

Home Affairs

Oral evidence: [Hate crime and its violent consequences](#), HC 683

Tuesday, 13 March 2018

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Members present: Yvette Cooper (Chair); Rehman Chishti; Stephen Doughty; Kirstene Hair; Sarah Jones, Douglas Ross; Naz Shah; John Woodcock.

Questions 483–579

Witness

[I](#): William McCants, Global Leader for Counterterrorism YouTube, Google

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Google](#)

Examination of witness

Witness: William McCants

Q483 **Chair:** Can I welcome everybody to this emergency session of the Home Affairs Select Committee? This is part of our inquiry into hate crime and extremism, where we have been particularly looking at online extremism as well. Mr McCants, can I welcome you before the Committee and thank you for coming to give evidence to us at short notice? We have taken evidence from YouTube before about online extremism and about online hatred and you have given us very many assurances and promises.

The reason we have called you before us for this session is that YouTube has failed to live up to those assurances. We want to concentrate particularly on far-right extremism and proscribed organisations, and particularly National Action as well. You will be aware that the Metropolitan Police counterterror chief, Mark Rowley, described National Action as, "A home-grown, proscribed, white supremacist, neo-Nazi terror group, which seeks to plan attacks and build international networks". Being a member of it is a criminal offence with a sentence of up to 10 years' imprisonment. The Government has said that National Action has promoted and encouraged acts of terrorism, after Jo Cox's murder. You will also be aware that an alleged member of National Action is to stand trial later this year, accused of plotting to murder another Member of Parliament with a machete and threatening to kill a police officer.

We have also taken evidence in this inquiry about other far-right plots that have been foiled and also about the police's growing concerns about online radicalisation and in particular online radicalisation, for example, which was linked to the Finsbury Park attack as well. Given all those very serious concerns, why is it that last week, 15 months after National Action was first proscribed by the Government and 12 months after we first raised it with you, a National Action video was still up on your platform.

William McCants: First, I would like to thank the Committee and the Chair for having me and giving me an opportunity to explain what happened. I want to say, to begin, that we apologise for those videos being on our platform. They should not have been there. You should not have had to come back to us repeatedly. These four videos, because they are from a proscribed terrorist organisation, should not have remained up on our platform.

I have spent my entire professional career working to counter terrorist videos online. I worked for the US military, for our Department of Defence, for the State Department, and as an academic working to make sure that this content did not reach and radicalise young people. It is why I took this job with YouTube, because they are serious about getting this content off of their platform. So it is with great personal frustration that I see that four videos that should have come down, under our policies, were not taken down. I welcome the opportunity to explain to the



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Committee why those videos remain online and I am happy to do so now, if you will permit me.

Of the four videos you brought to our attention, three of them were caught by our technology, and one of them was caught by a human flagger, so the system we had in place to proactively identify this material worked. What did not work in these four instances was the human review process. We have a team of reviewers working around the clock and around the world to deal with this content. There was a failure in review. They made the wrong call. We did not do the right thing in this instance and we are making three changes to address it.

The first change is to make sure that National Action videos from now on go to specialised reviewers who understand the symbols, the logos of the group and its slogans, and can make the appropriate calls on those. It will be routed to them rather than to the general reviewers. That said, the general reviewers still need to know and be able to identify these groups. We already have a rigorous training system in place, weeks long, to help them identify these videos. They get training on these groups—all the proscribed groups on the UK list. Clearly that training needs to be improved. They need to be better able to identify these groups. Finally, we are going to tune our technology to be even more sensitive to finding National Action videos, to make sure that we don't have incidents like this in the future.

Q484 Chair: The trouble is this is pretty much the same video. It is the same video that we raised with you 12 months ago. Why does your system and your technology not flag up this blazing thing that says, "This is National Action; it's the same video that we banned repeatedly throughout the year"?

William McCants: The technology you are talking about usually requires an exact match. Sometimes when there is a variation the technology will not automatically take it down; it will send it for review. In this instance, it is the reviewers who made the wrong call.

Q485 Chair: Why does it not tell the reviewers about all the other National Action videos that it is similar to? I have to say, to the untrained eye it looks absolutely identical to every previous one that we have raised with you eight times.

William McCants: I think you make a very valid point, and that is why we are fine-tuning our technology to make sure that we are spotting even smaller clips, even if they appear in news videos, to make sure a human, who is a specialist in these groups, is going to be able to see it and identify it for what it is.

Q486 Chair: The trouble is you have given us all of these reassurances several times. We had to raise this video with chief executives of Google, with the chief executive of YouTube, with the most senior people, and to raise it repeatedly in this Committee. I am not sure what else we could have



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done to raise the seriousness of this organisation. There are not that many far-right organisations in the UK that have been proscribed in this way, so I cannot understand why it has not been taken more seriously.

William McCants: These videos should not have remained online. Our systems did catch it, they were flagged to us, but clearly it was a failure in our review process and we are going to fix it. I personally am charged with taking care of this problem and I am going to be watching it like a hawk. My position within the company is to make sure proscribed groups do not have a presence on the platform and I am going to make sure to follow up and keep following up to make sure they do not have a presence on our platform.

Q487 **Chair:** This sounds so similar to everything that so many of your colleagues have said to us before, both in a public session and in private meetings. Why should we believe that this time is different?

William McCants: I have a long experience of working in this space. My expertise is in Islamist terrorist groups, but I have also looked at the far right, particularly in the United States. I understand, from over 15 years of experience, the kind of radicalising effect these videos can have. It is my job and my sole mission to make sure that they have no space on our platforms. I am going to do my job.

Q488 **Douglas Ross:** Who reviews the reviewers?

William McCants: We have a number of systems in place to do quality control. They are checked every week. We make sure that they are up to standard.

Q489 **Douglas Ross:** We have four videos in this case, three that technology identified as requiring action and one a human flagger had identified. It went to the human reviewer, who overturned that decision and allowed them to stay on. What was the next course of action in terms of someone reviewing that decision?

William McCants: We would, in the first instance, retool our review systems to make sure they are getting the appropriate training, but we would also—

Q490 **Douglas Ross:** No, I am asking a question. What happened in these four videos when they were flagged—they went to a human reviewer and then they were allowed to stay up? Was it then verified by someone else? You said there is a quality check every week to check the results of the human reviewers.

William McCants: In this instance the reviewers made the wrong call and we are putting the changes in place to make sure it is routed to the right people.

Q491 **Douglas Ross:** Yes, that is fine, but they made the wrong call immediately after it was flagged by the technology and the human flagger, yet it has taken 18 months and repeated letters and



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correspondence from this Committee to get anything done about it. What happened when these human reviewers went against the decision for these to be flagged in the first place? What is the next stage of someone saying the human reviewer has got this one wrong?

William McCants: We would go to those individual reviewers and make sure they understood their mistake.

Q492 **Douglas Ross:** Did that happen in this case?

William McCants: I do not want to speak out of turn. I do not know the precise information about who talked to whom. I am happy to follow up.

Q493 **Douglas Ross:** Is it not the case, then, that every time a video from National Action is flagged by technology and that decision is overturned by a human reviewer, that is checked again? There is no cross-referencing, crosschecking, to ensure that you have the quality in human reviewing?

William McCants: That was the problem in this instance: that a qualified person—

Q494 **Douglas Ross:** No, you said in response to my first question—who reviews the reviewers?—that it is reviewed every week.

William McCants: They are reviewed against overall standards to see who is performing in bulk on meeting our guidelines for review.

Q495 **Douglas Ross:** But this did not get highlighted at all?

William McCants: We missed this, clearly.

Q496 **Douglas Ross:** Yes, but not only did your human reviewers miss this—and they have to get extra training, and in future they will go to specialised reviewers—but the people reviewing that reviewer for that quality check failed as well.

William McCants: I would not disagree with that. We clearly have to fine-tune our review systems.

Q497 **Douglas Ross:** Going back to what the Chair said, how can you have any confidence that these new measures you are going to take are going to act any better?

William McCants: You will do it the way you brought this to our attention already.

Q498 **Douglas Ross:** Over months and months and months, and then call you back in again—that is how you expect us to deal with this?

William McCants: We are going to put systems in place for dealing with these reviewers and making sure that they are making the right calls in the future.

Q499 **Stephen Doughty:** Mr McCants, I find your claim that your reviewers



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are being trained in all UK proscribed organisations somewhat confusing, because when we had a representative of your company, and indeed Twitter and Facebook, before us a few weeks ago and I asked specifically whether they were searching for proscribed content other than Islamist content, I was told no. You are telling me that your reviewers and your staff are looking at all UK proscribed organisations.

William McCants: Yes.

Stephen Doughty: You are routinely searching for them?

William McCants: Yes, sir

Q500 **Stephen Doughty:** So what your previous representative said was wrong?

William McCants: I do not know what our previous representative said.

Q501 **Stephen Doughty:** Then clearly the training and the methods you are using are completely crap, because this morning I have been searching again on your platform for proscribed Northern Ireland terrorist organisations and I found multiple examples, yet again, despite having raised these with your organisation a few weeks ago. I will hand you a copy of them now—this is just a small selection.

Chair: Can I suggest as well it might have been wise for you to read the evidence that your predecessors have given to us?

Stephen Doughty: It is pretty basic, Mr McCants. There is a list here. This is the Government list of proscribed organisations. It is pretty clear; it is pretty explicit. This is not grey territory. These are the organisations that have been deemed by the UK Government as being organisations supporting or glorifying terrorism or extremism, and yet every single time I go on YouTube there is that content on there. Can you explain why?

William McCants: We do not allow proscribed groups on our platform. If they are there, there is a failure. I will take this back to our teams and find out what the problem is.

Q502 **Stephen Doughty:** What happened the last time when I raised it with your representatives before this Committee?

William McCants: We are working around the clock to try to remove this material. Sometimes—

Q503 **Stephen Doughty:** You are clearly not working around the clock, because that material is still on your platform. What did that member of staff do after they appeared before us and we raised these concerns with them?

William McCants: I do not know what happened when this particular incident—

Q504 **Stephen Doughty:** Have they spoken to you about their appearance before this Committee?



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William McCants: I have read previous testimony, yes.

Q505 **Stephen Doughty:** How are you saying things that are in contradiction with that, then?

William McCants: I do not believe it is in contradiction. I know that we look at UK proscribed groups. We do not allow them a presence on our platform in the UK.

Q506 **Stephen Doughty:** You clearly do allow them a presence on your platform, because they are on your platform. These are extreme organisations from both the Republican and the Loyalist side—well-known organisations with well-known names. I am not going to repeat the types of material that is on there; there are multiple examples. I have searched multiple times over the last few months. Every single time I go on, I find them, and that is before we even get into other, Islamist organisations, other far-right organisations, and comments. We are not talking about historical material here; we are talking about current material that individuals are watching and potentially being radicalised by. Do you think that is an acceptable situation?

William McCants: No, and I will take this back and find out what is wrong with our enforcement and why these groups continue to have their videos online.

Q507 **Stephen Doughty:** If you came back in four weeks' time, would I be able to find that content on your platform again?

William McCants: I hope not.

Stephen Doughty: You hope not? I am sorry, that is simply not good enough, Mr McCants.

Q508 **Chair:** How long have you been doing this job?

William McCants: Four months.

Q509 **Rehman Chishti:** By way of clarification, in relation to what Mr Ross asked earlier on the review and the material having been passed by the review individual and those individuals who allowed this material by the review, looking at competence, are there any previous occasions where those individuals had acted in a way, by allowing material to go on there, which they should not have done?

William McCants: Are you asking me, "Do we work with the reviewers to make sure that they are making the right calls?"?

Q510 **Rehman Chishti:** No. Let me clarify again. With regard to the individuals, the material was highlighted to be unacceptable, but then the individual looking at it allowed it to go up, is that right?

William McCants: No, not quite.

Q511 **Rehman Chishti:** What happened?



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William McCants: It was flagged as questionable and then we needed a human reviewer to make the call.

Q512 **Rehman Chishti:** The human reviewer made this call, is that right?

William McCants: Yes, and made an incorrect call.

Q513 **Rehman Chishti:** Correct. That human reviewer who made that incorrect call—had that human reviewer made incorrect calls previously? That is my question.

William McCants: I do not know in these cases.

Q514 **Rehman Chishti:** Because that goes to the competence of the individuals that you have. If that reviewer who had allowed this to go on had previously made incorrect decisions, that clearly shows the issue of competence of your staff has to come into question, am I right?

William McCants: I would have to look at the record of these individuals.

Q515 **Rehman Chishti:** You have not checked that information with regard to those individuals who allowed this material to go on?

William McCants: I personally have not checked.

Rehman Chishti: You have not?

William McCants: No.

Q516 **Rehman Chishti:** Do you think you should have done that to look at the competence of those individuals?

William McCants: I think as a company we certainly should have looked at the competence of those individuals.

Q517 **Rehman Chishti:** You are in charge of that procedure and you yourself have not done that?

William McCants: I advise on counterterrorism policy.

Q518 **Rehman Chishti:** On this position, you just accepted that the individuals who made that decision to allow it on— I asked you the question had they made those wrong errors before. You said you cannot answer that question, right?

William McCants: Personally I cannot answer that question.

Q519 **Rehman Chishti:** Correct. Maybe it would have been a good idea to check if those individuals who are making these decisions had previously made incorrect decisions, because that would show the public out there whether they can have confidence in individuals making the right decisions. Is that right?

William McCants: I will certainly take that back to our team.



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Rehman Chishti: That is a fair point, right?

William McCants: I believe it is a fair point. Of course we want to have quality control.

Q520 **Rehman Chishti:** That is why people out there, and myself, would have a real concern about confidence in your procedures, when you come up here, representing the organisation, and you cannot say whether the individual who made that wrong decision had previously made wrong decisions. I will leave it at that.

The second point is this. You said from now on you are going to be looking at it like a hawk, you are going to take personal responsibility for this and there is no space for that. Does that mean, then, that if you are back here in six months' time and this material is still there, that you will personally take responsibility and step down from your role because you are not performing?

William McCants: I will take responsibility for ensuring that this content does not remain online. If it somehow gets past our fail-safes, I am not doing my job to make sure we are doing the right thing to remove this content.

Q521 **Rehman Chishti:** Correct. In asking responsibility for that, in line with what has happened previously, acting like a hawk, making sure it is not there, taking personal responsibility, if in six months' time you are back here again and that material is there, then you will personally step down?

William McCants: I am responsible for working on terrorism groups around the world, proscribed groups; proscribed organisations in the UK is part of my portfolio. There are many other terror groups; we are also working to take down their content. I am a single person who is charged with counterterrorism policy. I am pushing as hard as I can.

Q522 **Chair:** What have you pushed for that you have not had agreed by your more senior colleagues?

William McCants: Over the past few months we have been working to put proactive systems in place to make sure that we spot these things before others on the outside spot them. We are still in the nascent stages of putting that together.

Q523 **Rehman Chishti:** Very quickly, I still do not understand that, Mr McCants. We are not talking about a complex AI system here. I literally just typed the names of proscribed organisations into your search bar and material comes up. This is the most basic, basic search you could be doing. In the top 20, these items come up.

William McCants: I agree, and we have to systematise that kind of procedure to make sure we are catching risks that we have already identified and making sure we have the fail-safes in place.

Q524 **Chair:** YouTube told us this October. In October, we had a letter that said: "Once we have identified content that violates our policies, we



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create a digital fingerprint of that video so that exact duplicates cannot be re-uploaded and are removed before they go live. We also use technology to perform regular sweeps to detect potential National Action content so we can remove it quickly". I just searched "National Action". That was how I found the ones that we raised with you last week.

William McCants: In the case of the four videos you brought to our attention, they were already flagged to us, one by a human, three by our technology. It was a reviewer who made the wrong call. In those four instances alone, it was a failure in review not in the proactive detection.

Q525 **Naz Shah:** Mr McCants, when were you informed that you would be appearing before the Select Committee to give evidence on this issue?

William McCants: On Friday, I believe.

Q526 **Naz Shah:** On Friday. It begs the question why, since Friday, you have not taken it upon yourself—and you have had two working days in between—to look at, first, what your predecessors have said in this Committee and given evidence on, to review how far you have come since you previous gave evidence, and, more importantly, this particular incident, where there has been this human failure, or reviewer's failure, and you have no idea.

William McCants: I looked at my predecessor Nicklas Lundblad and his testimony. I saw that what he promised was to do better. He did not promise perfection. He said we are putting systems in place to remove more and more of this content. Many of the National Action videos have come down over the past year. We have identified somewhere around 150. Even National Action members on other platforms are complaining about YouTube becoming a hostile environment to their videos. We are making progress but clearly it is not enough.

Q527 **Naz Shah:** Earlier on, when you were asked a question about previous evidence, you said you were not aware of what was said previously, and now you are saying to this Committee that you reviewed what has been said. Can you tell us whether you did review what has been said previously or whether you did not review it?

William McCants: Sure. I was speaking on the specific point of whether we review UK proscribed groups. My understanding is different than the Committee's.

Q528 **Naz Shah:** You were not aware. That begs the question, is YouTube even taking this call for you to give evidence seriously, or is it really just out to insult Parliament and the public by not being prepared to answer the questions that you know will be put before you?

William McCants: It took it very seriously and I take it very seriously. I wanted to come here and testify and tell you that we are working night and day to make it better and that clearly we fell short in this instance, and apologise.



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Q529 **Naz Shah:** Perhaps I can make this really clear. You have been called by Parliament to give evidence as a result of serious breaches of illegal proscribed organisations on your platform, yet the two most basic questions, which are about your reviewers— can you tell me what training your reviewers receive to be able to identify proscribed groups?

William McCants: They receive weeks-long training in the proscribed groups' logos, in their ideology. One challenge in this instance is that when they were working on the job to deal with these videos, many of the videos they see tend to be Islamist videos. It is just a matter of volume. We see so few National Action videos. That is why the reviewers were not able to spot them and that is why we are making sure that these get routed to specialist reviewers.

Q530 **Naz Shah:** The particular case that we wrote to you and asked you to give evidence about, you did not feel it was fit to look into that and look into why you had that human failure or that reviewer failure before you came to give evidence before us today?

William McCants: We looked into why the system broke down, why these videos remained online, and we identified it as a failure in human judgment, and we are making the appropriate changes.

Q531 **Naz Shah:** You are still not answering the question, Mr McCants. You have said time and time again— my colleague Mr Ross asked you specifically about the reviewer, and you have no idea, do you, about this particular incident.

William McCants: I do not know about the specific person.

Q532 **Naz Shah:** Thank you. Your algorithms on YouTube, when you are searching for National Action, will then promote the likes of Tommy Robinson and Britain First. This is despite the Finsbury Park Mosque case, where somebody was killed and that has recently been in the headlines. Despite the fact that videos of Tommy Robinson were cited as part of the online radicalisation of Darren Osbourne in the Finsbury Park court case, YouTube continues to promote those videos. What have you got to say about that?

William McCants: We are working to make sure that videos that promote hate or promote violence, if they violate our policies, are removed from the platform. If they walk right up to the line, we have also, at the encouragement of this Committee, developed a new enforcement mechanism to limit the features that they have. They should not be appearing in our recommendation engine. If they are, I will take this back to our team and see what the problem is.

Q533 **Chair:** They are. They are appearing. They are in my recommended timeline at the moment. Because I have been searching on my iPad for National Action videos, I, as a result, have the first two videos recommended to me by YouTube, when I click on to YouTube, as I have just done this afternoon. The first two recommendations are Tommy



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Robinson videos—the Tommy Robinson who was identified as part of the Finsbury Park online radicalisation process. That is what YouTube has recommended. I have not searched for it; YouTube has recommended that to me. Does that cause you some serious alarm?

William McCants: I cannot speak to these particular videos. Personally, it causes me a lot of alarm, but I will take this back to our team and see why this is happening.

Q534 **Chair:** It is not even about the individual videos; it is a recommended channel. It is coming up as my recommended channels. One of the recommended channels for me is a Tommy Robinson-recommended channel. I also have British Warrior—I have a series of other quite extreme things that are coming up—but I have specifically a Tommy Robinson-recommended channel. I can pass you my iPad.

William McCants: It is important for the company and for our bottom line for the recommendation engine to work as it is intended, to make sure that people can find quality content that they are looking for. It should not be serving up videos that incite or inspire hate. If it is, there is a problem and I will take it back to the team and see that it is addressed.

Q535 **Chair:** Lots of people have raised this with you. This is not just us; this is not the first time. I do not believe this is the first time you have heard this—allegations and concerns that your algorithms are promoting more and more extreme content at people. Whatever they search for, what they get back is a whole load more extreme recommendations coming through the algorithms. You are the king of the search engine, yet your search engines are promoting things that further and further radicalise people. Whatever they search for, they get something more back.

William McCants: And we are working to make sure that is not happening. For example, on news, where we have a lot of problems in this space, we are beginning to use an authority ranking to make sure that when you start with the news from a quality source, you continue to be suggested news from quality sources.

Q536 **Rehman Chishti:** A couple of points if I may with regard to the tragic and horrific incident at Finsbury Park Mosque—the vile act carried by Darren Osborne—and the following judgment given by Mrs Cheema-Grubb, who said that in the short time between seeing the material, being radicalised and carrying out a violent terrorist incident, the individual had in part been radicalised by seeing material by Tommy Robinson. You have worked at the State Department advising on extremism, I have seen you have written a number of books and you have been at a number of think-tanks. With your experience, does the vile material put up by Tommy Robinson—his vile poison online—violate your policy criteria, which you raised in a question earlier?

William McCants: I can say in general that hateful content can create an atmosphere that can lead people to radicalise. Whether his specific



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statements fall foul of our guidelines or not, I cannot tell you without looking at the specific policy.

Q537 **Rehman Chishti:** This is what concerns me. You are saying you cannot tell me without looking at it. There was a High Court decision, in which his name was mentioned—that he was linked to a radicalised individual who carried out terrorist attacks. You are saying to me that since then you have not looked at your criteria to see if that individual's material is radicalising individuals. With your own expertise in radicalisation and extremism, which is all admitted over here, you have not done that.

William McCants: I cannot speak to this specific content.

Q538 **Rehman Chishti:** Your organisation has not done that.

William McCants: I cannot speak to that either.

Q539 **Rehman Chishti:** Do you think you should have done that as an organisation, after a High Court judgment said that the vile views of an individual who has been mentioned—Tommy Robinson—led to an individual being radicalised into carrying out a terrorist attack in the United Kingdom? The first duty of the state is to protect its citizens. Following on from that judgment—that name is mentioned in that—do you not think you should have looked at that name and thought if his vile views violate your policy criteria?

William McCants: I will certainly take it back to our team.

Q540 **Douglas Ross:** I want to get this on the record, because you skimmed over this earlier. In your four months in position, have you have made any requests for improvements or additional measures that have been denied by your managers?

William McCants: No.

Q541 **Douglas Ross:** You believe that the current tools you have in the box are enough to deal with this?

William McCants: No, we are putting more tools in place. I have recommended some of them, but it takes a while.

Q542 **Douglas Ross:** Everything you have recommended has been approved, yet we are told this morning there is still this material available.

William McCants: Yes, sir, but clearly we are falling short.

Q543 **Douglas Ross:** After this meeting you will go back to your managers and say you need to do further action?

William McCants: Absolutely.

Q544 **Douglas Ross:** What kinds of things will that be?

William McCants: First of all we have to make sure that proscribed groups do not have a presence on our platform. If they are, we are falling short.



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Q545 **Douglas Ross:** In your four months in post, this has been happening and it is happening this morning, yet you are not asking your managers for any additional measures to assist you?

William McCants: I have asked for additional measures; they are putting them in place.

Q546 **Douglas Ross:** A final point: you opened your statement by saying there are three actions that you have taken to improve this. When did they start?

William McCants: Immediately.

Q547 **Douglas Ross:** From when?

William McCants: From when the videos were escalated to us. We could clearly see there was a problem in our review system.

Q548 **Douglas Ross:** Tell me, when did these start to go to specialised reviewers?

William McCants: Immediately.

Douglas Ross: On what date?

William McCants: Now.

Douglas Ross: No, immediately is when you asked for it to be done.

William McCants: Right, and it has been done.

Douglas Ross: When is immediate? When did you ask for it to be done? Was it today?

William McCants: When the videos—

Douglas Ross: Was it yesterday? Was it Friday? Was it a month ago, or six months ago?

William McCants: When the Chair brought these videos to our attention.

Q549 **Douglas Ross:** It has been brought to your attention for the last 18 months. So when in that 18 months did they start to go to specialised reviewers? When did you get improved training for your reviewers and when did you fine-tune your technology?

William McCants: We are putting those—

Q550 **Douglas Ross:** No, you said they are in place and they were in place immediately, so I would like the dates of those three improvements you have made. You have told this Committee they have been done—you are on the record as saying that—and I would like to know when they started.

William McCants: These videos, the National Action videos—

Douglas Ross: No, when did these three points, these three



improvements that you have put in place, start?

William McCants: Late last week.

Q551 **Kirstene Hair:** Can you walk me through the process as to when a video is flagged and how it is then dealt with? I also want to pick up on your targets. You have a target of two hours. I have all the information here, and you would be well aware of it as well. Are you embarrassed by the fact that you are absolutely nowhere near reaching those targets that you have in place?

William McCants: I am heartened by the fact that we get closer and closer to that target. Seventy per cent of the videos that come down for violent extremism come down within eight hours, 50% of it comes down within two hours, and we are getting faster and faster.

You asked a question also about the review process. The two ways that we primarily identify new videos is, first, using technology and, secondly, through human flagging. On the technical side, we are able to identify duplicates of videos that should come down automatically. We are also using our technology to identify videos that resemble those that we have already decided violate our content. Those get routed for human review. The system can say that it thinks this might be a violent extremist video, but we want a human to make that judgment.

Q552 **Kirstene Hair:** What is the timescale on that?

William McCants: The timescale is 50% of the videos that are identified within this way come down within two hours.

Kirstene Hair: The ones that then go to a human reviewer?

William McCants: That is going to human review.

Q553 **Kirstene Hair:** Why has this one taken such a long period?

William McCants: Here it was routed for review and they made the wrong call.

Kirstene Hair: It is really disturbing, and I think for anybody—not only the Committee but anybody watching, indeed the wider public—that it has taken this Committee so many occasions to try to take a singular video down. It is not really giving me any more confidence today that we are going to come back in a few months' time and the processes you have explained are going to be firmly in place.

Q554 **Chair:** Where are the reviewers based?

William McCants: They are all over the world. These particular reviewers that made this call, I believe one was in Europe; I think two or three other individuals were involved. I am not sure where they were based.

Chair: You do not even know where these four individuals were based?



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William McCants: No, I do not.

Q555 **Chair:** Do you have any reviewers based in the United Kingdom?

William McCants: I believe we have a large team of reviewers based in Ireland.

Chair: Which is not in the United Kingdom.

William McCants: Right. I am not sure. We have, of course, full-time employees who work on this, but if you are asking me about contractors that we use, I am not sure if they are based in the UK or not.

Q556 **Chair:** You put some of these decisions out to contract?

William McCants: Certainly, and that is part of the trouble here: that these videos were going to people who were not able to identify them. That is why they are going to be routed to specialists and why the reviewers—general reviewers—are going to be given training in order to identify these videos better.

Q557 **Chair:** Let me clarify: these were not YouTube employees who were reviewing and making the decisions; it was done through a contract?

William McCants: On these four cases, I do not know.

Q558 **Chair:** Six days on from me raising this and sending you the letter on behalf of the Committee, you still do not even know where the individuals involved were based or whether they were YouTube employees or whether they were contracted out. How many of the people who make these decisions are not YouTube employees?

William McCants: Generally, I do not know a number.

Q559 **Chair:** A significant number of the people who are taking these decisions are not even employed by your company?

William McCants: In the first instance, we have several layers of review. A lot of the initial reviewing happens through contractors, who route it to the right specialists. Once you get higher and higher up the ladder of review, that is when you get more full-time employees from the company, who specialise in these videos.

Q560 **Chair:** Do you do the training for these contractors or is that contracted out as well?

William McCants: I do not know who conducts the training. I certainly know that our trust and safety teams are intimately involved in designing the curriculum.

Q561 **Chair:** This is new information for us, and I have to say it is shocking. It is really shocking that you do not even know where your review teams are based, who they are, whether they are done through contract to other companies or organisations or whether it is done by YouTube. For all the statements that you gave us at the beginning of this evidence



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session about how much it mattered to you personally, if these things are being implemented by staff on your behalf or by people on your behalf, it is frankly shocking that you seem to know so little about who they are, where they are, what training they have had or even whether they are employed by your organisation. You have no response to that?

William McCants: I have been brought on to deal with counterterrorism policy. I work on it at a very high level. Our trust and safety teams are charged with making sure the reviewers get the training that they need.

Q562 **Chair:** Do you think that might be part of the problem: that you are just dealing with some policy stuff, but you are not looking at the implementation, and it is the implementation that is failing so catastrophically?

William McCants: In this instance, certainly the human reviewers made the incorrect call.

Q563 **John Woodcock:** All of us want to believe that this is an area that can be improved, but I question why you would come to the Committee not being able to answer such basic questions about the process surrounding it, where you knew you had to come to the Committee and give a full apology. Convince me why, if you have not prepared in such a basic way to answer these questions—which I would have thought you would be able to anticipate—you and your structure can be trusted to do the very important tasks for which you personally are responsible.

William McCants: We are doing everything in our power to make sure that these videos do not remain online. We are committed to hiring over 10,000 people working across the company to identify these videos. We are putting new systems in place. The work of this Committee has been instrumental in pushing us to put in place more and more safeguards. I will continue to make it part of my personal mission to make sure that these kinds of videos do not remain on our platform.

Q564 **John Woodcock:** Could you tell us a bit more about what you do know about the training processes? There is a certain amount that is contracted out. To what kind of organisation? What are we talking about? Do you contract to a large corporation? How does this work? What is the basic process?

William McCants: I cannot speak to specifics.

John Woodcock: You do not know.

William McCants: I can talk about the curriculum that I have seen, and it is systematic and rigorous.

Q565 **John Woodcock:** That would be helpful. In terms of the curriculum and how that is imparted, are we talking about human-to-human training here? Are people given a manual? To become a reviewer, describe what process you go through.



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William McCants: It is human-to-human training. It is a weeks-long process. They are given one list of all the proscribed terrorist organisations and groups. They are asked to look at a series of videos—some that clearly violate our policies, some that are right on the borderline. They are graded on how they do. Once they are passing the grade, once they are able to make proper judgments according to our policies, then we allow them to begin moderating and applying our policies on the platform.

Q566 **John Woodcock:** Thank you. My final question is over other proscribed organisations. Is it fair for us to assume, given National Action had been directly raised by the Chair of the Committee and by this Committee with senior executives, that National Action content would have been right up at the top end of awareness for your company in identifying it and yet there have been these levels of failure? Is there not a danger that content from other proscribed organisations could be worse than the picture that we are getting today about National Action?

William McCants: It was certainly part of the training. I think the challenge for us as a company is that the highest volume that many of these reviewers see are of the Islamist variety, so they end up being quite good on that kind of terrorist propaganda. The volume from National Action is much lower. We have taken down about 150 National Action videos over the past year. They do not have as many opportunities to identify this kind of content. That is why we want to make sure that in the review process it is routed to specialists who are able to identify it.

Q567 **Stephen Doughty:** I am still finding your answers utterly extraordinary, Mr McCants. You said a moment ago that you have staff and reviewers in Ireland. How many are there?

William McCants: I do not know.

Q568 **Stephen Doughty:** You do not know, but you do have staff there. Are those YouTube staff rather than contractors?

William McCants: It is both.

Q569 **Stephen Doughty:** It is both. You are telling me that a staff member in Ireland would not know who the IRA is or the Red Hand Commandos? I have handed you here a picture of a video. I simply put "Red Hand Commando", which is a proscribed organisation on the list that you say has been given to your staff. It is a video of a masked man carrying a machinegun through the woods, describing, "Red Hand Commando, Ulster's elite". You are telling me your staff in Ireland would not get that—they would not understand that that was a proscribed terrorist organisation—because they were a bit too much focused on the Islamist groups?

William McCants: I cannot speak to this particular piece of propaganda, but in general many of them have had much more experience with the



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Islamist variety and not as much experience with the far-right videos, because the content is—

Q570 **Stephen Doughty:** I am not talking about far right; I am talking about Northern Irish terrorist organisations here, which are well known. Some of them have been around for 100 years—pretty well known in the public.

William McCants: I do not know why these particular videos are online, and I will certainly take it back to my team.

Q571 **Stephen Doughty:** I want to be very specific about this. Have your reviewers or your contractors systematically searched by entering the names of proscribed organisations into your search engines for the list of proscribed organisations, 74 international terrorist organisations and 14 Northern Irish related?

William McCants: Yes.

Stephen Doughty: They have? They put the names of those organisations into your search engine?

William McCants: Yes. In order to test our systems.

Q572 **Stephen Doughty:** How is the content still on here, then?

William McCants: That particular content, I do not know. I will have to go back and ask our team.

Q573 **Stephen Doughty:** There is a huge inconsistency between what you are saying and what we are finding to be the case. Can you provide us with a list of all your contractors, the names of the corporation and the number of staff employed?

William McCants: I will bring that request back to Mountain View.

Q574 **Stephen Doughty:** You cannot guarantee you will give us that information?

William McCants: I am happy to bring that request back to my Mountain View.

Chair: We would like information on the number of people who are doing this work through contract, the number of people who are directly employed by YouTube or Google and also where they are located, as well as some more information about the training that they follow. We are going to have to move on in a second to our other session.

Q575 **Naz Shah:** Mr McCants, a final question from me, or an observation as well as a question. I have read your résumé—your quite impressive résumé—around counter-extremism, and Islamist extremism in particular. Do you think you are the right person to be appearing before us to give us the answers that we are asking about a far-right group in Great Britain, given everything that we have just discussed?



William McCants: Counterterrorism specialists tend to, on the one hand, work at a comparative level across all of these groups to find their commonalities. On another level, each of us has our own specialty. When I have been briefing the FBI, briefing the military, I will often draw comparisons to far-right groups because part of the challenge we find is that when you just focus on the Islamist groups, the audience tends to attribute everything these groups do to religion, and they do not understand that there are a lot of commonalities between these various terrorist groups. I find that kind of comparison very helpful. I am much more aware of the far-right groups in the United States and there is a lot to be learned about how these groups operate online, their similarities and differences.

Q576 **Naz Shah:** Perhaps I could make it easier for you, Mr McCants. What I am struggling to understand is that you are the head of counterterrorism at YouTube, but what we are looking at are the transactional issues of reviewers, of you removing content offline and taking it down. When we have had evidence from YouTube in the past, you were very clear. When there is copyrighted materials such as songs and albums, the minute they appear, you remove them—within minutes. Yet you have nothing—you have not invested anything—to match that kind of copyrighted material, and yet this stuff is dangerous. It leads to people losing their lives, it is illegal, it is a cancer in society, terrorism, yet you are not putting in the effort into it. Frankly, I feel insulted that YouTube sent you to answer the question. This is not about your competence in your field, but an organisation as big as YouTube sending somebody who does not know the basic answers to the questions, yet you have had nearly a week's notice to be answering us.

William McCants: I share your description of terrorism as a cancer. That is why YouTube is dedicated to removing that content from its platform. We are putting in place fixes every day, spending millions of dollars to address this problem. Our technology is getting faster and we are expanding the number of personnel who work on this issue and we continue to make improvements. Are we perfect? No. Will we be perfect? No, but we are getting better and better.

Naz Shah: This is not about perfection, Mr McCants; this is about you being the wrong person before this Committee and not having a clue what you are talking about. That is what I feel has just happened in this evidence session.

Q577 **Chair:** Mr McCants, do you think what YouTube is doing by allowing these videos to continue is illegal?

William McCants: According to UK law—and I am not a lawyer—I do not know. I do not think these videos themselves are illegal, but they are certainly against our policies. We do not allow proscribed organisations, proscribed terrorist organisations, proscribed groups, to have a presence on YouTube, and we are doing everything in our power to take them down.



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Q578 **Chair:** The proscribing of organisations includes urging people to support these organisations, and these are clearly propaganda videos. You do not believe that by continuing to host these videos you are doing anything illegal?

William McCants: If we receive legal notice that this material is illegal, our lawyers review it and then make the appropriate judgment.

Q579 **Chair:** Do you think we should start making it illegal, given that you seem to be not capable of taking it down in the current circumstances?

William McCants: I cannot advise you on legal matters, but I can tell you we are seized with dealing with this problem.

Chair: We have to move on to other matters, Mr McCants. Obviously when we contacted YouTube and Google, we gave your organisation the discretion about who it wanted to send, how many people it wanted to send and how it wanted to give us evidence. I think the failing that we have seen today is a corporate one by YouTube and also by Google. The fact is that you are continuing to host illegal organisations, you are continuing to collude with these illegal organisations by providing a platform for their extremism. Your algorithms are continuing to promote radicalisation by promoting more and more extreme organisations. The failing is not simply an accident. The evidence that you have given us today is so weak that I am afraid this looks like a failure to even do the basics along the way and even to be able to respond to the questions that we have asked.

We are grateful for you giving your time today, but we are extremely disappointed by the evidence that you have given. I hope you will take the opportunity to give us some further written evidence that responds to the questions that you were unable to answer, and to give us that written evidence next week. I also hope that you will go back to both YouTube and Google and say to them that, frankly, the richest organisation in the world should be capable of doing a better job than this on national security and public safety issues. Thank you very much.