



Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA
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By email

4 May 2020

Dear Mr. Earley,

Follow-up questions from our session on the COVID-19 Infodemic

I am writing following your appearance before the DCMS Sub-Committee on Online Harms and Disinformation on Thursday morning.

We were deeply disappointed with the evidence given by all three social media companies, which fell short of the standards we expect in terms of clarity and openness. Witnesses seemed unwilling to answer direct questions, relying instead on pre-prepared answers, some of which seemed to be lifted from a press release rather than emerging from a statement of fact. This defensive positioning is deeply unhelpful, and is not a meaningful way of engaging with parliamentary scrutiny.

Ironically, the expert panel preceding your own evidence suggested that social media companies had made real efforts in some of their responses to the crisis. But we were not able to identify these positive trends due to oblique answers that did not deal with the question posed.

As a result, as well as asking follow-up questions now in writing, we need to leave open the option of recalling the three companies – represented this time by senior executives who have direct knowledge of, and are accountable for, company policy.

For now, the Sub-Committee requests answers on the following points:

1. What proportion of people who have seen (not just engaged with) content flagged by users or third party factcheckers as misinformation or disinformation on Facebook and Instagram are then alerted to this and provided with authoritative information? What is the total number of users that have received this alert since it was rolled out?
2. Does Facebook today have the same number of full-time equivalent staff working directly in content moderation across all platforms as before social distancing measures were put in place (i.e. 1 February 2020), both for English-language users and globally?
3. How are you balancing moderation of different kinds of harmful material? Are there some categories of harm that are being expedited, and if so, what categories?



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4. In a letter to the Committee, the Secretary of State said that the Government has been working closely with social media platforms “to tackle misinformation and disinformation together”. Can you provide more detail on exactly how Government and your company are working together, and provide information on whether there have been discussions about future plans to tackle online harms and disinformation?
5. Assuming the proposed duty of care set out in the Online Harms White Paper and initial consultation response has public and civil society buy-in, would Facebook support it in principle?
6. Does your company endorse the recommendations set out by Full Fact in their report on the Third Party Fact Checking Programme, such as more data for fact checkers about the spread and flagging of content, a more in-depth rating system and an expansion of the Programme to include Instagram? Or not, why not, and which recommendations specifically?
7. How have you been working with partners in the Trusted News Initiative¹ to ensure that authoritative information is surfaced appropriately and misinformation is demoted on your platforms? Do you adjust your systems to reflect these insights and how do the algorithms and systems work to implement what partners are telling you?
8. Given WhatsApp is an encrypted service, what plans does your company have to implement a reporting tool for content users receive within the app to you directly, which could allow your company to respond such as by withdrawing access to the app for repeat offenders or escalate reports and complaints to public authorities?
9. Recently you set up the World Health Organisation with a WhatsApp account to be able to disseminate correct information easier. Is there scope to expand this to a limited number of authoritative partners, such as those in the Trusted News Initiative?

Given the fast-moving nature of the crisis, and the urgency of the issue at hand, the Committee requests a response by 11 May 2020. I may also follow up with further questions should we require more information based on your answers.

Yours sincerely,

Julian Knight MP
Chair, Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

¹ BBC Media Centre, [Trusted News Initiative announces plans to tackle harmful Coronavirus disinformation](#) (27 March 2020).