

Mrs Eileen Higham—written evidence (FE00032)

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

I am a UK woman who has watched the abuse of women on line move to unprecedented levels. It has been gradually getting worse and without J K Rowling drawing attention to the closing down of a women's right to discuss their issues, this would still be under the radar. Time to correct, time to move back to balance. Time to re-assert our own culture.

There appears to be a distinct threat to women online and most of my responses will focus on that area.

1. 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?

Women can be hounded and threatened but are easily banned. Cultural differences seem to be in evidence. The large tech companies are American and even though there are cultural differences these organisations are the arbiters of our cultural lives. Women are particularly disadvantaged in the masculine world of tech, and in online platforms misogyny seems to run rife.

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

I would imagine education will make little difference to those who spew bile on-line (education is passive, they are not). Therefore I would look at how to make people accountable for their actions – remove anonymity.

3. Is online user-generated content covered adequately by existing law and, if so, is the law adequately enforced? Should 'lawful but harmful' online content also be regulated?

Until unlawful activities are properly policed, I cannot see how, adding another layer of policing would help. There are almost 4.66 billion active internet users as of October 2020, encompassing 59 percent of the global population. How is that to be adequately policed? The penalties and ability to police should be absolute priorities. Any content which targets young people should be the main focus of online harming. Any person or organisation producing potentially harmful information should be asked to amend or it be taken down but you then run into the argument of what constitutes harm as opposed to offence (no one has the right not to be offended).

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

Internet companies should have a legal duty to protect freedom of expression as they are unelected bodies and must abide by our laws otherwise they are anti-democratic.

5. What model of legal liability for content is most appropriate for online platforms?

Withdrawal of the platform. The government needs to develop a UK platform in line with our culture and protected by our laws.

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

Speech has changed gradually since the advent of on-line platforms. The anonymity afforded on-line users has meant that normal boundaries of reasonableness have been breached. The way of insuring accountability would be to remove anonymity, of course there are always those who will find ways around this, but easy tracking and naming of perpetrators of on-line abuse would have a dramatic effect. Women need protection. If we were dominant in the tech industry, there would be no on-line harms of women and children.

9. How could the transparency of algorithms used to censor or promote content, and the training and accountability of their creators, be improved? Should regulators play a role?

I am sure removing opacity would make a huge difference, in all areas. Regulators need to be part of this but regulators themselves need to be impartial otherwise the issues remain the same, just a different group being affected.

10. How can content moderation systems be improved? Are users of online platforms sufficiently able to appeal moderation decisions with which they disagree? What role should regulators play?

If the internet is 'cleaned up' and more transparent, then this would diminish the number of appeals and make moderation easier. There is no one fix for this issue but I believe regulation is long overdue.

11. To what extent would strengthening competition regulation of dominant online platforms help to make them more responsive to their users' views about content and its moderation?

I would love to see more competition but Facebook and Twitter will just buy them up to avoid competition. If new platforms could be developed in this country with government financial help and contracts preventing sale to large overseas corporates, this would be a good way forward.

Whilst we can look to protecting freedom of expression, there are those unfortunate people who live in countries where the right to freedom of expression does not exist. If we do not curb the excesses of the internet tech giants, we may well end up in the same place. Never say 'it couldn't happen here' it already is for women!

14 January 2021