



Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA
Tel 020 7219 6120 website www.parliament.uk/cms

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6 Pancras Square
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By email

4 May 2020

Dear Ms. Dimofte,

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.

The Sub-Committee requests information on:

1. Expert evidence we received in the first panel stated that Google Search does not have a 'report' function for low quality or misleading news, and that the reach of websites that are algorithmically downgraded often take less than a year to recover and resurface to users. Why has Google not implemented a report function for low quality or misleading search results, given the limitations of its automated systems and algorithms? How else can Google address these limitations?
2. Do you accept the Global Disinformation Index's findings that Google has provided adverts for almost 90% of sites spreading coronavirus-related conspiracies?¹ Can you point to where your policies have been updated publicly to ensure your advertising does not run on these types of websites?

¹ Global Disinformation Index, [Why is Ad Tech Funding These Ads on Coronavirus Conspiracy Sites?](#) (24 March 2020).



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3. What trends have you observed regarding the prevalence and targeting of gambling adverts during lockdown, and has this differed to previous trends? Are 'problem gamblers' ever targeted with gambling adverts and how do you protect them?
4. How quickly does YouTube take action against content flagged as misleading? Has this response been expedited during the crisis?
5. Regarding the London Real YouTube livestream of 5G conspiracy theories (the same interview was sanctioned by Ofcom for the radio broadcast by London Live), Google donated its video revenue to charity. However, the BBC reported that YouTube allowed London Real to keep its Super Chat revenue raised whilst the video was online.² Can you clarify whether this was the case, and if so, why?
6. Facebook claimed that it only became aware of the London Real video after it was flagged to them by ITV.³ Do you think this is evidence that more cross-platform collaboration is needed in tackling misinformation? Did Google flag this through the Trusted News Initiative to other companies, and if not why not?
7. How have you been working with partners in the Trusted News Initiative to ensure that authoritative information is surfaced appropriately and misinformation is demoted on your platforms?
8. Are you supporting or amplifying the output of traditional news organisations? If so, how, and if not, why not?
9. On 23 April, the US President asked the Coronavirus Response Coordinator to test exposure to ultraviolet light and injections of disinfectant on patients. The White House streams its daily briefings to YouTube. Would YouTube therefore take action against the White House's video if the claims were streamed unchallenged, given YouTube's statement that it will ban conspiracy theories from the site?

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 response.

Yours sincerely,

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

² BBC, [Coronavirus: YouTube tightens rules after David Icke 5G interview](#) (7 April 2020).

³ ITV, [Facebook removes David Icke coronavirus-5G conspiracy video](#) (9 April 2020).