

## **Rachel Palmer—written evidence (FE00105)**

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

Social media creates and influences public opinion, but that isn't always a two way street. Social Media giants try to regulate what happens on their platform with 'community standards' which aren't fairly or consistently applied which goes on to skew opinion. Offline, there are laws which protect and uphold free speech and we can agree to disagree with those we aren't aligned with. Disagree with the attitudes social media have sanctioned, however, and you find yourself quickly silenced. Being banned from a social media platform means only that you think differently to the way prescribed by their 'community standards', which are far from the authority on acceptable ways to think or behave.

As an example of the arbitrary policing of these 'community standards', Twitter changed the rules on what they considered to be acceptable on their platform and decided to ban Graham Linehan, the justification being that a very old tweet of his from years prior broke the new rules. At the time of the tweet he was acting within Twitter's terms and conditions. This retrospective application of the rules doesn't stand up to how the law of the land works and places social media users at the risk of being banned from their platform for actions which at the time did not break any rules.

Another example of a misuse of social media which is not policed by the platforms themselves is Helen Islan, supporter and associate of the Mermaids charity for transgendered children. As soon as the judge told the ONS that their guidance for completing the census was unlawful, on the 9<sup>th</sup> March 2021, Helen immediately tweeted a post suggesting to her followers that they should all disregard what the judge has said and fill in the census in whatever manner they want, she also shared many tweets from other people over the following days saying the same thing. Despite being reported to Twitter for this blatant undermining of a legal judgement, Twitter has taken no action on this account and the tweets are still there.

In addition to the over zealous retrospective application of updated rules, Twitter also ignores its own rules on what is permitted on the platform. I have reported accounts who have told people to kill themselves or described violent sex acts on them, yet the accounts are still there. I posted a tweet about how I identify as straight and that my preference is towards men. In response to this I received a tweet that said 'jokes [sic] on you I have a thick juice dripping cock which i'm [sic] gonna shove down your throat'. I reported it to Twitter who deemed that this graphic misogyny-laced threat was acceptable on its platform. Helen Staniland attracted a ban because she questioned whether giving adult men access to female children in changing rooms was a Safeguarding concern. After what we have heard from women recently, from the #MeToo movement to the highlighting of the dangers of misogyny in the wake of Sarah Everard's tragic murder, it seems an especially bitter twist that these two incidents should be treated so differently; stating that biological sex exists is ban worthy bigotry, yet a rape threat towards a woman is acceptable. Because of this, being banned

from Twitter should not be seen as a legitimate judgement of someone's character. This is exactly what we saw, however, when Graham Linehan was told several times on 9/3/2021 that he 'must have done something wrong' to have been banned from three different websites.

By using the banning of people from social media platforms to ascribe guilt puts private businesses as the judge and jury over the thoughts and actions of ordinary people with no means of recourse to clear their names is an incredibly dangerous precedent to set and one which I urge you not to participate in.

On 9<sup>th</sup> March 2021, the verdict was given that the ONS should change their guidance on the census to reflect biological sex rather than gender identity. Upon tweeting my support of this judgement, a trans rights activist who was unhappy with the judgement maliciously reported my account, bizarrely stating that it encouraged sexual assault on children because I have the colours orange and black in my profile. This resulted in my being locked out of my account for 7 days, silencing me for having a different opinion to her own. Mass reporting of tweets for arbitrary reasons is a commonly used tactic to silence women who have questions about the conflation of gender and sex and the damaging effect this has on women and women's service. It is commonly used because it frequently works and Twitter becomes complicit in preventing legitimate free speech, predominantly from women. This is another issue that Twitter fails to address, that people are bullied and silenced by people mass reporting accounts in retaliation for 'unacceptable opinions'. I appealed my suspension from Twitter and I cannot access my account until it is processed, even though the original seven day period has passed.

I have never submitted anything to a Committee before but I have been following this for years with growing concern at the bullying and hate that is propagated on these sites and how social media companies – private, for profit businesses – are given more power over their users than our own government and laws. I agree with Helen Staniland in that an independent body needs to be set up to curb this outrageous infringement on our rights as UK citizens.

*18 March 2021*