

## **Anonymous 5—written evidence (FEO0108)**

### **Communications and Digital Committee inquiry into Freedom of Expression Online**

I watched the meeting with H Staniland and G Linehan yesterday and at the end the Chair invited further submissions from listeners which I include below.

As someone who was well aware of both of their Twitter activity I would like to offer a different perspective.

Regarding Twitter particularly people do know when they are heading for a ban. G Linehan had his blue tick removed in advance, that was a significant warning that his activity was in breach of their terms and conditions. H Staniland also knew, she posted on a platform called 'Spinster' that "the inevitable has happened".

I disagreed with Ms Staniland's comment about isolation. There are multiple platforms available, discord servers, Reddit, Spinster, facebook, mumsnet, medium, substack etc. I believe there are enough such that if a person is banned, there are plenty of other options. And despite engaging with people like Ms Staniland and Mr Linehan and posting over 24,000 times on Twitter, I have never been suspended even for 12 hours. I talk about the issues, I do not attack people, I stay within terms and conditions. One can be passionate and active without breaching conditions.

I do not believe Twitter is biased against trans hostile people or other groups. I have been called a paedophile just for my profile which includes my identity and sexuality. I reported it, Twitter took no action. They have to have algorithms etc. to manage the platform, it is too large for a nuanced review of each tweet. It was clear before Mr Linehan's ban for example that using the word "groomer" was likely to result in action as many other people had been censored for this. He did however call a lot of people "beard" also a slur in certain circumstances, which gets zero attention from Twitter because it is a common usage word. I accept this is part of the imperfect experience of using a very large active platform.

It is already against Twitter rules to incite a "pile on" and Mr Linehan as a person who had hundreds of thousands of followers did in my opinion come close to this. I do believe that an area for policy or discussions with the media owners would be an extra duty of care for very large accounts not to negatively influence their followers in a way that could lead to abuse of a much smaller account. This the most likely thing to cause a lot of people to be abusive to one person. Large follower accounts should be aware of their influence. Mr Linehan mentioned JK Rowling, I utterly disagree with her views on transgender people and use of discredited research but that is her choice and she is not abusive to individuals, that is the level at which we can vehemently disagree, but without censorship.

I am staying away from the detail of issue which Mr Linehan expressed yesterday because it is not relevant to the question of digital censorship. I

disagreed absolutely with his statement which to me was littered with inaccuracies, untruths and paints trans people as dangerous. One has to understand that even if there are passionate people supportive and hostile to trans people, the majority of trans users who are on the receiving end of a lot of accusations are a very small percentage of the population and find platforms like Twitter a lifeline for connection with each other and spreading misinformation has real life consequences for us all. There is "block" and "mute" but it is still almost impossible to not see abusive comments. In reality, I agree there is some inconsistency regarding who gets banned but overall, you have to be pretty bad to be permanently banned and even then people often try to evade it with other accounts as Mr Linehan said he had.

I do believe people should be able to express things I disagree with, but platforms should also exclude those who despite warnings, repeatedly break rules.

I feel the Committee would have been enhanced immeasurably if examples had been given to all members of the Committee yesterday of the lengthy and sustained background to both their bans to add context to their comments. Anything that either Mr Linehan and Ms Staniland had already put in the public domain would have been perfectly acceptable and added understanding to how unpleasant discourse can become. It was absolutely not a quick decision to ban either of them based on one tweet, Mr Linehan himself said he'd become involved in 2015 and had been known as a problematic poster towards trans people and their allies for years. They both had multiple warnings, they both expressed knowing before their bans that their activity was going to cause that. They both knew bans can be permanent. They were both experienced Twitter users who knew what other people get banned for.

Mr Linehan mentioned the ex POTUS breaching Twitter rules repeatedly and here he has a valid point. Blue tick accounts are protected from being banned generally. Large accounts of well known people do seem to get away with more and I understand you cannot be permanently banned while you hold a blue tick (verification). I think it would be a question to ask the likes of Twitter whether verified status and follower count does give a person extra protection.

It was hard to watch yesterday, but regarding the issue of bans, what I see are the consequences of sustained actions. Twitter was a noticeably less toxic place for trans people and allies once they were banned. Freedom of speech is important, but where that impacts on the well-being of individuals, that has to be balanced. People do leave Twitter because it is toxic for transgender people, because it is really hard to avoid the unpleasantness even if you don't engage with these people there are still screenshots and retweets.

Actions should have consequences. Isn't this how humans learn? When you accept the terms and conditions of a platform, rules and have been warned about your activity, then you should be banned if you refuse to remove tweets and continue to be abusive.

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