



Siobhan Baillie MP
Member of Parliament for Stroud
House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

23rd November 2021

Dear *Damon*

Further to our many discussions about the Online Safety Bill ("OSB"), I am pleased to note that the pre-legislative scrutiny committee is willing to consider additional evidence relating to tackling anonymous abuse. I am grateful for this opportunity and for your chairmanship of the committee.

I note the question to be considered by the joint committee is: 'Does the [OSB] deliver the intention to focus on systems and processes rather than content and is this an effective approach for moderating content (sic) what role do you see for e.g., safety by design, algorithmic recommendations, minimum standard, default settings?'

Anonymity online

The ease with which social media can be used anonymously, or with pseudonyms, is a major driver of harmful behaviour.

It is a key factor in the spread of disinformation, conspiracy theories and extremism. Organised disinformation networks exploit the ability to create fake accounts, and false identities at scale. They use networks of these accounts to create false and misleading content, to spread and amplify this content, and to distort and disrupt online conversations.

It is also a key factor in bullying, harassment, and trolling. When social media users are anonymous, they feel much more able to behave badly and abuse other users – a phenomenon known as the "Online Disinhibition Effect".

Anonymity also makes it much harder to enforce rules against such behaviour. If an anonymous troll does eventually get banned, they can easily switch or create a fresh anonymous account with a new pseudonym and continue their trolling or abuse. I am told time and again, particularly by young people, that being abused online or cyberflashed by an anonymous account is far scarier than when it is from somebody with a genuine name attached because it is hard to assess the seriousness of the threat.

Campaign

As you are aware, I have been campaigning for changes to the OSB for some time. I held a Westminster Hall debate on 13th January 2021 and a debate in the House of Commons chamber on 24th March 2021 that was oversubscribed with MPs from across the House seeking to contribute. On 24th November 2021, I am presenting a Ten-Minute Rule Bill ("the Bill"). The thrust of the Bill is as follows:

Constituency Office: 54 Five Valleys Shopping Centre, 3 King Street, Stroud, GL5 3BS
01453 759748 siobhan.baillie.mp@parliament.uk siobhanbaillie.org.uk



Social Media Platforms (Identity Verification) Bill

'A Bill to require social media platforms to offer a user identity verification process to all users; to require such platforms to offer options to limit or block interaction with other users who have chosen not to verify their identity through that process; and for connected purposes.'

My proposal is not seeking to ban anonymous social media accounts. It instead ensures anonymity is treated as a risk-factor, and provides social media users and parents in the case of young users, with a choice and more control over how they experience the online world. In essence, the Bill seeks to achieve three main things:

1. *Give all social media users the right to verify their identity if they choose.*

Every social media user should be given the option of a robust, secure means of verifying that the identity they are using on social media is authentic. Users who wish to continue unverified should be free to continue to do so.

2. *Make it easy for everyone to see whether or not a user is verified.*

The verification status of an individual user should be clearly visible to all other users. Each user would then be able to bring their own judgement as to what a verification status might say about the credibility and reliability of another user's content.

3. *Give users the option to block interaction with unverified users.*

Some users will be happy to hear from, and interact with, unverified users. Others will not. This should be a matter of individual user choice. Every social media user should be offered options to manage their level of interaction with unverified users, including an option to block communication, comments, and other interaction from all unverified users, as a category and pre-emptively.

Your committee will no doubt recognise that the above requests could be implemented by social media companies now without any government involvement. Indeed, many members of your committee will already be verified on their own Twitter accounts with a 'blue tick' as evidence that they are who they say they are.

Consultation and draft OSB

While the OSB will do much to protect people from online abuse, including anonymous abuse, my assessment is that the impact of anonymity has not been thoroughly considered. The consultation omitted to ask specific questions about anonymous abuse, or gather suggestions for how to tackle the same.

As a result, I understand there is as yet no decision to explicitly define anonymity as a key risk-factor for online abuse upon which platforms must act to mitigate, and which Ofcom must be required to address within its Codes of Practice.

The social media platforms' current approach to anonymity is fuelling online harms. There is a significant body of evidence that the major social media platforms' approach to anonymity facilitates both online abuse and the spread of disinformation. These are two of the key 'harms' that the government is seeking to reduce with the OSB. Leaving such design flaws unaddressed by the OSB risks leading to the over reliance on content moderation, which is much more challenging to get right and poses greater trade-offs regarding freedom of expression.



Further, an absence of measures to tackle misuse of anonymity limits the effectiveness of other measures in the Bill, such as the reliance on the platforms' terms & conditions ("T&Cs"). Despite the limited confidence in the platforms abuse reporting structures and a lack of clarity surrounding T&Cs, the draft OSB overly relies upon consistent enforcement of the largest ("category one") platforms' T&Cs in order to reduce harmful behaviour.

However, at present, users are able to exploit a laissez-faire approach to anonymity and verification to evade T&Cs. The ultimate enforcement sanctions in a platform's T&Cs are suspending or banning an account. In the absence of any new measures regarding anonymity, it remains extremely simple for a banned user to switch accounts or start a new account and continue their harmful behaviour, including harassing other users.

Public opinion

It is my experience that the public believe anonymity online vastly fuels the hate and nastiness. In many conversations, the issues go hand in glove. You will have seen the rise in calls for anonymity online to be banned outright and 73% of adults 'support government action to reduce the number of anonymous accounts on social media platforms' (June 2021 Opinion poll).

Over 72% of UK victims of online abuse say they have experienced abuse or harassment from anonymous accounts (June 2021 Opinion poll).

73% of the UK public would like the government to take action on the reach and number of anonymous social media accounts (June 2021 Opinion poll).

81% of social media users would provide a piece of personal ID to gain a verified account in order to help reduce the impact of toxic anonymous accounts (January 2021 Opinion poll).

71% of social media users would choose to screen out posts and DMs from anonymous users on social media (January 2021 Opinion poll)

The Community Security Trust (CST) noted that 44% of the 789 recorded antisemitic incidents between January and June 2020 occurred online, adding that 'online platforms represent a convenient, far-reaching, anonymising and secure-feeling environment for those who wish to voice and incite hatred.'

The International Journal of Cyber Criminology in 'Anonymity, Membership-Length and Frequency as Predictors of Extremist Language and Behaviour among Twitter Users' (July-August 2019) found there was a much higher chance of group polarisation within anonymised computer-mediated communications settings than within an identified face-to-face setting.

Nearly 40% of reported antisemitic abuse online came from fully anonymous and partially anonymous users (October 2020, Antisemitism Trust).

Kick It Out identified social media as a "battleground of hate" and said everyone needed to do more to tackle the problem. "We need better regulation and enforcement, and we need social media companies to be part of the solution," (September 2020)

In the majority of cases, victims of cyberflashing do not know the identity of the sender with 'the twofold threat of a sender who is not only anonymous but also proximate'. (Law Commission July 2021).



It should also be noted that Facebook's own figures estimate that 5% of its accounts are inauthentic. That means 144 million accounts but independent estimates range up to 25%. The public are acutely aware of this as they live with these accounts contacting them every day.

With the above in mind, I fear that the lack of specific measures on anonymity in the OSB will weaken the credibility of the legislation in the eyes of the general public. If our proposals were adopted within the OCB, it would provide clarity to the regulator and the platforms, from day one, that we expected a change to how anonymity is managed. It would also mean the public could be told to expect tangible changes to their online experience, by a specific deadline, to address one of their major concerns.

Disinformation

Clean Up The Internet conducted a study of Twitter conversations in Spring 2020 regarding 5G and COVID-19. This found that anonymous accounts were over four times more likely than identified accounts to be actively promoting conspiracy theories.

A NATO study in 2020 found a huge scale of anonymous, inauthentic accounts available for disinformation. For €300, it was possible to buy inauthentic engagement in the form of 1,150 comments, 9,690 likes, 323,202 views and 3,726 shares across Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter and Tiktok - courtesy of 8,036 fake accounts.

A study from George Washington University identified a network of 80,000 fake German language Facebook accounts, actively promoting the far-right AfD during the 2019 EU Elections. AfD was the most supported party on social media despite only coming 4th in the elections.

Over a third of UK social media users (38%) have seen anonymous/fake name accounts, share extremist posts or fake news on social media (Opinium 2021). We also know that many of our constituents are growing increasingly concerned about online scamming and disinformation from fake financial services companies.

It is too easy to create fake accounts with deceptive false identities and bad actors can create large networks to spread false information to trick honest users. Providing verification options would go a long way to give social media users confidence in who they are dealing with and that should they be scammed; the perpetrators will be brought to justice.

Tracing perpetrators

Where an online user is engaged in illegal activity, they can be identified and prosecuted using existing legislation, namely the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and the Investigatory Powers Act 2016.

The reality of the situation is however that identifying social media users is taking too long, if it happens at all, and prosecutions are low. I believe that it would be a missed opportunity if the OSB fails to address these issues. An increase in the proportion of verified accounts online would greatly assist the police, the courts, and the regulator. Our proposals would reduce strain on law enforcement both by reducing the number of offences in the first place, and by making it easier for perpetrators to be traced where an offence has occurred.



Verification implementation

My campaign has not sought to prescribe the method of verification, although we have had helpful discussions with a range of organisations and businesses that provides us with confidence that a range of options are available to meet the needs of social media users safely.

Should the committee wish to see draft amendments to the OSB that we have produced, please do not hesitate to request documentation. In addition, please find a document attached 'Annex 1' called 'Verification: What works?' that sets out (a) what aspects of someone's identity should be verified; and (b) options for verification mechanisms and processes. You will note that the document also addresses safeguarding and privacy. In addition, please find attached 'Annex 2' to provide suggested 'Alternative proposals for tackling anonymous abuse'.

Supporters

It should be noted that I have been working with Members of Parliament from all the political parties and from all four devolved nations, together with Clean Up the Internet, the Anti-Semitism Trust, Kick It Out and celebrities Katie Price, Emily Atack and Malin Andersson, and many others. I thank all involved who have assisted me to gather views and inform the proposals created above.

While I am working to make changes to the OSB, it should be noted that the UK Government is already breaking new ground with its existing proposals. The Government recognises that we simply cannot carry on with the levels of online abuse and disinformation that we are all now living with on a daily basis. It is trying to find ways to prioritise the wellbeing of UK citizens over the private economic advantage of social media giants and I applaud that effort.

I hope that your committee and the Government will see that the above proposals are a simple way to offer social media users choice and additional protections that will reduce the reach, impact and scale of anonymous abuse.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any queries.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Siobhan Baillie