

Maxted, retired freelance technical author—written evidence (FEO0031)

House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee inquiry into freedom of expression online

I am a feminist who is involved with the current debate around sex and gender. I have been active on many social media platforms including Mumsnet, Spinster and Twitter. I mostly use Twitter and have over 3000 followers.

1. Is freedom of expression under threat online?

Freedom of expression is under threat online, especially if you are a woman talking about women's rights.

I used to be active on the Mumsnet feminism pages, however the moderation is now so extreme that expressing yourself has become impossible. This is a direct result of extremist trans activists targeting Mumsnet advertisers, threatening them with bad publicity, boycotts etc unless they prevent women from talking about inconvenient truths such as autogynephilia or the sex of males who commit crimes.

I now use mostly use Twitter. Moderation there is more haphazard, however males seem to get away with violent threats, whereas women are suspended from the site for stating facts. Some examples – women have had their accounts removed for:

- calling males 'he' rather than the person's preferred pronouns,
- saying that only males can rape women
- saying that only women can get cervical cancer
- saying that lesbians are female

On the other hand, I have files of tweets where males threaten women with physical violence, death and rape. These are three examples from just one day, yesterday, where no action was taken (warning re offensive language, included to show the severity of the problem):

- An instruction to eat rat poison
- A threat to 'shit' in any swimming pool used by TERFs (trans exclusionary radical feminists)
- Told to 'shut up TERF' with a graphic of a pointing gun.
- Told 'I got one thing for you lot, and it cums in 9mm sized bullets. suck my massive clit ya cunts'.

It is the same every day. Women are threatened with images of barbed wire baseball bats, told to 'choke on a dick', threatened with being punched, killed, raped and so on.

Women have more or less given up reporting such posts. Twitter does nothing. We know not to involve the police because they will take no notice.

It's not only unfair, it has a massively chilling effect on free speech. Many women will not speak up.

2. Good digital citizenship - No comment.

3. Lawful but harmful content should not be regulated.

Who defines harm? Transactivists say that women talking about their biology is harmful to them. That pointing out that transwomen's convictions for sex offences are higher than those for other men is harmful to them, even though this is a fact, and backed up by Ministry of Justice figures.

It is harmful to women if we cannot point out these facts. We need to be able to discuss the reality for women about proposed changes to society, for example males being admitted to women's shelters, prisons etc. That male bodies are fundamentally different to women's bodies and consequently women's sports should be for females only. That rape victims have the right to same sex care. Sex is important and we are being banned for talking about it.

At the same time, males are allowed to abuse and threaten women freely on Twitter.

Of course trans people, just like everyone else should be protected from harassment and discrimination, however these issues are already covered by existing law.

Note that misogyny is not covered by hate crime legislation. Women are not protected.

I have never heard of a transactivist being arrested for their on-line threats to a woman.

4. Online platforms should be under a legal duty to protect freedom of expression.

Like it or not, Twitter is the public square. Their monopoly means that when women are banned from Twitter they are extremely restricted in attempts to take part in public life.

Women are increasingly turning to alternative platforms to express their views, however Twitter's monopoly means that law makers, the media, and other influencers have accounts on this platform. Banning women who stand up for their rights results in them not being heard and consequently discriminates against them as citizens.

These platforms must have a legal duty to protect freedom of expression. The harms from losing the ability to speak freely are well documented. What kind of society do we want to become?

5. Method of Legal liability - No comment

6. Anonymity

Anonymity is absolutely VITAL for women on line. Every day, I am threatened with rape or death, just for acknowledging that biological sex is important and the root of women's oppression. If I was not anonymous, I would be scared for my safety.

Women have been fired from their jobs for the same reason. Social media is like a digital witch hunt, and employers are cowed by the mob. They sacrifice these women to get the mob off their back even where women have done absolutely nothing that is illegal.

7. Technology and Freedom of Expression – See below.

8. Design – see below.

9. Transparency of algorithms

Algorithms must be made public so that any bias can be seen and addressed, as should all moderation techniques, guidelines etc. Also companies such as Twitter should be able to show sex based statistics on those carrying out moderation and those developing algorithms and other techniques.

10. Moderation

Moderation should be transparent to the user, and regulation should be used to ensure that it is not biased and that it follows the law, not the tech company's prejudice.

There should be independent regulators that users can appeal to if they think they have been unfairly banned.

11. Competition

Twitter is effectively a monopoly. It needs to be broken up.

12. Examples of successful policy - No comment.

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