Parliamentary briefing: Tackling online misinformation in an open society

Misinformation and the Online Safety Bill

Bad information ruins lives—it damages public debate, risks public health, and erodes trust. Misinformation and disinformation spread rapidly during the pandemic, bringing significant harm by undermining safety and long-term health, devastating families across the country.

At Full Fact we have countered misused statistics on the effectiveness of vaccines, harmful claims on treatments and cures, and conflicting advice for pregnant women. We've also rebutted: misinterpreted research that undermines public trust and debate, conspiracy theories on 5G, as well as many false claims about MPs expenses.

Public concern about misinformation is high; people find it hard to protect themselves from harm. They want politicians to take responsibility and tackle the spread of bad information:
- 1 in 2 people report being targeted with disinformation 'often' (Full Fact, 2021).
- 1 in 4 falsely believed a news story that wasn't real (Full Fact, 2021).
- 40% of UK adult internet users don't have the skills to critically assess online content. Only 2% of children have the skills to tell fact from fiction online (Gov.uk, 2021).

Full Fact's new report, Tackling online misinformation in an open society, calls for stronger measures to tackle harmful misinformation, protect freedom of expression, and bring greater and long-lasting understanding of how to address harmful misinformation.

The Online Safety Bill is the Government's chance to protect people from the harm that can come from misinformation—a necessity if it is to meet its ambition to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online. Current proposals in the draft Bill mean online platforms will have duties that require them to take action on illegal content, content that could harm children and content that could harm adults.

However, **the proposals for tackling misinformation and disinformation are insufficient and weaker than the 2019 White Paper. There is also a lack of certainty on how freedom of expression will be protected.** We need proportionate and effective measures that tackle harmful misinformation and protect freedom of expression.

Case study: **the impact of Covid misinformation on pregnant women**

There have been numerous information gaps during the pandemic, where scientific evidence did not yet exist or was contradictory. Online discussion quickly became dominated by speculation, low quality or partial information, and misinformation.

This included the safety of vaccines for pregnant women. Both women and vaccination centres received mixed messages and pregnant women were not given second doses or thought they needed to start their course again. This caused widespread confusion, fear and inaction among pregnant women.

In the first half of 2021, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists found that only 40% of women offered the vaccine had accepted it. Of those not yet offered, 40% planned not to take it, and 20% were undecided. **The main reason for not getting the vaccine was waiting for more evidence to reassure them that it is safe for their baby**.

Pregnant women are at risk of getting severely ill with COVID-19. In October 2021, 1 in 5 of the most critically ill COVID patients were unvaccinated pregnant women.

Full Fact has partnered with Pregnant Then Screwed to tackle this kind of misinformation. As of February 2022, more than 1,100 unique queries had been answered via our service, showing the extent of the gaps in good information.

This example shows the real impact on people's lives that not properly tackling misinformation can have. Had there already been an effective regulatory regime in place, it could have ensured information vacuums on the safety of vaccines during pregnancy were addressed early on in the pandemic; vaccine centres could have been provided with better information, women could have made informed choices on their health, and those with Covid-19 symptoms admitted to intensive care could have been reduced.

Full Fact's recommendations for the Online Safety Bill

The Online Safety Bill must be strengthened to give Ofcom the powers to protect UK internet users now and in the future. It must ensure that internet companies are accountable in how they address harms and protect freedom of expression on their sites. **We cannot continue to rely on individual platforms to make decisions without independent scrutiny and transparency.**

Full Fact's new report outlines 10 recommendations to amend and strengthen the Online Safety Bill to protect people from harm:

Tackling harmful misinformation

- The Bill should require **Ofcom to look for information vacuums and ensure that reliable information from authoritative sources is available**, working with service providers and others to do this.

- **The regulator should identify and coordinate responses to information incidents openly**. It is not clear how Ofcom and service providers will work together in dangerous information incidents like terror attacks, threats to elections, or public health emergencies.

- **The implications of disinformation campaigns during UK elections must be dealt with in the Online Safety Bill**. Harm from misinformation and disinformation during elections could be avoided through the introduction of a public protocol to alert the public when an incident endangers the integrity of an election.

- **New legislation should introduce a requirement for a minimum supply of high quality news on large internet platforms**, as Parliament has decided there should be on public service television. This is vital as access to news diversifies.

Protecting freedom of expression

- **The Bill must prioritise promoting good information over restricting content.** An open society should aim to inform people's decisions, not control them. Restricting information online should always be a last resort.

- **The Bill should prioritise tackling specific harmful behaviour over restricting content**. It should be amended so that it covers regulated 'content and activity'. Including 'activity' will help to target specific harmful behaviour and support proportionate responses to false information over seeking to control what content anyone can see and share.

- Government can and does seek to limit speech online by lobbying internet companies to remove or restrict content, without transparency or Parliamentary oversight. **The Bill must end 'censorship-by-proxy' and ensure government attempts to influence online content are public and accountable**.

Improving the understanding of harm from misinformation

- **The Bill must strengthen media literacy as the first line of defence**, so we all have more resilience to bad information. There should be a statutory duty on Ofcom to produce a strategy to improve media literacy and set out how progress will be measured.

- The regulator will require the best possible evidence to be able to implement the new Online Safety regime. **The Bill should be amended to give Ofcom responsibility for enhanced research on the harms caused by misinformation and disinformation**.

- Content moderation algorithms, which curate what people see and share online, can do real good if they work well, but cause real harm when they don't. **Provision must be made for independent testing of algorithms by Ofcom and independent researchers**.

What you can do to help tackle misinformation

Your support in Parliament can ensure that the Government addresses these substantive concerns before the Online Safety Bill returns to Parliament. We can make sure everyone in the UK is protected from harmful misinformation with proportionate and effective regulation. You can put these concerns to the Minister during DCMS oral questions, in a debate or in a written question.

Full Fact is also able to support your role as legislators and provide briefings, amendments and advice ahead of the Bill's introduction and during its passage in Parliament.

Share Full Fact's resources with your constituency. Alert us to something you've seen that you think should be fact checked. You can also forward on WhatsApp posts and get a response within 24 hours: fullfact.org/get-involved/suggest-a-fact-check

Become an active supporter of Full Fact, help us to campaign for systems changes to help make bad information rarer and less harmful: fullfact.org/signup

Correct the record when you make a mistake. At Full Fact we fact check claims to reduce the spread of harm and advocate for higher standards in public debate. If you have inadvertently made an error, we can help you put this right.

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