Supplementary written evidence submitted by Sarah Connolly, Director Security and Online Harms, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

12 January 2021

Dear Julian,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in front of the Committee on 17th December. During the session, James Sorene and I committed to write to you on two areas: firstly on what further information we would like to receive from social media platforms; and secondly on how much the Government has paid social media platforms over the last 3 months for vaccine and Covid-related purposes. The Committee also requested further information on how the Government was trying to counter the messaging of the anti-vaccination lobby. This letter provides a response on your first question related to social media platforms. James Sorene will provide a separate response to your second and third questions in due course.

As I mentioned in the session, there are three areas where we are particularly focusing our efforts, namely understanding the spread of mis/disinformation on social media platforms, improving understanding of action taken to counter mis/disinformation, and evaluation of the effectiveness of interventions put in place. These are issues on which further evidence and analysis from social media platforms is welcome, but also where the input of academics, civil society and other practitioners is key.

Since the start of the pandemic we have strengthened our engagement with the platforms and other partners, and continue to have robust conversations about the most effective ways to build a deeper understanding of Covid-19 mis/disinformation, particularly in relation to anti-vaccination narratives. The key mechanisms for our engagement and information sharing with platforms are bilateral meetings, and the Counter-Disinformation Policy Forum that we launched in December 2020, which brings together experts from industry, civil society and academia. We welcome discussion with the platforms about the best way to share information and note that detailed, specific information is more helpful to understanding this issue than large numbers shared without context. Through this forum we are asking participants to share insights and data on the issues identified on an ongoing basis. Therefore we request that platforms provide as much detail as they are able, with specifics rather than summary numbers, and provide access to anonymised datasets where possible, while respecting privacy considerations of their users.

In particular, we are asking for structured information sharing that will help the Government and civil society partners to build the most accurate picture of the situation, including information on trends, but also specific emerging narratives of concern. This will ensure that we are appropriately targeting our communications efforts and help positive messaging on the vaccine rollout to prevail. In addition, we are asking for evidence to allow us to build the best possible understanding of what measures are proving to be most effective in tackling misinformation on the platforms, including information on how users interact with various interventions such as warning labels, provision of accurate information, and limiting dissemination through reducing content visibility.

Ultimately, this information will help us understand which types of interventions are most successful in reducing the spread and consumption of false content, and encourage the adoption of best-practice principles throughout the online environment.

As noted above, the Counter-Disinformation Policy Forum, alongside continued engagement at a bilateral level, will be an important vehicle for advancing these conversations and assessing the efficacy of platforms' actions.

While the Government continues to work at pace to tackle vaccine mis/disinformation, we are encouraged by recent data from the Office for National Statistics that finds 85% of adults surveyed said that they would be either very likely or fairly likely to have a COVID-19 vaccine if offered. Furthermore, we continue to see a reduction in users reporting exposure to mis/disinformation; Ofcom weekly polling data finds that 29% of people said they came across false or misleading information about COVID-19 compared to 46% during the first week of the March 2019 national lockdown.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Connolly,
Director Security & Online Harms