

Written evidence submitted by the Publishers Association (OSB99)

This submission seeks to inform the Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill. It reflects on the key concerns raised by the publishing sector in response to the government's proposals to tackle harmful content online.

About the Publishers Association:

The Publishers Association is the member organisation for UK publishing, representing companies of all sizes and specialisms. Our members produce digital and print books, research journals and educational resources across genres and subjects. The industry is worth over £6bn a year to the economy and employs 29,000 full-time-equivalent UK staff.

Summary of publishers' priorities:

We fully support the ambition for the UK to be the safest place in the world to go online. Publishers care deeply about the authenticity of the content they bring to market – and it is our collective hope that the Online Safety Bill can champion more accurate and less harmful content for the widespread benefit of our society.

Alongside our commitment to the authenticity of online discourse, the publishing industry also has a long-term commitment to freedom of expression. We believe these themes intersect with the government's proposals in different ways, and can be articulated via our two key priorities:

1. First and foremost, we would emphasise that author safety online is critical, and action must be taken to adequately **protect authors from online abuse**. Authors must be able to express their views without fearing unreasonable threats to their personal security. This is a fundamental tenet of freedom of expression in the modern world.
2. As a second point, we would urge for clarity regarding “user generated content” to ensure that **academic discourse is not inadvertently restricted**.

We would welcome the committee's consideration of these themes and have articulated a fuller explanation below.

1. Protecting authors from online abuse:

Publishers feel an intense responsibility to the author's right to freedom of speech, as enshrined by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Books have long been an incredibly effective means for challenging the status quo. So too has the internet provided new opportunities for democratic communication.

Yet here lies the complex balance that must be struck in the final wording of the Bill. The book industry welcomes debate, discussion and disagreement; however, it is also imperative that our authors can be adequately protected from unreasonable online threats to their physical and mental wellbeing.

The rise of social media has brought to bear new pressures on creators. Publishers face daily scrutiny of their decisions, just as authors face daily scrutiny of their thoughts and actions. A furore

can be born from a single tweet, and the resultant wave of hateful and harmful vitriol from online trolls can leave authors too scared to speak their minds.

This kind of self-censorship was publicly raised by Sir Kazuo Ishiguro, winner of the 2017 Nobel Prize for Literature, earlier in the year. Speaking to the BBC, Sir Kazuo warned that a "climate of fear" was preventing some people from writing what they want, in case an "anonymous lynch mob will turn up online and make their lives a misery."

To be clear, we are referring to shockingly harmful online bullying. Authors, and particularly women or those from minority groups, have been subject to truly horrific harassment – including rape and death threats, as well as sickeningly discriminatory language. At times the abusers have simultaneously proven that they know the author's home address, or the name of their children's school. This inevitably brings to bear a crippling pressure on the targets.

As an example, children's author Michael Thwaite and his daughter received death threats in 2018 owing to his depiction of English Bull Terriers as "scary" in his book *100 Dogs*. Similarly, the author of *Everyday Sexism*, Laura Bates, has received co-ordinated messages from groups of misogynistic trolls with "brutally graphic" rape threats.

We therefore welcome this opportunity to increase online accountability and to create a safer digital space for all. We ask that improved measures are put in place to filter and remove abusive material, and that an improved verification process is put in place for users. This will rely on the utmost cooperation from online platforms in responding to these incidents, and we look forward to working more closely with them going forward.

We would further recommend that resources are made available to the police and to the Crown Prosecution Service to ensure that harmful online behaviour can be treated with the same significance as offline behaviour.

2. Ensuring academic discourse is not inadvertently restricted:

We would also like to flag the possible impact of the draft legislation on the scholarly communications sector. It is important that the Bill does not have an unintended impact on the ability of academics to freely share ideas with one another.

We are concerned that the full definition of user generated content included in the draft legislation (Chapter 6, Section 39) risks incorporating scientific forums. These forums aid the research discovery and production process and facilitate knowledge sharing among very specialist audiences. We would ask that parliamentarians ensure that the legislation does not have the unintended consequences of chilling academic discourse.

We would also appreciate some clarity that 'user-generated content' does not include peer-reviewed research articles. It is not clear whether content such as an article published online in a digital journal has in fact been generated by a user (the author) and is considered online content that should be subject to the proposed regulation.

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is almost self-evident that well-researched and properly validated academic discourse published online must not be unnecessarily impeded. We would therefore suggest that the duties to protect journalistic content are extended to include peer-reviewed research, in acknowledgement of the importance of free expression of academic content.

Concluding remarks:

Publishers support the aims of the legislation and the creation of a duty of care to protect users of social media services. Our specific lens on this debate, as outlined above, is the horrendous abuse some of our authors have received online. We urge the Committee to ensure that the draft legislation can deliver safer online spaces, in turn promoting freedom of speech and expression without fear.

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