life and online from trans-critical people. Trans women and cis-gendered women want the same thing: they want safe spaces. The whole point that people who are against trans people are making is that trans women are not women, and they are. We need to make a community and find a space in which both can align.

Seyi Akiwowo: As a straight woman with her boyfriend forced into the bedroom at home—he cannot come out until after 5 pm—I do not speak on behalf of trans people. It is time to have nuanced conversations. There is a need to bring people on a journey of understanding human rights. I would like to see it clearly outlined when tactics of online abuse are used to censor groups, so we can have nuanced conversations and debates without the trip-ups on words and mistakes.

A term has been coined—"dogpiling"—where people, maybe with the intention of being a bystander to somebody on the receiving end of online abuse, abuse those who are also from a very vulnerable community. Sadly, we were on the receiving end of this tactic when we released our report, *The Ripple Effect*, of online abuse and how abuse has increased for women and non-binary people during the pandemic. We had people dogpile and try to skew the research away from the conversation we were having about the increase in online abuse to talk about something that is so delicate and sensitive. How does technology help facilitate the nuanced conversations that need to happen online? What happens when people are clearly using tactics to censor people, keep them away from conversations and make them scared to be themselves online? That is where we have that violation of freedom of expression.

Q90 **Lord Griffiths of Burry Port:** We are all public figures in this conversation. We are all grappling with this at a theoretical level, trying to find answers and the best way forward, building on experience that we have had, and so forth. It is a very complicated place to be. I sometimes do not know how to situate myself in the complex situations that are being thrown up at the moment. There is a level at which the discussion has to happen between people such as us and others out there in the community. I am interested in young people who do not have the luxury, the education, or whatever, to tease these things out, to check their experiences against anybody else's experience and to know how to make

the most of sometimes conflictual material. Where do we go with this discussion at that level?

Seyi Akiwowo: I completely agree with you that we have a deficit in digital citizenship education. For us, that is defined as understanding that we have digital rights and responsibilities around being secure, password protection, two-factor authentication, privacy—you name it. We also need a conversation about our collective responsibility to each other. What are the cultural or social norms? What happens if I repost fake news, misinformation, disinformation or very triggering content? That was discussed last year on the back of the resurgence of Black Lives Matter and George Floyd. Well-intentioned people who wanted to be bystanders were resharing graphic content and probably enacting their right to freedom of expression, but were doing a lot of harm to already traumatised black communities. There is a real need for a conversation and education about what it means to be a digital citizen.

We believe that digital citizenship is the key to tackling and addressing online abuse. I would envision us talking about digital citizenship from nursery and primary school right up until university. It should be readily available at libraries—when we can go back to libraries—and on tech platforms. We often go to tech platforms and social media platforms when something has gone wrong, when we want to look at their moderation policies or report something. How do we make that a place we can go to understand our rights? When we set up a Facebook group or a community group on any app, we should be doing that with the best intentions and making sure that everyone is feeling safe. How do we do that with an understanding of online codes of conduct? How do we help people spot fake news and misinformation?

A lot of effort went—and is still going—into tackling misinformation when it comes to the vaccine and Covid-19. Would it not be great if that same effort was applied to tackling harassment and abuse? Would it not be great if that same amount of resource was available for tackling Holocaust denial and people who are denying slavery and its impact? These mechanisms exist, but how important is it to tech companies? We know they are not the most reflective group of people in our society.

Kenny Ethan Jones: It starts with education. What I struggle with on Instagram is that there is no place for nuanced conversation. It is just the extreme views, either extreme left or extreme right. That is where the problem arises. We do not know how to deal with opinions that differ from our own. That needs to be approached. We should look at putting more education in place to understand how to resolve conflict.

Seyi Akiwowo: We could start, to piggy-back on what Kenny said, with the role of employers. We have seen kitchens and living rooms—I am in my living room at the moment—being converted to workplaces, and we have not had a conversation about the responsibility and duty of care of employers to make sure they are tackling online health and safety, and online sexual harassment. Our research showed that only 9% of victims who faced online abuse during lockdown last year received education or advice from their employers about online abuse and harassment.

I have spoken to physiotherapists who, because there has not been a clear statement by the employer, are sharing their concerns and scepticism around the vaccine. Without realising it, they have shared a lot of fake news about the vaccine with other colleagues on a work platform. There is a real entry point in tackling employers' duties around digital citizenship and online safety education. That filters through to families and friends, feeding this urgency to shape new cultural norms when it comes to our online space.

Q91 **Baroness Bull:** Thank you both for being here. I want to ask for your views on the prevalence of abuse and harassment online and the role of the police in enforcing laws that prohibit that abuse. It seems that the more niche the online forum, the more the content risks being abusive and aggressive. Worryingly, between 10% and 20% of people in the UK have been targeted by abusive content. That percentage goes up among black people, which is terribly worrying. We heard from a previous witness that enforcing laws online was beyond the police's capacity, but also that there was some heavy-handed policing going on. Let us hear from you about the prevalence of abuse from your perspective and the role of the police in addressing it.

Kenny Ethan Jones: As a marginalised person, especially being black and trans, I am more likely to face abuse online. I have to face transphobia as well as racism. What role should the police play in that? To be honest, the police do not have the deep understanding of intersectionality required to approach this. We need to look at creating a special team that can look at these issues, because we are talking about a very specialised thing here.

Seyi Akiwowo: Sadly, in our most recent report, *The Ripple Effect*, we found that one in two women and non-binary people—46%—reported experiencing online abuse since the beginning of the Covid pandemic in March. One in three—29%—of those who had already experienced online abuse prior to lockdown reported it getting worse during lockdown. The trend of online abuse is increasing, even though it was already a beast to get a handle on. I said in my opening statement that artificial intelligence and automated decision-making, which were potentially a solution in content moderation and helping to tackle online abuse, are exacerbating and creating new forms of online abuse and harassment, and gaslighting and further traumatising people who are most likely to be affected.

To echo everything that Kenny is saying, black women are 84% more likely to be harassed online. Amnesty International's research showed that. We know that, when you look at other identities that intersect with that, it is even worse, but we do not get any disaggregated data from the police. We do not have evidence of what is happening on the ground. The first recommendation for law enforcement is to capture this data. Even if police on the beat do not think that the evidence is enough to go to the Crown Prosecution Service, we need a real understanding of the data. What types of abuse are people experiencing: online stalking, surveillance, threats, violence? We need to understand it, and then we

need to see that disaggregated by protected characteristics, so we can make sure that we are putting in the basic provision for people.

Despite being a campaigner for increasing the capacity and resources for the police, when I have had to report online abuse—I was terribly stalked by somebody two Christmases ago—I had the police gaslight me, victim-blame me and tell me that I should just come off the online space. I was like, "I am trying to get you more resources and you are telling me to come offline". There is a massive disconnect with what the Crown Prosecution Service is talking about, which is that hate speech online will be treated the same as that offline. The guidance is there; they want to tackle gender-based violence online, but that is not being filtered through to law enforcement.

If I can be really honest with you, that is my concern about the online harms Bill, that we will have this amazing policy in law, because Glitch is going to be very involved in making sure that it is amazing, and then it is not enforced by local police or we see disparities. The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, in his first term, piloted something with the Home Office, where six detective inspectors were looking at hate crime online—stepping away from extremism, which is important, but looking at other forms of hate online, which is much needed. Sadly, when I tried to use that service, I had to pick whether I wanted to be a woman or black. I could not be both in the eyes of the law, and that really speaks to what Kenny is saying. People with multiple intersectional identities do not have proper provision in the law.

On the flipside, the murder of George Floyd has again put on the agenda a conversation about racial justice and what that looks like. I know what it is like to be a victim and to want the perpetrators to be punished, in jail and publicly reprimanded, but, when I look with my CEO hat on and as a black woman at how the law disproportionately impacts my community, I now feel like we need to have a conversation about what a public health approach to online abuse would look like.

When I talk to Instagram yummy mummies, who are doing amazing content and influencing online, they tell me that they have bravely spoken to their trolls. They have direct messaged them. When they ask them, "Why are you trolling me?", a lot of them will say that they are victims of domestic violence. They are isolated. They are lonely. They are going to the food bank and they are feeling jealous. All those social ills are now being taken out, wrongly, on somebody else. I want us to think about what a public health approach to online abuse would look like.

We still censor the victim, like we saw last week with Ian Wright, who was disappointed by how his perpetrator was dealt with. At the same time, how effective is it to sentence an 18 year-old who abused Captain Sir Tom Moore? How effective is it to sentence a young person to six months in prison and give him a criminal record for saying something online, when we as a state and a society have not put down what we mean by digital citizenship and a good social norm for the online space?

Q92 **Lord Vaizey of Didcot:** I hope that your boyfriend can join us at 4.59;

if he is going to be cooped up in the bedroom for an hour having to watch you on video, he should get a runout in the last minute. Most of my questions have been answered, really. I was going to ask whether you thought that platform moderation policies were fit for purpose, and you clearly do not, like most of us. You have also talked about the effectiveness of digital citizenship. I am interested in exploring your public health approach, because you are the first person to articulate that vision. I sympathise a lot with it. There are several points I want to make, and it will be slightly incoherent.

First, you mentioned earlier that you train people how to stay safe online. Do you think it is a cop-out, for example, for me to say to people who get trolled online, "You should just mute or block"? I always roll my eyes when a celebrity picks out a tweet with three followers and says, "Look at this nasty person"—sort of doing the job for them. Is there a case for just saying, "These are the rules of the road. Just as you look both ways when you cross the road, you behave in a certain way online, particularly if you are a public figure"?

Secondly, I was thinking, when we were listening to Jimmy Wales, about what motivates people to behave like this online. Sometimes, it is the first time you get a chance to directly interact with someone. When Michael Gove retweets me and a pile-on starts, it is because very, very few people get the chance to tell Michael Gove what they think of him and know that he will read it. It is just like shouting abuse in a crowd. There is an element of online interaction that is unique.

Thirdly, do you see any parallels? I have been using Kick It Out as a parallel, where you have a community, football fans, and a problem, racist abuse in the stands, and you have a relentless campaign to dial it down, even though you might not change the mindset. You may have changed the mindset of one or two people, but you have certainly changed behaviour patterns. Is there any parallel in that kind of campaign? That was quite a stream of consciousness, sorry.

Seyi Akiwowo: There is so much there, but it is good. I am really glad you liked the public health approach. I would love to continue that conversation and explore what that could look like.

It is only a cop-out or in danger of victim blaming if that is all we say to people who have experienced online abuse: "You need to block, filter and mute". To the questions we have been sent and in what we are exploring, we are saying that, hand in hand, we need online safety to deal with what is happening right now, as well as systemic change. When I get the chance to facilitate workshops—less so now, because we have an amazing team—I try to tell women, "It is not fair that we have to do this, but when we go out we have to look over our shoulders. Before we get our keys, we have to see if anyone is following us. If we go out for a drink, we have to make sure our drink is not left unattended". There are sadly things that we have been conditioned to know and learn as self-defence mechanisms, to try to brave the outside world of patriarchy.

We do not yet have that same understanding of the online space. I say this in the nicest way, but we are still allowing tech companies to portray

this façade that the online space is safe. We need to inject some more realism. When you tweet something, you might be thinking, "I am tweeting only to my political party friends. I am tweeting only to black Twitter. I am tweeting only to feminist Twitter", but somebody in Australia or South America with a lot more followers could pick up your tweet and take it out of context. That injects some more realism into how we navigate the online space as digital citizens. That does not mean tech companies cannot play a part in that, and there is a role for them to help shape it better. We coined the term "digital self-care" to help people think about their boundaries. How can we do more than just blocking and muting? How can we filter more? How can we filter videos and audio? How are people with epilepsy able to filter gifs of flashing images that are purposely sent to them to spark an epileptic attack? Tech companies can do a huge amount to help with digital self-care and the boundaries that we talked about.

On accountability and interaction, yes, that is probably why it is getting worse. People are isolated, lonely and do not have the ability to channel all their frustrations properly. We have to have a conversation about this term, "freedom of expression". What do we mean by accountability and abuse? It is right that we can hold people accountable; people hold me accountable, as CEO of a charity, for charity money. How do we make sure it does not lead to online abuse? We have not yet done the work to talk about accountability frameworks online. As you pointed out, we do not have other mechanisms to hold public officials to account.

How else do we hold a celebrity to account when they have done something wrong, if it is not to @ them on Twitter or Instagram? Can we get their agent's email address so we can send our complaints? When it comes to MPs, there is an official channel, to contact the office via email or letter, but there are no other means of accountability. We are left in this growing cesspit on Twitter to try to come up with accountability frameworks. That is where we are getting into a lot of trouble.

Your last bit was about Kick It Out. It is sad that the online harms Bill does not allow for individual grievances to be taken to the regulator, Ofcom. It is a shame, as it means that people with social or cultural capital are the only ones who can do a class suit. If Ofcom, which has been announced as the regulator, is going to look at systemic causes in cases and taking it at a broader level, there is a need to equip civil society groups to be that listening ear to communities; obviously I declare an interest here.

When Jewish communities face anti-Semitism online, where can they go to have their case dealt with and raised with Twitter? It is the same for black communities, working-class communities and employers. How do we make sure that we have a framework, using civil society groups and remunerating them properly to be that echo and that platform for those who do not have the ear of tech companies?

Kenny Ethan Jones: It is a wonderful idea of trying to create a board that represents each part of these communities. The issue I see with these platforms is that there is not enough diversity around hiring. That

is why there is no real understanding of what we are experiencing. If you have a place of employment full of cis people, they are not going to understand my experience as transgender. If you have a place that lacks black employees, they are not going to understand my experience as a black man. We need to have these people at the table, in these discussions, making decisions and trying to help the communities.

Q93 **Lord McInnes of Kilwinning:** Moving on from that issue of diversity in the workforce, what are your feelings on the processes of moderation? Seyi, you mentioned automated moderation and how that can make online abuse worse. What should the balance be between human and automated moderation? Should the platforms be regulated to have more transparency over the way they do it? To what degree can intersectionality be taken into account in automated moderation?

Kenny Ethan Jones: That is a big question. Could you ask it again?

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: It is how human and automated moderation can reflect intersectionality, if you think it can, and how that is managed. Following on from what you said before, is that about diversity of employment and bringing a more diverse workforce into the platforms in the first place?

Kenny Ethan Jones: It is about diverse hiring, but also possibly trying to incorporate some form of bias training with employees. If people are making decisions, what bias do they hold? People who hold bad biases should not be employed to take on these social issues. It starts with employment at the heart of the companies. As a user, I am not too sure where you step in on automatic regulation and people, but it needs to be a balance. That starts with having all the right people around the table and understanding language and different aspects. As trans people, the abuse we face online comes mostly from the choice of language, in using words such as "biological" rather than "cis" or "gender". That understanding is a framework to build on.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: Is that an organic process within the platforms, or does it require more government regulation to make it happen?

Kenny Ethan Jones: It depends on how the platforms make money. It depends on their system. Platforms such as Instagram want to foster hate because you spend more time on the platform, so it is not in their best interest to do the right thing. By using fewer algorithms, posting in chronological order and things of that form, platforms can self-regulate. If it is not in their interest, the bigger platforms should not be regulating themselves.

Seyi Akiwowo: We need transparency. As somebody who has been in this space for four years this April, I am still confused and do not understand content moderation, let alone a lay person who just wants to use the app. There is a real need to be clear about what happens. When you write me a letter, we know the process: the postman, postwoman or post person will pick up the letter and drop it to the sorting office; it gets picked up and sent out to somebody else. We know the process when it

comes to a letter, and that is potentially a letter of complaint. We do not understand, when we make a complaint on the platform, where it goes and what decisions are made.

We hear rumours about people having to use whistleblowing policies to expose what is happening in these tech companies. We hear about moderators not being properly trained or treated. We hear about moderators not getting any mental health support after seeing a lot of graphic content. We do not know, which is why we need a regulator to bring a light to the forefront, so we can begin to tackle it properly. We started doing this piecemeal. We need real oversight of what is going on, which is why the online harms Bill and the duty of care that Carnegie Trust has been pushing for are really important.

We are talking about automated decision-making, because more of us are online. We see the trends. Something like 60% of the world's population is online. There are huge numbers, so I understand that Instagram's team does not have the capacity to moderate different types of abuse. We need to look at the data on how automated decision-making and AI are being used, to make sure that it is constantly being audited and that those who are doing the audit are from diverse communities, so that we are teaching the algorithms to pick up things, because there are going to be nuances. I will share one; it is very timely, given that the theme of the conversation is freedom of expression.

We did some consultancy work for Twitch, a second-generation platform for video streamers. It is not for me, but my boyfriend wants to get on it. It wanted to understand how it could enforce on the N-word, because there are some people in the black community who use the N-word. They wanted to understand how they could enforce on words such as "queer" that have been reclaimed by communities. These nuanced conversations are brave to have, but are not being had by the tech giants, to make sure that this is constantly reviewed.

There is a role in making clear to MPs how content moderation works. A lot of onus is now being put on MPs to regulate tech companies, which is great, but where is the training and capacity building to make sure that we really understand that process, so we can start saying what standard of content moderation we want?

Q94 **Lord Stevenson of Balmacara:** I am a new member of the committee, so please be gentle with me. You have both been so open with us and you have had so much experience of the issues we are talking about. I feel very privileged hearing you talk so well and so convincingly about what you have learned and the thoughts you have about it. In his answer to the question before last, Kenny mentioned the tension between what the platforms were after and what they got out of having everyone on them, and the issues we are talking about, of it being an echo chamber and allowing people to join in with abuse. More people doing more things on the platform is good for the platform, even though it is obviously bad for the people who are receiving it. Is this an irreconcilable tension or is there a way forward?

Kenny Ethan Jones: I am not entirely sure what that looks like, but it is about sitting down to have a conversation with these companies and trying to move them away from their current business model, such that they still have the ability to thrive as a company, but want to do the right thing. The best way to do that, if you approach a platform such as Instagram, would be to ask the whistleblowers who left the company for moral reasons to put together a framework to challenge the platform, to make it step away from hate speech and abuse online, and to make it more of a community rather than speaking to an audience.

Lord Stevenson of Balmacara: Seyi, that picks up your point about how it works in practice. You were saying that you want transparency all the way down; is that right?

Seyi Akiwowo: Absolutely, I want transparency all the way down, as well as on the design and algorithms of every product that is rolled out. I declare another interest here: I am on Twitter's and TikTok's trust and safety councils for their online abuse and harassment policies. That is a great step, but with Twitter we always see a product towards the end of its being rolled out. We need to see it from the beginning, that design element, and have that input. As Kenny said, we need to be given the time to reach out to communities and get their input, as an organisation, even though we are not elected, so that we can properly represent the communities we are trying to make the online space safe for.

The design of social media platforms has allowed harmful behaviours to thrive by allowing a lot of viral content to go unchecked. The platforms' business model is closely linked to the attention economy. That being the case, there is a way to increase positive attention. When you set up a Facebook group, whether it is a mutual aid group for your local area and you want to get resources to people on your streets, or you are part of a new political party or have started a campaign, how do we make sure that those in charge of the welfare and experience of increasing numbers of people have the proper support, advice and nudges from the platforms to moderate their groups and communities in a safe way?

Health experts can talk more about the dangers of the attention economy, but there is an assumption that attention has to be bad—that that rage, anger, polarisation and echo chambers are the only way to get attention. I love Idris Elba; at every opportunity I will talk about Idris Elba. If you do something with Idris Elba, it will make me provide more attention to the platform, not if you send me a barrage of abuse and call me all sorts of names.

Lord Stevenson of Balmacara: The other end of the question about who these people are online is anonymity. Do you have a view about whether anonymity is to be permitted, whether it should be regulated, or whether there needs to be an intermediate way for the names to be known, even if they are not revealed to those who are participating?

Kenny Ethan Jones: I feel two ways about this. I understand the need for privacy, especially if you are a politician of some form. Being a public figure, you want to stay secure, but somebody needs to know who you are. How can you hold someone accountable if we do not have that

information? I do not know how we source that and use that information, but it is important to have.

Seyi Akiwowo: Sometimes the debate about anonymity can be simplistic. There is so much nuance needed. I say that as somebody who has gone on a journey. When I faced the horrific abuse across so many platforms, I was like, "I want to know everybody's name and address. Let me deal with them". I understand the position that addressing anonymity would reduce online abuse, but we saw President Donald Trump get banned from Facebook and Twitter only this year. Under his birth name, as himself, he was on the platform for many years spreading hate and abuse. I do not believe that tackling anonymity means that one day online abuse is going to disappear.

Anonymity was a shield for marginalised people, freedom fighters, whistleblowers or people sharing their #MeToo experience, but it has now been co-opted by bad actors to hide behind and say awful things. I would love to see innovation around us as users. It goes back to a point made before about digital self-care by Lord Vaizey. As users, we can decide, "I do not want to interact with an anonymous account or an account that has not bothered to verify its email address or provide a phone number". That gives us an opportunity to push out that bad culture or bad behaviour, or people who do not interact with the platform in the way we want to.

I would love to see something that I have seen work well on Twitter rolled out across other platforms. When someone interacts with your tweet, you can click on their profile and it will tell you whether you have any mutual contacts. That gives the user reassurance that we are dealing with somebody whom somebody knows. If we can have more technology for that, shying away from anonymity and increasing people's confidence that they are interacting with those they know, we will not have this need. I do not want to say that we could brush the situation under the carpet, but it would be clear that we just do not need to interact with them.

On the flipside, people who want to be anonymous feel like the word "anonymity" is being taken away from them by bad actors. There is the potential to work with companies such as Yoti, which helps young people with age verification even if they do not have the access to passports or provisional licences. It has a great encrypted, safe, secure way of being verified, and no one can access that data. For people who need to be anonymous for their livelihood, can something such as that exist somewhere that no one can access, where no one can buy or misuse their data, and no dictatorship or bad actor can cause further harm? There is a need to be more experimental around anonymity for good, but we should not believe that online abuse equals anonymity.

Q95 **Baroness Rebuck:** I echo Lord Stevenson's thanks to both of you. This has been completely fascinating. I want to take you back to a question that, in a sense, has gone right the way through this discussion, that of digital citizenship and education. You said earlier, Seyi, and we would all agree, that it needs to go from primary school through secondary to

university. But we have heard far fewer ideas from our witnesses about how adult digital education should take place. You talked about libraries but there must be other ways. I have been impressed by the powerful way that Glitch has called on tech companies to invest in education. You have also called on government to take a much more active role in disseminating digital literacy.

If you had senior representatives of the tech companies and a Minister in the room, what would you say to them?

Seyi Akiwowo: Let us look at where people congregate and get the information there. There is a role for hairdressers, beauty therapists and doctor's surgeries to provide this conversation on digital citizenship. On surgery walls, there are screens that say, "Get tested and get a flu jab". They could, when we are allowed to mix outside, talk about digital citizenship, fake news, fact checking and the harm of misinformation, which also helps the NHS with the issue of hesitation over the vaccine.

We talk about barbershops as a way for elders to do storytelling for young communities. Let us bring that back. In churches and mosques, priests and imams have a role. Let us equip our faith leaders, who have a platform to talk about this. They have also seen and experienced online abuse, because they have all had to do their faith work online and have seen what it is like to be a Jewish person or a black person online. Let us equip them.

Obviously, that looks like investment of money. The digital services tax came into force in April and, in one month, generated something like £400 million. There is a lot of revenue there. I understand that it needs to go to things such as furlough and the death of our high streets, but every corporate has to have some responsibility for harm. Football stadiums have to pay for security and extra policing. Nightclubs have to pay for extra policing. The alcohol and gambling industries have to do adverts about harm, responsible drinking and responsible gambling—which I do not think you can do, but anyway. How have we not expected tech companies to do their bit on digital education?

For government, it has been done before, such as with drink-driving. We made drink-driving a public problem. We made clear that everyone has a part to play. We saw ads: "Do not drink and drive. If your friend has been drinking, take their keys off them". We saw it on "EastEnders"; Peggy Mitchell would take the keys off people. We saw every way that a community could make sure the roads were safe for young people and their loved ones. How do we get that same feeling of urgency about our online public space? It is in those ways that I have mentioned.

Baroness Rebuck: Kenny, I want to ask you about education, but first I want to say how informative I found your interviews and writings on your personal experiences, particularly your campaign on menstruation. I really learned a lot, so thank you for that. It seemed to me that you found a way of having a dialogue online that was not abusive and did not harass, even though you felt very strongly. I am talking about your different views from J K Rowling's. How could this be bottled? How could we influence others to engage in a dialogue in the way that you have,

which is reasoned? You still may not agree, but at the end of the day you educate.

Kenny Ethan Jones: Thank you for your kind words. It is a very good question. It just comes down to my mindset, my understanding of people and what I want for the world. I want the world to be a better place. I believe in being as transparent as I can so that people can relate to my experience. We need to focus more on that. To some degree, when I see other influencers or people who are educators, sometimes it has a selfish aspect. It is like they are just trying to build for no reason. It is about educating people and questioning, "Why do you want to do this? Why do you want to participate in this?"

For me, that came from being a marginalised person. Periods were very traumatic to me growing up. I faced many issues because of being trans. In trying to replicate that, it is about understanding why we do these things and making sure that people are clear on that when they enter the platform. Recently, I have struggled with trying not to be too extreme in my views and not to shut down open conversations, where people are not intentionally being ignorant but are saying the wrong things, because of a lack of education. We need to be patient with people and say, "I want you to learn". Sometimes I hear things and think, "I do not necessarily like this, but I know that it is not from a bad place".

It is about giving space to that conversation, having patience, making people understand nuance and how to deal with conflict, because there are people who come to my page and say, "I identify gender based on biological factors". I respect that and that is fine; that is your opinion, but let us not say, "You do not have the right to exist". Do not stop people having human rights because of that perspective. There is no one answer here, but I hope you can take something from what I have said.

Baroness Rebuck: Yes, it is the human aspect of education. Thank you both. You are both really inspirational.

Seyi Akiwowo: If online abuse stops Kenny doing what he does, I will not be the better person I am today. It is through Kenny's work that I do not hold the same toxic opinions that I was conditioned to believe in. If we tackled online abuse, it would really help human beings be able to talk to each other and learn from each other.

I have talked about this; I held very anti-Semitic views. It was normal in my upbringing and it was joked about. It was only through the brave education of people online who could withstand people trying to deny their existence and deny anti-Semitism that I was able to go through that unlearning. There is something really powerful about addressing online abuse so that people can be better humans and allies to each other.

Baroness Rebuck: Thank you for that example.

The Chair: That was a very brave and helpful intervention.

Q96 **The Lord Bishop of Worcester:** I echo the thanks that have already been expressed to you both for this session, which has been really

illuminating and helpful. Thank you for all the good work you are doing, particularly in Glitch, but also, Kenny, I have someone very close to me in the family who is trans, who has found your work hugely inspirational and encouraging.

You have talked about all sorts of things. We are going to follow up on the public health aspect and that approach. You have just mentioned the possibility of a campaign like drink-driving. All sorts of things have come up this afternoon. There is lots of possibility here. We are focusing on public policy. You have been asked about what you would say to the platforms. What would you like the outcome of this inquiry to be? What would be success or a good outcome, as far as you are concerned?

Kenny Ethan Jones: A plan for how you are going to move forward, what that relationship with the platforms looks like and how you are going to measure the success of what you are doing. That is what I would expect at this point.

Seyi Akiwowo: Multiply this conversation. I would love to help increase the number of people who can talk to you from their experience of being a disabled person, a trans woman or a black gay man online. I would love to facilitate a safe conversation where more people can talk from their lived experience and expertise in this space, to help shape free expression and how important it is for them. How can we help people understand intersectionality? How can we help make sure that there are more voices providing evidence? I am only one type of black woman; I do not speak on behalf of all black women. Another black woman could challenge and disagree with me. That is the gift I would offer you: more people who can speak expertly on this topic, from lived experience but also from expertise.

The Lord Bishop of Worcester: That would be fantastic. Can you give us any signposts as far as public policy changes are concerned?

Seyi Akiwowo: Ring-fence the digital services tax. If we need anything, we need money, right? I can help you there; I can help you find 10% of the digital services tax, which is not yet all planned to be spent. It has generated more money than was thought, because we have all joined online. The revenue that all these companies have been making this year is helping raising revenue through the tax. That revenue could build the capacity of law enforcement to enforce the laws that currently exist and anything that comes through the Law Commission's reviews.

It is about looking at a public education campaign. In the short term, it is about making sure that people are accessing free digital self-care, self-defence workshops and digital citizenship workshops, so that after this oral evidence session—there are, I hope, hundreds of people watching this—they can go on Twitter or Facebook and critically engage with the content. That is because we have been able to signpost them to free services on online safety and self-care.

The Chair: Seyi and Kenny, thank you both very much indeed for some inspirational and extremely thought-provoking evidence. I am sure I speak on behalf of all members of the committee. We are very grateful

to you for coming this afternoon. Seyi, thank your boyfriend for his forbearance in hiding away during this committee meeting.