

 ADAPTED VERSION

Social media giants ‘put profit before safety’

A report by MPs has condemned the likes of Facebook and Google for doing too little to crack down on harmful content. Is this fair, and what should the companies be doing to help?



Crackdown: The charity NSPCC wants fines for social networks that fail to protect children.

Each major social network has a set of community standards, in which it outlines what counts as harmful content and what steps it takes to remove it. However, British MPs believe that these companies are not obeying their own rules.

According to a damning **report** by the UK Parliament’s **Home Affairs Select Committee**, firms such as Facebook and Twitter are not doing enough to remove “dangerous and illegal content”. Examples include terrorist recruitment propaganda, explicit images of children on Facebook, and a YouTube video titled “Jews admit organising White Genocide”.

The committee criticises the companies for being slow to remove reported content. It also questions why they rely on user reports, arguing that they could use their vast resources to **identify** harmful material themselves. Those that refuse to do more from now on, the MPs say, should pay fines and help fund the police’s online counter-terrorism operations.

The report comes amid growing alarm over the risks of social media. As these platforms grow, so does their capacity to spread fake news and harmful ideas. Last November, one **study** disclosed that a third of Britons between the ages of 12 and 15 had seen hate speech online within the past year.

Several countries are trying to police social media through legislation. German ministers have approved a law that imposes fines of up to €50m (£42.7m) on companies that fail to remove criminal content quickly. Kenya is to consider a bill that bans social media users from using **fake names**.

The companies acknowledge these risks. Speaking to the UK Parliament’s committee, executives from Facebook, Twitter and **Google** pointed out the ways in which they have recently tightened their safety systems, and admitted that flaws remain.

And yet the social media giants insist that their community standards can only go so far. The ultimate responsibility to separate “good”

content from “bad”, they argue, should not be theirs.

Moderation in all things

The companies are right, say some. The **sheer volume** of content on their sites cannot be properly moderated, whether by humans or algorithms. Even if it could, this would require the companies to determine what counts as “dangerous” or “illegal”. Citizens are suspicious of big businesses as it is. Why should they trust them with these moral judgements?

There will always be borderline cases, admit others. But for too long, social media firms have used these grey areas as an excuse to shirk their duty. In many cases, even when reported content is clearly “bad”, they have been reluctant to remove it. These companies are very rich. It’s only fair that they spend some of their profits on ensuring their users’ safety.

Q & A

Q: What do we know?

A: Last May, the big social media firms pledged to remove hate speech within 24 hours of its being reported. But when the European Commission — which brokered the agreement — checked up on the firms in December, it found that only 40% of cases were removed

within a day.

Q: What do we not know?

A: What effect this latest report will have. Amber Rudd, the home secretary, has promised to study its recommendations, but they are far from becoming law.

Q: What do people believe?

A: The companies in question are all based in

the USA, which has laxer laws on hate speech. Some question whether anger from a few British politicians is enough to bring change in their practices. Others argue that the companies have already been more cooperative in this area than they are technically obliged to be.

YOU DECIDE

1. Should it be illegal to use a fake name on social media?
2. Do you agree with Germany's new fine?

ACTIVITIES

1. Without looking the term up, write a definition of "hate speech". Then, as a class, come up with a definition that everyone agrees with. Have a think: in the past year, have you seen anything online that you would call hate speech?
2. Write an open letter to the chief executives of Facebook, Twitter and Google, proposing one way in which each company could improve its system for dealing with illegal content.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

"There should be no limits to freedom of speech."

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WORD WATCH

Report – The committee's inquiry was triggered by the murder of the MP Jo Cox in June, and the rise in hate crime following the vote for Brexit.

Home Affairs Select Committee – A group of 11 MPs from various parties who examine laws and policies relating to the Home Office. See the video in Become An Expert.

Identify –

One of the committee's arguments is that social media firms have designed algorithms that successfully pick out and delete copyrighted material. The companies reply that some kinds of hate speech are harder for algorithms to identify.

Study – Ofcom interviewed 2,059 families. It allowed the respondents to determine what they consider to be "hateful". See our briefing in Become An Expert.

Fake names – The proposal has stirred

controversy. Critics point out that not only would it be near impossible to enforce, it would have a chilling effect on legitimate criticism of people and institutions.

Google – YouTube's parent company.

Sheer volume – 400 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube per minute; 350m photos are posted to Facebook every day; 500m tweets with hashtags are sent daily.

BECOME AN EXPERT

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