

Mr Chamberlain—written submission (FEO0009)

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

Q1. Is freedom of expression under threat online? If so, how does this impact individuals differently, and why? Are there differences between exercising the freedom of expression online versus offline?

Freedom of expression is indeed under threat online, looking at the case in Scotland where Mark Meechan made a comedic satirical video wherein he stated his girlfriend constantly talked about how cute their dog was, so he decided to turn his girlfriend's dog into the least cute thing he could think of, which in his mind was a Nazi.

He taught the dog to raise its paw in a manner similar to a Roman salute, the dog watches a Hitler speech, and to react to the phrase "Gas the Jews", ending the video with an edited image of Hitler's moustache over the dog's face alongside comedic music.

He was summarily sought out by the police after they discovered the video, arrested and fined according to the Communications Act 2003, under the charge of being "grossly offensive", frankly, the right of offence is unrecognised, but offence often infringes upon freedom of expression.

At the time of the court case, Mark garnered the support of famous comedians such as David Baddiel, and Ricky Gervais, then after the fact Frankie Boyle later voiced his support saying that he should not have been convicted.

The last recorded time a dog was taught to perform a Roman salute upon mention of Hitler, the Nazis began a campaign of harassment against the owner, sabotaging his business and interrogating him, the only reason charges were not pressed were due to a lack of witnesses, as we can see, the UK has fallen greatly in the past 60 years if we can arrive at the same or worse totalitarian result than the Nazis, if albeit for different reasons.

Q2. How should good digital citizenship be promoted? How can education help?

We should seek to promote the availability of anonymity on the internet, keeping yourself secure online, we don't do nearly enough in that area, and quite frankly the term 'good digital citizenship' is meaningless without users having first having the safety of self responsibility and security.

Q4. Should online platforms be under a legal duty to protect freedom of expression?

Online platforms should have a legal duty to protect freedom of expression, looking at the recent invasion of the capitol in America, this was clearly caused by a lack of online freedom of expression, to understand this you only need look at what they were holding, megaphones and flags. They wanted to be seen and

heard in a world where to be seen or heard depends on if Facebook, Twitter or YouTube recognises your speech as acceptable, in a landscape where the only speech that is acceptable is that of corporations and advertisers, otherwise you may be in danger of causing gross offence and you are removed.

The recent move to alternate tech platforms such as Parler and Bitchute, then storming the capitol megaphones in hand as they find they have no way for their voice to reach people because they've been forced into these echo chambers is a symptom of people's speech being restricted on these platforms, and I only fear these symptoms will only grow the longer these corporations have a stranglehold on what people can and cannot say.

Q6. To what extent should users be allowed anonymity online?

Full anonymity should be afforded to online speech as much as possible, people need to be able to speak out about corruption without fear of reprisal by the media, police, or government.

Looking at the example case of Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, a man in the UK who spoke out online about the Rotherham rape crisis and performed other journalistic acts of a similar vein under a pseudonym, his real identity was uncovered, then he concurrently was smeared for his history with the EDL and is constantly hounded by police and the public wherever he goes.

For one moment in his life he held with some bad people, despite the fact that he disavowed them, he's now branded as a neo-fascist, white nationalist, a near domestic terrorist and is commonly treated as such, he and his family and children are harassed constantly over his history and his Islamic critical reporting.

However, he's also been awarded with the International Free Press award, also known as the Sappho Award by the International Free Press Society for his journalistic work in January 2020.

Clearly his work is recognised to be of some merit by an international institution that recognises the value of a free press, I can only imagine the quality of Stephen's life and many other journalists would be vastly improved had he and others had the availability and protections of online anonymity.

8 January 2021