

Anonymous 1—written evidence (FE0065)

I am making this submission in a personal capacity as a private individual.

I firmly believe that online platforms should be under a legal duty to protect freedom of expression. The past few weeks have clarified for me, beyond any doubt, that freedom of speech is being censored and prevented online. As a prime example, in the past few days:

1. TalkRadio in the UK was deleted from YouTube, without warning or full explanation, allegedly because TalkRadio had violated 'community guidelines'. TalkRadio is a national broadcaster, regulated by Ofcom. YouTube back-pedalled fairly swiftly in a clear demonstration that its action had been unwarranted and censorious.
2. The President of the US had his Twitter account closed, and untold thousands of other Twitter accounts have been affected – either closed or 'managed', for example by removing 'follower' links. Similar censorship has been regularly reported by a number of Twitter users who had commented on the Covid-19 crisis and challenged the prevailing orthodoxy and government strategy, notwithstanding they referenced data publicly available from the NHS, PHE, ONS etc in support of their views.

I firmly believe that the founders and managers of many of the largest social media platforms are using their positions to stifle debate and to censor those who espouse views not in accordance with their own. For years people like Mark Zuckerberg have relied on US legislation (s230 of the Communications Act) for protection when answering claims that they have failed to police their sites adequately. Insisting they are simply providing a platform, and that they have no responsibility or role in editing content, suited their purposes when they were criticised about not removing illegal content from their sites – for example child pornography or terrorist propaganda. However these claims ring hollow when they are clearly now censoring legal content that simply goes against their political leanings and world view – eg President Trump, or the views of those opposing lockdowns in the Coronavirus crisis.

The censoring of debate about the pandemic is often claimed to be 'to prevent misinformation', but in practice such steps are simply censoring free speech and can have unexpected consequences. If the 'misinformation' being censored is so wrong, is it not better to challenge it using facts and logic? Simply preventing debate raises the question "if you are so sure of your facts, why are you afraid to debate them?" It appears that we are being treated as incapable of knowing right from wrong/lies from truth, or assessing information for ourselves, so we have a filter imposed perhaps without our knowledge, to 'protect' us. This is insulting, dangerous and immoral. There is a stark difference between the removal of illegal material from online sites, and the removal of opinion simply because the site monitors and owners disagree with it. Even the institution of moderation boards within online platforms have the propensity to be biased in line with the ethical and political views of their owners and managers. Therefore external, non-partisan and apolitical regulation is important.

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