

Social media censorship: A safety measure or a threat to free speech?

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For the first time in history, the UK is planning to set up an 'internet watchdog.'

The announcement to have the Office of Communication, known as Ofcom, become the head of the new regulations came on 12 Feb. This will see the use of an independent company which will regulate the content of UK social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, and Tik Tok.

Ofcom is a regulatory authority approved by the UK government, founded in 2003. It is known for regulating daily communication services such as phones, televisions and mobile services. It also oversees broadcast and radio license as well as the United Postal services. Although its responsibilities are determined by Parliament, Ofcom itself is independent and funded by fees paid by the companies it regulates. Its existing duties include protecting viewers and listeners from harmful or offensive content on TV or radio. It does not interfere with advertisements, the BBC licenses, or what people post on the internet.

The hidden cost is the post-traumatic stress disorder felt by moderators when viewing the graphic content flagged by users for review

Plans to have an independent regulator for UK social media have been in the works since last year. The government released the Online Harms White Paper, a set of proposals detailing how they will deal with identifying and minimizing online harm.

Public support for social media regulations heightened after the 2017 death of Molly Russell, who took her life after viewing self-harm images on social media. Last year's Christchurch shootings also increased criticism against platforms like Facebook for their lack of control over blocking graphic and obscene content.

In a 2018 study done by Ofcom on internet user's experience of harm online, 45% of adult internet

users had experienced some form of online harm. However, only 21% had taken action to report it.

Ofcom will now make sure social media companies take down illegal content, specifically terrorism and child abuse imagery, in a timely manner. In order to do so, it will also hold social networks accountable for enforcing their own terms and conditions policy.

How Ofcom will enforce this, and the consequences the platforms will face if failed to meet the requirements, is still unclear. While the government offers no specific policies, it does allow Ofcom the flexibility to create and finalise the details.

A response from the government and Ofcom about these topics will be published in the Spring.

The lack of specificity about Ofcom's control concerns Dr. Paul Reilly, Senior Lecturer in Social Media and Digital Society at the University of Sheffield. For Dr Reilly, the lax writing leaves the policy up for interpretation.

"We probably need more details before assessing the full impact of this announcement."

For Chelsey Weight, an International Criminology master student at the University of Sheffield, regulating social media is a step in the right direction for making sure it is a safer place for users.

"I do think regulations are good

just to protect young kids from predators in general, and from bullying and harassment. Just most importantly, I think regulations are good for the safety of mental health, for young, old, all ages."

Miss Weight said her views on regulation are also shaped by the passing of American NBA basketball player Kobe Bryant in early February. She saw hoax videos of the crash circulating Twitter, and saw the amount of views and retweets it gained as problematic.

"You're promoting that and people are watching. It's hard to stop watching things like that because everyone wants to know things these days."

David Haywood, a Mathematics undergrad at the University of Sheffield, is an avid user of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat. He said that while everyone has the right to voice their opinions online, there should be consequences if the responses are illegal.

"If you're saying radicalised things or something like that, you should be regulated more, and there should be more consequences."

Dr Reilly sees the appointment of Ofcom as a first step towards holding companies like Facebook and Twitter accountable for their

current lack of regulation.

He said that these corporations hide behind the term, 'platforms' in order to avoid taking responsibility for the content published on their sites. The consequences of not owning up to removing online harms results in users having to do so on their own.

"The hidden cost of this process has been the post-traumatic stress disorder experienced by these moderators when viewing the graphic content flagged by users for review." Dr Reilly said.

Ofcom's newly granted powers quickly resulted in concerns being raised from both the public and media outlets about its interference with free speech. A study done last year by the regulatory authority showed that 47% of adult internet users acknowledge that websites and social media platforms support free speech. They also recognise that in doing so, offensive content may be published and widely shared.

Big Brother Watch, a non-profit privacy campaigning organisation said the proposals are "set to be a disaster for freedom of expression and privacy online". The organisation also pointed out concerns about Ofcom storing and collecting user's data.

However, Dr Reilly thinks it is

too early to assume how Ofcom's new regulation role will affect freedom of speech online. Governments, whether democratic or not, want to exert a larger control over online platforms. Dr Reilly said that forcing social media giants to comply with the mass surveillance of its users could potentially lead to speech being restricted or filtered.

Looking forward, it is difficult to say whether or not this new "internet watchdog" will achieve or stray from the government's goal to make social media a safer place for users. However, regardless of how the future regulations play out, people should be mindful about what they see and post online, and hold themselves accountable for removing inappropriate content if need be.



Image: Lewis Ogden



The death of TV presenter Caroline Flack has raised questions surrounding social media regulation
Image: Scottish Beauty Blog