

Written evidence submitted by BT

Online Harms Subcommittee evidence session on Covid-19 misinformation

We welcome the focus that your Subcommittee on Online Harms and Disinformation has placed on the impact of Covid-19 misinformation, and the effectiveness of the efforts that social media companies have made to combat the spread of harmful content about the Covid-19 pandemic.

As a company that currently operates the UK's largest 5G network, we thought our perspective on the themes that your upcoming evidence session will cover may be of interest to the committee. Our focus at BT has been on standing by the country – connecting the new Nightingale Hospitals, helping isolated patients speak with their loved ones, making sure our networks perform to keep everyone working and entertained, offering help to vulnerable customers and support to small businesses that face the challenge of a generation.

Misinformation around Covid-19 is having a material, real world, impact on the UK's digital infrastructure and the BT staff and subcontractors who work to maintain it. Since the UK entered full 'lockdown' on 23rd March, there have been 30 separate incidents of arson, attempted arson and other forms of sabotage on mobile masts delivering services to our customers. These have included incidents involving petrol bombs. We believe the number of attacks on sites operated across all four mobile network operators to be approaching 80 over the same period. Very few of these attacks have been on 5G sites, but they have generated well over 2500 complaints from EE customers. 19 attacks took place near critical infrastructure, such as fire, police and ambulance stations. There have been significant concentrations in the Midlands and in and around Liverpool.

While incidents of arson have attracted a great deal of media attention, we are also very mindful of the increasing trend of threatening, intimidating and violent behaviour towards staff who are working every day to maintain the digital infrastructure that we are all relying on to live our daily lives. There have now been almost 70 separate incidents involving EE staff and subcontractors alone. These have included threats to kill and vehicles driven directly at staff. We believe the number to be significantly higher when staff at Openreach, its competitors and staff at other mobile networks are considered. It should go without saying that violence, threats, arson and other forms of vandalism are in all circumstances completely unacceptable.

Our analysis suggests that many of these incidents are in response to unsubstantiated conspiracy theories relating to the perceived harm that 5G masts cause to health, or a perceived relationship between 5G and spread of Coronavirus. We note Ofcom's recent confirmation of the lack of evidence for there being any grounds for concern. Their testing programme has shown that 5G sites are operating at a fraction of the radiation limits set by the International Commission on Non-ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP). Ofcom's maximum measurement for any mobile site was approximately 1.5% of those levels – including signals from other mobile technologies such as 3G and 4G. The highest level from 5G signals specifically was 0.039% of the maximum set out in the international guidelines.

Beyond this, we do not believe these attacks to be the result of a co-ordinated effort by a specific organisation or organisations. However, we do believe that content shared via social media platforms is playing a significant role in inciting individuals to commit these acts. To date, BT has

identified at least 45 specific items of content and/or accounts on Facebook, Youtube and Twitter that, in our view, may have either incited or helped to facilitate these attacks and associated behaviour. We have supplied full details of them to these companies. We have welcomed some platforms approaching us proactively to discuss the steps they are taking to assess and where possible remove this content. We have also worked closely with relevant DCMS officials. A substantial amount of concerning content is also hosted on websites operated independently by groups and individuals associated with this activity.

We also welcome several specific announcements that social media platforms have made in relation to the steps they are taking. In particular, Google's commitment to remove content from Youtube that links 5G with Coronavirus, and Facebook's classification of false claims which link Covid-19 to 5G as misinformation which "can cause physical harm" and can therefore be removed are valuable steps forward. Facebook have also told us that they are using machine learning alongside human review to remove this kind of content. We would encourage this approach to be used more widely.

In parallel though, we believe there is scope for greater clarity around the fact that Covid 19 related 'fake news' will not be tolerated on these platforms and that existing efforts to allow users to distinguish between content that is factual and that which is clearly not will be extended. We also need to see further transparency from social media platforms as to how they assess the specific reports that we make in relation to Covid-19 misinformation, what standard of 'misinformation' must be met for a report from us to be acted on, and what proportion of reports they are prepared to take action on in the form of removal, ideally on a site by site basis. This would be hugely valuable in our ongoing efforts to combat the direct impact this misinformation is having on our ability to support the UK economy and wider society

Finally, we would suggest there is potential to take further action against 'troll' accounts across social media that are promoting disinformation of this nature. Twitter has, for example, undertaken deletions of such accounts before. We would like to work with social media platforms to address this and we are looking at how best to identify such accounts and flag them for removal.

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