

Petitions Committee

Oral evidence: Tackling Online Abuse, HC 364

Thursday 21 May 2020

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Watch the meeting: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMMPwVewJPU>

Members present: Catherine McKinnell (Chair); Elliot Colburn; Martyn Day; Chris Evans; Nick Fletcher; Mike Hill; Kerry McCarthy.

Questions 1-13

Witnesses

I: Bobby Norris, petition creator.



Examination of witness

Witness: Bobby Norris.

Q1 Chair: Thank you very much for joining us for this session today on our new inquiry into how to tackle online abuse. It is an issue that our Committee has taken a strong interest in for some time, following a huge demand from petitioners that Parliament must do more to address the scourge of online abuse—particularly in our previous inquiry in relation to disabled people; but our new inquiry into online abuse follows more than 133,000 people signing Bobby Norris’s petition to hold online trolls accountable for their online abuse via their IP address, as well as other petitions relating to this issue.

We are really pleased to welcome Bobby here today to give us evidence. It is particularly appropriate that we are holding this session today during Mental Health Awareness Week, because the impact of social media use and the experience of negative content online on mental health is well known, and as more and more people are spending more of their lives and social lives online—particularly during this covid-19 crisis—the pressures, and the imperative to do something about it, are greater than ever.

Before we go to questions, I want to give Bobby the opportunity to introduce himself.

Bobby Norris: Thank you everyone, to start with, for being here and taking time to address this. It is something that is so close to my heart. This is actually my second petition. I did come into Parliament and my previous petition was held for debate; that was specifically surrounding homophobia online. I have seen such an increase in online abuse and trolling, especially since lockdown. Speaking about it to my fans and followers on social media, I am so aware that it’s not just me and people in the public eye going through it. It is so important for me to be addressing this today.

Chair: Thanks so much, Bobby. We have a number of questions that we are going to put to you, but obviously just come in at any point. This is your opportunity to set out your reasons for the petition and your thoughts on this subject, so if you want to come in at any point, do just say. I will go to Elliot first, who has got some questions for you.

Q2 Elliot Colburn: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Bobby, so much, for coming and speaking to us today. I think I agree with you, Chair, that this is very topical at the moment. It is something that is in the forefront of minds of Members, I think. We all experience abuse on social media as well. I received homophobic abuse during the campaign, so it is something really timely to be talking about. Leading on from what you just said, Bobby, perhaps you could tell us a little bit more about why you started this petition and why you think it’s important to hold people accountable for what they say online.



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Bobby Norris: Absolutely. Firstly, I think I've become immune, almost, to the online hatred and homophobia—which in itself is devastating. I have had to build an immunity to it. I have been on a TV show for nine years and whenever I experience any kind of online hate it is always to do with my sexuality.

As a gay man of 33, I think I have built up quite a thick skin to that, so I am very aware that I do have a strength. That is not to say it doesn't hurt, and it is certainly not right, but I have built up this immunity. I am very aware, though, that 14-year-old Bobby would not have had that strength, and I hear from so many people, whether it is parents or people suffering themselves, saying "How is it 2020 or 2019 and we are still having to face this, and nothing's being done about it?"

We have come such a long way in the grand scheme of things, in terms of homophobia, and I don't want to take away from that. It is amazing where we have come; but we still have a long way to go. I believe that there is still this thing in people's minds. They think what they say online doesn't matter—that it is not the same as saying something to someone's face. But it is. There is a misconception that things can just be banter, as people like to call it. It isn't, and I cannot stress enough to every single person on my platforms, and whenever I have spoken about it on public forums—whether news, TV shows, etc—that they should think before they type. What you would not say to someone's face—don't feel it is all right to say that online. Whatever anyone does for a living—whether you're in TV or music or not, it doesn't really matter; no one should have to experience this.

The one thing that I found at first a lot of people would come back and say was, "Just don't look at it. Delete social media." Firstly to that I would say: that's letting the troll get away with it and they're winning. Why should I have to come away and why should anyone else have to come away from their social media platforms because they are a victim of online abuse? I just don't see how that is ever going to work going forward. The genie is out of the bottle with social media, and I'm not here to bash social media. I love it, and 95% of it is an amazing tool. You can connect with people around the world and friends and family. When used in the right way, it's amazing, and especially during lockdown I'm so glad that we have technology so that we can do this today, and that we have been able to connect with friends and family while self-isolating. But there is a very dark side to social media as well. When I hear from people who are self-harming and I hear stories of people taking their own lives, I want to use my platform and my voice to make a change.

Q3 **Elliot Colburn:** Fantastic. Thank you for that, Bobby. I think you have touched on this already, but can you elaborate a little bit? Is it safe to say that you feel that the current law in this country and also the regulations by which social media platforms operate are not effective enough to deal with this problem as they are?

Bobby Norris: Absolutely. I still can't understand how social media platforms, which have tens of millions or maybe billions of users globally,



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require so little information when people sign up. If I was to go to a supermarket and sign up for a reward card, I would have to give more information in a supermarket than I have to in order to access the internet, which is in everybody's house and in everybody's pocket on their phone. Social media is everywhere; it is never going away, but nothing has caught up. In my opinion, the law has not had a chance to keep up with how big social media has become relatively quickly. It is my understanding that currently, for something to be illegal under the Communications Act, it has to be "grossly offensive". However, I question whether the threshold for that needs to be looked at and modified. If what I and thousands or millions of people are finding offensive is at one level and the threshold is much higher than that, where are we ever going to go with it?

Elliot Colburn: I would love to come back on the point about thresholds and exactly what needs to be done, but I know that a couple of colleagues want to come in first. I would love to come back to that point. Thank you, Bobby.

Chair: Kerry, I think you had a question to ask. Is it possible to unmute Kerry? You are not pressing anything, Kerry, no? Elliot, do you want to carry on with your questions? We will come back to you, Kerry. Hopefully we'll be able to sort the problem.

Q4 **Elliot Colburn:** Thank you, Chair. Can we go back to the petition, Bobby? It asks that people's IP addresses be blocked from accessing social media. What do you think, leading on from what we were just talking about, the test should be as to whether someone should see their account blocked—their IP address blocked? What kind of tests or other things should social media companies or the law be looking to in order to make sure that someone cannot access social media in those circumstances?

Bobby Norris: I believe that trolling is abuse and that the content is often a hate crime. Whether it's homophobia, racism or anything else, what is a hate crime offline should also be one online. For me, the first thing, as well as the IP being blocked and it being flagged up that someone has done this before—You do get full-time trolls. A lot of people will say, "Just block them," but because it's so easy to start a new account—because no ID is necessary to get a social media account—no sooner have you blocked them than they have gone back online, within five minutes, and started another account. They are not being held accountable. You are forever chasing your tail because you're blocking and they're opening them literally within minutes.

As well as the IP address being blocked and it being flagged up that someone has done this previously, and that person having the privilege of their social media platform revoked from them, I would say all social media accounts should need you to give some form of ID. I do not quite know how exactly—whether that should be a national insurance number or a passport number—but certainly, I believe that more information is needed from social media users. If everybody was more accountable for



what they said and knew that their details were there for someone to see, especially when it comes to the level of death threats, which I will touch on later and I have been receiving almost daily during the lockdown, I believe we would see, literally overnight, a massive decrease in online hate and trolling—if people knew that they were traceable and that their actions would have repercussions.

Q5 Elliot Colburn: Yes, that is very important, and you would have to be heartless not to sympathise with someone receiving death threats. I would like to delve a little deeper into the actual content we are talking about. No one would condemn the removal of death threats from social media and the people who make them being stopped from using it, but what would you say is the line? How far can people take what they say on social media before it becomes something they should be banned from social media for? There is a big debate, as I am sure you are aware, about free speech and how people are allowed to use online platforms. Where is the line? Is it what is already criminal—homophobic abuse, racist abuse and so on—or is it wider than that? Should we be looking to expand what is unacceptable and make sure it does not appear on social media?

Bobby Norris: Absolutely. One of the things I heard when starting my original petition was, “Is that not taking away people’s freedom of speech?” I am certainly not here to take that away. Everybody is entitled to an opinion, and I am a big believer that you should have your opinions. Of course you should; we all have opinions. But then there is going a level above that. Again, there has to be a cap on it. If someone messages you, “I don’t like your hair today, I don’t like your suit, them jeans don’t look good on you”—opinions—that is fine. When something crosses into what would be illegal offline, I generally believe that needs to be looked at. A crime online should be the same offline, and I believe that needs to be acknowledged by people.

I also think—I know this is slightly off topic—that education is a big part of this. Children from school age should be told how to use social media—how to use online in the right way. Education is key to this. I am not naive enough to think, until a law is passed, that anyone is going to stop this. For some reason, trolls get fun from doing what they do, and until there are repercussions for that, they will continue to do what they do, no matter what I say. I can stand on my soap box and shout out to my followers day in, day out until I am blue in the face; they are not going to listen to that. If anything, since I began starting petitions, my trolling has become so much worse, because I think I have become the man who is trying to end their fun. Even people who did not troll me before now troll me because of these petitions and my trying to make a change.

Going back to your question, it is all relative. You know what it would be acceptable to say to someone’s face, and you know anything that would cross into hate speech or be detrimental to someone’s mental health. I am not a doctor, so I do not know how I would prove this scientifically, but I believe that mental ill health and social media are so on the increase that there definitely has to be a connection between the two.



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Suicide is on the increase. We have seen people in the public eye, as well as so many people who we do not hear about, take their own lives because of abuse online. I have a list of people, from the age of 13 onwards, who took their own life because they could not handle the online abuse they were suffering. We have also seen people in the public eye take their own lives, for one reason or another. A lot of people are quick to criticise TV channels and production companies for that and to say, "There's not a very good duty of care there." In my opinion, as well as that duty of care, which I personally have always received, there needs to be a duty of care from social media and Parliament.

Q6 **Elliot Colburn:** Thanks for that, Bobby; that's really helpful. The last thing I would like to pick up on is whether the change in the law that we are asking for in terms of blocking IP addresses and stopping online harms should be instead of or as well as stronger legal action. Do you view the legal action that can already be taken against someone for what they say offline as adequate?

Bobby Norris: I am aware—I am realistic—that we cannot go around just using this law against every single person who sends their initial tweet, comment or DM to someone. We would have to build prisons every day for those trials—there are clearly not enough places for that.

It has to be looked at as harassment as well. When the same users, who we can trace by IP addresses, are being deleted but start new accounts and keep coming for someone, at what point does harassment not come into play? If you were being stalked offline by someone—if someone kept standing outside your house, which is another thing that I have had, and thousands of others, I'm sure, with people saying they are outside your house—at what point can we say that enough's enough? Day in, day out, you are coming to that person, and mental health can absolutely go through the roof. This has sparked my anxiety, and I know it causes a lot of people depression.

The umbrella of it all, the law, has to be in place, but the social media platforms could do more to trace the people who do it and to take away their privilege of having a social media account. That is where it should be: it should be a privilege and, if you don't use it correctly—the same as when you don't use your driving licence correctly and drink-drive or whatever, you have it revoked—you should have your social media platform revoked because you are not using it appropriately.

Elliot Colburn: Thank you so much, Bobby.

Chair: Before I bring you in, Kerry, I will bring Chris in briefly, because he has to go as well.

Q7 **Chris Evans:** Just a quick one—*[inaudible]*. I have been doing a lot of work on eating disorders—*[inaudible]*—encouraging people with eating disorders. We came to something where they banned key words, but to get around it they would—*[inaudible]*. Instead of an "I" they'd use a "1". If we can ban key words, how do we get around them using numbers



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instead of letters—*[inaudible]*?

Chair: Did you manage to hear that, Bobby?

Bobby Norris: Only bits and bobs. I am sorry, I didn't really hear it.

Chair: I think you need to be less close, Chris.

Chris Evans: Yes, I come in because I can't hear myself.

Chair: I think what Chris was saying was that he has done a lot of work on eating disorders, and people get around some of the ways in which the social media platforms try to regulate abusive terms—people will put in a digit to hide the fact that it is that abusive word. Is that something you have come across and that needs to be addressed?

Bobby Norris: Absolutely, and you are so right. The trolls, unfortunately, seem to be one step ahead, so if they put a star or change a letter for a number, they will know that you know what they are implying, but it gets around that block. That is why I feel that social media platform providers need to do more on where their threshold is and on what they see as acceptable.

I know that for myself and from what so many of my fans and followers have reported on things they have gone through. I have publicly said, "This is what's happened", or screen-grabbed it. When it gets so bad that I am receiving daily death threats, I want people to know that they are not alone, but in so many cases—nine out of 10—platform providers will come back to say, basically, that it not breaking their rules and regulations. My question is, "What do you have to do to break a rule or regulation?" So many of those things are still being passed, and those people are still able to target individuals, day in, day out.

Whether that is by words being blocked—I am not sure how you get around it, because the numbers and stuff—I believe that we can overcome it with a stricter process. When something is reported, someone at these platforms should look at it, and perhaps there could be a traffic light system: once something is flagged, it is green, then amber and red—third strike, absolute deletion.

Chair: Kerry, do you want to come in now?

Q8 **Kerry McCarthy:** Yes. Thank you for all you have said so far, Bobby. I thought that was really well expressed, and I certainly recognised some of the things you were saying. Will you tell us what sort of response you have had from other people? You said that the trolling had increased, because of the petitions. What about people who have been on the receiving end of abuse? What sort of response have you had from them?

Bobby Norris: I have had hundreds—maybe by now thousands—of messages from people thanking me for making it such a publicly spoken about thing on my social media platforms. I believe some people still feel shame from being trolled and abused online, the same as when people are bullied. You inherit the emotion and you feel shame for that, and none of



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us should. With the platform and the voice that I have, as someone in the public eye, it is important for me to let people know they are not alone. The messages that I have had—saying, “Thank you so much. You’ve made me feel better that I am not alone. I have not left my bedroom. I don’t go to school. I don’t go to work”, to the extreme of messages from family members, friends and partners of people who have taken their own lives because they couldn’t handle it any more.

This is where education is key from a young age so that children are taught how to use social media appropriately, because by the time they get to adulthood—I can only imagine how social media will have grown by then. Even in my nine years in television it has changed to a whole new thing. As I say, it is a positive tool when used correctly. The problem is that it is not always used correctly. Until we can let people know that it’s not okay, I will continue to do what I do.

I have received messages from people that are thankful and want to show their support. My initial petition received over 155,000 or 157,000 signatures. The recent one received 133,000 or 134,000. When I have gone on various news channels and TV shows, the response I have had from people has been, “We’re so glad you’re talking about this because this is affecting our lives and our mental health.” And it has affected people’s self-esteem.

I know I am not the only one. It is not for me that I’m doing any of this. This is for people’s children and the next generation, and also for adults that don’t have thick enough skin to take it. You can handle so much, but if you get something relentlessly over and over again—since lockdown I have created an Instagram celebrity interview platform called “Get Gobby with Bobby”, and every time I interview a celebrity I have trolls in there saying, “After this live, go and hang yourself.” Thankfully, I am strong enough that I won’t do that.

Some people’s mental health might not be stable enough, and after the fifth or sixth time of being told to hang themselves, they act on that—they do hang themselves and take their own life. If people are losing their lives because of something that in theory can be changed relatively quickly—it’s something that I am sure all of us here know we have to address—why would we not do that? Why would I not stand on a soap box and say, “Let’s make change”? People should not be losing or taking their lives or locking themselves in their houses and their bedrooms.

Q9 Kerry McCarthy: You have a public platform. You have lots of fans and followers. You can be on the media talking about this. Can you say why you felt it was important to go down the petitions route? This is your second petition. What led you to think that that was the way that you wanted to pursue this cause?

Bobby Norris: I could have sat on my social media talking about my experience, but the reality is that that would not have made change, and I want to make change. I am in a privileged situation and position. I have a public profile and I have a voice, and I want to use that for good. I want to



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help people that message me from every walk of life that I know are going through this. Trolling and online abuse does not come down to one person's job, age, or sexuality. There are so many—tens of thousands of people—suffering daily for all different reasons. To use my voice down the petitions route is, I believe, the best way of making change and helping the generation of tomorrow to not have to experience this.

- Q10 **Kerry McCarthy:** Have you done anything else other than the petitions and talking about this on social media? Are there other things that you have done or perhaps that other people have done? You talked about the importance of education, so maybe people could go into schools or directly contact some of the social media providers. Are there other ways in which we can make sure that this message is amplified?

Bobby Norris: Last year I went to Southend college and gave a speech about my experience and I let students know that they are not alone: 82% of 13 to 18-year-olds have been exposed to online hate, and one in five 12 to 15-year-olds experience online bullying. Those figures are astronomical. It is devastating that people of that age, in such severe numbers, are going through this.

I wanted to go to the college and let them know that I suffer with it, this is what I am going through and we cannot let these people win—we cannot let the trolls win. That is something I will continue to do. Once we are out of the lockdown—hopefully, and thankfully, when we get covid-19 sorted—and we are able to get out and about, I would love to tour more. I want to go to schools and colleges.

I believe that we have to nip this in the bud from education age. No child is born a troll; they inherit the idea that it is acceptable to do because there are no repercussions. Teaching people from a young age that that is not acceptable and how to use the internet appropriately is the way that we will overcome this.

When I was a child, we didn't have social media, but you can go to a supermarket or any shopping centre and see children from the age of two or three holding a tablet or their parent's phone, whether they are playing a game or watching films and cartoons. Children can use technology now. For all the amazing qualities the technology brings, we are all aware—especially during this speech—that there is this dark side. To expose children to that when they are so impressionable is beyond worrying.

Chair: Thank you. Thank you, Kerry. I will now bring in Nick to ask a question.

- Q11 **Nick Fletcher:** Thank you for joining us, Bobby. It is good to see you and talk to you. I have two quick questions. Why do you think people think it is okay to behave like this? I see many people who appear to be decent, and they do not hide behind an IP address—but they think it is okay to abuse people online and say awful things about them. I find that quite disturbing. This is not necessarily restricted to any demographic. Young or old, it can be anyone. They seem to sit behind a screen and think it is



okay to say quite unkind things.

Do you think that we need a campaign about that, pointing out, “You are speaking about somebody’s son, daughter, brother, sister or partner; someone that other people care about, not just a person”? I can understand where you’re coming from. It’s not just about you, either. If somebody said something awful about me, members of my family would be really upset about that and it would probably affect them more than me. What do you think of that?

Bobby Norris: Massively. There seems to be a disconnect about what people think is acceptable online. I believe nine out of 10 people wouldn’t say half of the stuff they think is acceptable online to someone’s face. Whether that is because of the security and bravery of being behind a device, I don’t know, or whether the education and knowledge are not there yet that that still is not acceptable. I genuinely believe that people think that they can say things right off—fire off their abuse and their comments—and it has no effect on anyone. People are not immune to this abuse. Whether you are in the public eye or not, everyone is human and has feelings and emotions. People need to realise that when you say something online it is exactly the same as saying it to someone’s face.

Q12 **Nick Fletcher:** I would say that cowardice is behind that, wouldn’t you? They really are cowards.

Bobby Norris: Absolutely. I imagine that most of these people would smile at you in the street, but when they are online, they think it is acceptable to say, “I’m outside the house. I’m going to throw acid in your face. I’m going to assault you with an 11-inch machete.” The list goes on. “I’m going to kill you. I’m going to set fire to you.”

It is horrific what people are going through. No one could possibly be immune to that, so that it doesn’t affect them in some way, somehow—even with a thick skin. The point you made is right. I always say this when I do videos and I post them on my social media platforms: “Someone is someone’s parent, child, brother, sister, or friend. If that was happening to anyone you know, how would that make you feel?”

I believe there’s a misconception that all trolls are young. They’re really not. Sometimes you will click on their profile and it will say in the bio, “Proud father” or “Mother of two,” or “Proud grandfather,” and I think, “Gosh, if someone did that to your grandchild or your child, how would that make you feel, or make them feel?”

Nick Fletcher: Exactly right.

Q13 **Chair:** Apart from anything else, the internet is such an amazing world of wonder, and all the trolling that has become so commonplace on it makes it an unpleasant place to be. One of the big challenges we face is how we can be able to enjoy being on the internet and, as you say, feel confident about our children and grandchildren being in a happy place on the internet, when too often it is an unhappy place, as you have described really powerfully this morning.



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We are running out of time now, but I wanted to say what a powerful advocate you are for making the internet a safer and more enjoyable place to be, and that this is just the beginning. We are going to have a number of sessions to build public interest and to present to the Government what can be done about this, based on the evidence you have given and that from the petitioners who are clearly supporting you all the way in this. It would be helpful if you could tell us what things you would like to see us asking experts and social media platforms and asking of Government as our inquiry progresses. Do you want to give us that now?

Bobby Norris: Absolutely. I would like to know from social media platform providers why, at this point into social media—as big as the beast is—ID is still not required from any user. As I say, referring back to the supermarket reward card scheme, you give more information to the supermarket than you do to a social media account. It just makes no sense. With that in itself, we would see a decrease—I literally believe overnight—because people would know, “They know who I am. This isn’t just an email account.” They would know more details. They would know who you are and you would be held more accountable.

On the technology side, I would like to know how it can be looked at to start blocking IP addresses, whether we do the traffic light system or look at a way that, after once or twice, but certainly when it gets to a point that you are harassing someone daily, we go about blocking that IP address, whether it be a mobile device or a home broadband provider.

Government-wise, I am so thankful that you’ve all taken the time to be here today and that we are talking about it. It is an amazing step forward for me that you have acknowledged that something needs to happen. I am grateful for that. I am looking forward to seeing where this progresses. I would like to know law-wise, though, what we do moving forward to have people held more accountable for their online actions.

Chair: Brilliant, thank you. As I say, this is just the beginning. You have so powerfully set out the problem, and from here we need to take it forward in our inquiry, to try to come up with some solutions to make this better for you, for public figures, for everybody out there who is using social media and on the internet, and for all those people who you have advocated for so powerfully today. Thank you so much for your time. Obviously, we will continue to work together on this into the future. Thank you.

Bobby Norris: Amazing. Thank you so much. Cheers, everybody.

Chair: If there is anything further that you want to add, just get in touch with us and we can incorporate it within our inquiry.

Bobby Norris: Absolutely. Thank you. Have a lovely afternoon.

Chair: Thank you very much.