

Anonymous 3—written evidence (FEO0073)

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

Apologies for imperfections in my submission but my illness greatly restricts my capacity for reading and writing.

Question 1: Is freedom of expression under threat online? If so, how does this impact individuals differently, and why?

I primarily use Twitter online. I value freedom of expression and do believe that in some contexts it is under threat online.

Specifically, in the context of women discussing Women's Rights, where I have seen numerous Twitter accounts of women just talking about their own lives, removed for "hate speech". Most commonly this is for disagreeing with Extreme Gender Identity Campaigners - EGIC - (aka Extreme Trans Rights Activists - ETRA).

One common reason is for "misgendering" i.e. describing somebody by their biological sex rather than a gender identity that they may or may not feel they have (which may or may not be changeable/fluid on any given day) - or not agreeing with the EGIC quasi-religious mantra that "Trans Women Are Women".

In contrast, I have seen EGIC who have posted actual threats eg "Kill all TERFs", "TERFs can choke on my girl dick", "Punch TERFs", "Die TERF scum" ad nauseam or posed with weapons with such threats written on them (often in female public toilets) including one male with a "TERF bayonet" (a machine gun with a dildo attached to it) which was left on his Twitter account for months despite many women (myself included) complaining about it.

NB: TERF was originally an acronym for Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist, but in reality it is used to describe any woman at all who disagrees with a EGIC.

There seems to be a definite imbalance in which Twitter accounts are suspended or banned.

One of the most egregious and more inexplicable examples was @intersexfacts - a Twitter account dedicated to correcting misinformation about people born with DSD/VSD which is regularly used by EGIC to justify a "born in the wrong body" or "third sex" narrative. This account was banned for "hate speech" for calling a Trans Woman 'dude' (something my female friends have regularly called each other in real life) ie "misgendering".

(At what point did refusing to tell a socially polite fiction based on a quasi religious belief - Gender Identity Theory - become hate speech and why does Twitter think that referring to someone in a factual way ie by their biological sex - which cannot be changed - amounts to hate speech and should be policed?)

Online "intersex" people have become a political football in what is characterised as the fight for trans-rights. If any group of accounts need obvious protection online from harassment, & the ability to speak freely about their own lives, I would suggest that it is "intersex" people.

We see much talk, including from several official Liberal Democrat accounts, about protecting vulnerable minorities, and yet they consistently ignore the requests of "intersex" people to stop using them in their arguments about Gender Identity and Queer Theory, neither of which have anything to do with people born with Variants of Sexual Development.

Another account (from a gay man) was closed for simply stating the actual statistics for murder by and of trans people in the UK. There was a year in which there was a slightly higher chance of being murdered by a trans-person than as a trans-person. Despite this being in the Ministry of Justice statistics, on Twitter it was deemed hate speech and removed.

People should be free to discuss their own lives, and they should be free to discuss legal and biological facts without having to worry about being censored, or their accounts being suspended or closed.

Question 2: How can education help?

While it is also true that discussing eg Women's Rights on Twitter will invariably attract misogyny, sexual threats, and general attempts at bullying behaviour, I have learned how to use Twitter to minimise any abuse & stress I experience. There should be broader education efforts about this.

Mute, Block, Report, Account Privacy settings, notification frequency, not reading headlines etc

I do love Twitter. It is like an instant social life for anyone who is predominantly housebound. It is entirely possible to have a Twitter account which just has a Time Line full of lovely and interesting things - assuming no politics is discussed - but it is clear from my online interactions that not everybody knows how to do this.

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

I do believe that online platforms should be under a legal duty to protect freedom of expression - there can be no democracy without freedom of expression.

That has to come before any presumed duty to protect people from being offended.

While there will always be an issue over where the line is drawn, I think direct threats have no place in online discussion, but freedom of expression has to be favoured over a more Draconian interpretation of what can be meaningfully described as a threat.

N.B. I would rather have an online environment where even the example given previously of the man with the "TERF bayonet" was able to keep an online account which I could then mute or block myself, then be in a scenario where people are being suspended or blocked from having an account because of biased reasoning, favouring one group over another, or for dubious/tenuous reasons.

Question 6: To what extent should users be allowed anonymity online?

I am all in favour of anonymity online. While it may cause problems, it does allow people who are not in a position to speak openly for a variety of reasons e.g. the potential for being targeted by others who disagree with them and losing work, the potential to be targeted by abusers or stalkers, to speak freely.

More importantly those living in countries where they do not have any form of free speech and anything they say could see them arrested by the police or hounded by governments need others to ensure that free speech is possible.

People around the globe, people face genuine danger from just expressing their views online. I think they have to take precedence over removing or banning general unpleasantness, which can be largely mitigated against by users.

15 January 2021