

Ranbir Dhaliwal—written evidence (FEO0002)

House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry into Freedom of Expression Online

I do believe that freedom of expression online is under threat and it is evident more so now during this pandemic than ever before. Having seen the most well intentioned and positive content be removed or the users banned troubles me considerably. It removes fundamental freedom rights to bodily autonomy and the individual being able to acknowledge, digest and form opinion of their own volition. In person everyone has the opportunity to continue to digest the information should they wish to do so, which is no longer the case online. As it stands with online censorship from various platforms, content can be removed before the point of delivery. **This I believe is totally unacceptable.** Effectively this means expression must either fit a certain agenda or not go against a certain narrative. Before now these kinds of restrictions on civil liberties have only ever been prevalent in tyrannical regimes for which many have lost their lives fighting against.

I do not agree that because these platforms are private companies they have the right to restrict content as they see fit. These very same platforms can be seen as public utilities and in their own words they are the online equivalent of the public square. If they actually hold themselves true to this value, they cannot continue to censor whatever or whomever they wish. This only provides them with the power to shape and form perceptions and opinions, which can lead wider consequences not only in the online space but also offline.

I want to cite an example of YouTube restricting content should it go against the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommendations. During the early period of this SarCov2 pandemic multiple doctors and people within the medical profession were advocating the use of Vitamin C & D as way to help boost the immune system. This information was repressed with the content removed for violating the guideline of it not being something the WHO had announced or recommended. Months later the WHO issued a statement advising both Vitamin C & D can be very beneficial for the body to fight SarsCov2 and can reduce complications in nearly 2/3 of people. I can only come to conclusion that should this information have been allowed to remain on the platform many people could and would have benefited. Another example being the questioning of the use of lockdown measures to battle the spread of SarsCov2. The WHO themselves have now advised against lockdowns yet anyone who had previously stated that very same opinion was banned or removed. There seems very little logic behind censorship by these platforms other than fitting narratives or agendas. Holding such power should not be taken lightly by these tech companies and they should employ robust mechanisms to enable them to make better decisions.

This moves onto the current mechanisms they have in place, which are in now way fit for purpose. The use of 'Fact Checkers' or algorithms to moderate content is a flawed process. Firstly, algorithms cannot take the whole content in context and only seeks to review key words or phrases and then removes it in its entirety. This cannot be seen as an effective way to moderate content. Secondly,

the use of 'Fact Checkers' only removes the liability from the platform but places into the hands of another private company. My understanding is these platforms use other private companies who sole purpose is dedicated to fact checking content. These same private companies are themselves subject to the same question of impartiality and the ability they have to censor is they see fit. More alarmingly, the same fact checking company can be then used by multiple platforms, thus allowing them to monopolise the information to an even greater extent.

I do believe these platforms are a very valuable resource and are crucial to reaching far and wide communities. However, they are not indispensable and we should hold them to that fact. Our government should promote other ways of communications with populace beyond these tech giants.

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