

COVID-19 AND ISLAMOPHOBIA ONLINE

**MEND SUBMISSION TO THE
HOME AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

Muslim engagement
& development

mend

The Home Affairs Committee Inquiry into Home Office preparedness for COVID-19

A Submission from Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND)

May 2020

MEND's contribution to the inquiry

This submission from Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) seeks to assist the Home Affairs Committee to explore the current dangers posed in online spaces on account of the current COVID-19 pandemic, as well as highlighting potential mechanisms for mitigating these harms.

MEND is a community-funded organisation that seeks to encourage political, civic, and social engagement within British Muslim communities through empowering British Muslims to interact with political and media institutions effectively. Our approach to achieving this involves a combination of community engagement (through education, community events, local campaigns to encourage voting etc.) and advocacy work (involving victim support, submissions to parliamentary inquiries, media analysis, election resources, briefings etc.).

Social media offences and hate speech online is a growing area of concern as more and more people utilise the anonymity of the web to share or post hateful messages. As such, there remains a great deal of scope to ensure hate speech is efficiently tackled on social media platforms. Currently, due to the sheer scale of social media sites, abusive posts are largely brought to the attention of social media companies only if users themselves report them, and recourse is often at the discretion of the social media company according to their self-imposed community guidelines.

Considering MEND's expertise in how Islamophobia manifests itself within online spaces, we hope that our contribution to this inquiry will provide valuable insights in assisting the Government in formulating an effective response to the current crisis, as well as a long-term strategy for combatting online harms.

Executive Summary

This submission broadly examines the three areas of interest posed by the Home Affairs Committee:

- (i) Understanding the nature, prevalence, and scale of online harms during the COVID-19 period,
- (ii) Steps that could be taken to mitigate these concerns,
- (iii) The adequacy of the Government's online harms proposals to address issues arising from the pandemic, as well as issues previously identified.

(i) *Understanding the nature, prevalence, and scale of online harms during the COVID-19 period*

When it comes to exploring the nature, prevalence, and scale of online harms during the COVID-19 crisis, these developments cannot be viewed in a vacuum, but must be interpreted within the context of existing social media forces. Particular attention must be paid to three key areas:

- **Islamophobia and extreme far-right content online:** There is a wide corpus of evidence demonstrating an existing pattern of Islamophobia across social media platforms. The scale and ferocity of this abuse must be understood in order to appreciate the fact that many new themes that have emerged during the current pandemic are not isolated incidents, but are in fact integrated within an existing trajectory of hatred directed at minority groups.
- **The mainstreaming of hatred:** Hatred directed at minority groups is not a phenomenon that is exclusive to the fringes of the far-right. In reality, mainstream political figures play a prominent role in promoting hatred on their own social media platforms, which subsequently legitimises hate-based sentiments and provides tacit approval for such sentiments to fester amongst the general population.
- **The role of newspapers in spreading online hatred:** Newspapers are also another medium that serves to legitimize online hatred. While they are often considered to be excluded from responsibility for online harms (as appears to be the position of the Online Harms White Paper),¹ their role in disseminating “fake news” and misinformation cannot be overlooked within the context of online harms, particularly considering the trajectory of news consumption, wherein almost half of the population now rely on social media for receiving news.²

It is within this context that one must approach recent developments in online harms directed at minority communities, such as Muslims. Consequently, it is perhaps unsurprising that the current pandemic has been utilised by far-right forces to fuel a far-right ideological worldview at the expense of minority communities. While international conspiracies connecting Muslims to the spread of the coronavirus continue to abound,³ groups in the UK have given these conspiracies particular momentum on social media, with counter-terrorism police recently

¹ “Online Harms White Paper”, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and the Home Office, April 2019. Accessed: March 12th, 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/online-harms-white-paper>

² “Half of People Now Get Their News from Social Media,” Ofcom, July 24, 2019, <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/features-and-news/half-of-people-get-news-from-social-media>

³ Omar Suleiman, “Like India, Sri Lanka Is Using Coronavirus to Stigmatise Muslims,” Coronavirus pandemic | Al Jazeera (Al Jazeera, May 20, 2020), <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/india-sri-lanka-coronavirus-stigmatise-muslims-200519134939934.html>

investigating far-right groups accused of “trying to use the coronavirus crisis to stoke anti-Muslim sentiment”.⁴

Online hatred has very tangible consequences in the real world, and as mounting conspiracy theories are given life on online spaces during the current pandemic, there are concerns that Muslims and mosques may be vulnerable to a wave of Islamophobic attacks once lockdown measures are lifted.⁵ Any government response should therefore be mindful of the potential for misdirected frustration (which is currently largely contained to online spaces as a consequence of lockdown) to be violently targeted at minority communities once public restrictions are eased.

(ii) *Steps that could be taken to mitigate these concerns*

and

(iii) *The adequacy of the Government’s online harms proposals to address issues arising from the pandemic, as well as issues previously identified.*

Last year, the UK Government committed to the reviewing and updating of domestic legislature governing cyberspace to make the UK “the safest place in the world to go online”.⁶ This resulted in the Online Harms White Paper.⁷ However, crucial concerns still remain unresolved, particularly regarding the remit of the protections, how harms are defined, and the mechanisms through which protections will be enforced.

- **Platforms included within the remit of the white paper:** As stated by Hacked Off and evidenced in their submission to the Online Harms and Disinformation Sub-Committee inquiry into COVID-19 Disinformation and Misinformation, “Established news publishers have themselves been responsible for publishing false information (“fake news”) regarding COVID-19 in their news stories. Any approach to tackling online harm and disinformation will be ineffective if it addresses UGC exclusively, while permitting established publishers with the largest reach to publish conspiracy theories and fake news with impunity (whether on their own websites or via republication on social media platforms)”.⁸ However, the Minister for Digital and Culture, Caroline Dinenage, recently confirmed that the Government’s proposed online harms regulatory regime will not only exclude online newspaper outlets, but also exclude the comments sections on these websites (which does indeed constitute user generated content). According to Dinenage, IPSO is currently moderating newspaper comment sections in a manner that is “clear and effective”.⁹ This is categorically and demonstrably devoid of truth and there is a large collection of evidence that IPSO cannot be considered an appropriate vehicle to protect against the online harms that plague many of the UK’s major news publishers, both in terms of published content and in terms of the user generated content in their comments sections. Considering the reach of newspapers in online spaces, to exclude them from the same levels of oversight as social media platforms has the potential of devaluing any protective benefits of the online harms strategy as a whole.

⁴ Nazia Parveen, “Police Investigate UK Far-Right Groups over Anti-Muslim Coronavirus Claims,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, April 5, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/05/police-investigate-uk-far-right-groups-over-anti-muslim-coronavirus-claims>

⁵ Lizzie Dearden Home Affairs Correspondent @lizziedearden, “Dangerous! Conspiracy Theories Could Spark Wave of Islamophobic Attacks When Lockdown Lifts, Report Warns,” The Independent (Independent Digital News and Media, April 19, 2020), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-muslim-lockdown-conspiracy-theories-tommy-robinson-katie-hopkins-a9471516.html>

⁶ “Online Harms White Paper”, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and the Home Office, April 2019. Accessed: March 12th, 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/online-harms-white-paper>

⁷ “Online Harms White Paper”, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and the Home Office, April 2019. Accessed: March 12th, 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/online-harms-white-paper>

⁸ “Online Harms and Disinformation - Committees - UK Parliament,” submission to the Committee for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport’s Online Harms and Disinformation Sub-Committee inquiry into COVID-19 Disinformation and Misinformation, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://hackinginquiry.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Hacked-Off-Inquiry-Submission.pdf>

⁹ “Parliamentlive.tv,” Parliamentlive.tv, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/e5ed9e46-6100-475e-9f29-c5918a096eed>

- **Defining harms:** Whilst the white paper has demonstrated a strong stance in tackling hate crimes online, concepts such as 'Islamophobia' still remain undefined. Defining Islamophobia is essential as it will provide much-needed clarity in legislation and policies that are intended to protect vulnerable minorities, including in relation to the proposed online harms strategy. However, the Government has yet to accept a definition of 'Islamophobia', having rejected one put forth by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for British Muslims; a definition that has been accepted by all other mainstream political parties in the UK. Therefore, considering the prevalence of Islamophobic content across social media platforms, the absence of an agreed definition will severely curtail the ability of the online harms regulatory regime to successfully approach some of the most potentially damaging content online.
- **Method of protection:** The Government has proposed regulation by an independent regulator, as opposed to primary legislation enforced by law. However, MEND urges the Government implement primary legislation to deal with social media offences and hate speech online and commit to working with social media companies to protect free speech while developing an efficient strategy to tackle hate speech online in consultation with Muslim grassroots organisations.

Understanding the nature, prevalence, and scale of online harms during the Covid-19 period

The scale of online harms during the COVID-19 crisis should not be viewed in a vacuum. Rather, they must be interpreted within the context of a continuation of social media forces that have been developing over the past two decades. Therefore, the below discussion seeks first to put the current online landscape into context, before exploring how COVID-19 has catalysed further developments.

Islamophobic and far-right extremist content online

There is a wide corpus of existing evidence demonstrating a pattern of Islamophobia across social media platforms. The scale and ferocity of this abuse must be addressed in order to understand the manner in which many new themes that have emerged in relation to the current pandemic are not isolated incidents, but are in fact integrated within an existing trajectory of hatred directed at minority groups.

In the wake of the Manchester Arena attack in 2017, Andrew Emery was given a two-year prison sentence after posting Islamophobic messages on Facebook saying: “It is time we started to fight back. The Government won’t do **** because of the PC brigade. Every time we have a terrorist attack, we should burn a mosque, preferably when it is full.” This was followed by another post three hours later which said “To all the British murderers and serial killers out there, do us all a favour and concentrate on the Muslim community”, while another post stated “BURN A MOSQUE TODAY AND FEEL BETTER”.¹⁰ According to the prosecutor, Harpreet Sandhu, these comments were not confined to Emery’s Facebook friends, but were visible to a public audience.

While the severity of these comments opened a legal recourse through existing hate crime legislation, the lack of primary legislation governing online spaces means that the huge swathes of extreme Islamophobic content online remains unchallenged. Ultimately, without primary legislation, the threshold for action is so high that it is virtually impossible to challenge the most heinous of abuses directed at Muslims unless it explicitly includes threats of violence. Abuse that does not meet that threshold is ultimately under the remit of the community guidelines of the platform in question. Indeed, in the case of Emery, this was not an isolated or uncharacteristic incident. As observed by the prosecution in the case, previous comments included, “Trump had the right idea trying to stop Muslims entering his country. Maybe we should do it so we would only have to worry about the scum already here”.¹¹ As will be discussed further below, there are potentially fatal consequences for allowing the spread of hate-filled rhetoric, as even rhetoric that does not explicitly include threats of violence can form the basis for the motivations behind atrocities that have been witnessed in Christchurch in New Zealand, Halle in Germany, the murder of Jo Cox by Thomas Mair in 2016, and the murder of Makram Ali by Darren Osborne in the Finsbury Park attack in 2017.

Moreover, the vitriol in Emery’s statements are in no way exceptional, nor unprecedented. In an example from January 2019, a video clip was widely circulated of a man filming himself hurling racist and Islamophobic abuse at school girls in East London.¹² In the two-minute clip, the suspect can be heard making references to Dr Mengele, an SS officer and physician, infamous for his role in the Nazi regime for conducting inhumane experiments on prisoners at Auschwitz concentration camp. Abhorrent language litters the video, including reference to the girls as “black c***s” who are going to “breed like f***ing rats” and calling for their sterilisation. He continued “This was England,” and “We’re going to be f***ed with this lot. I

¹⁰ Tom Usher, “Man Jailed for Vile ‘Burn a Mosque Today and Feel Better’ Facebook Posts,” Metro (Metro.co.uk, December 13, 2019), <https://metro.co.uk/2018/07/01/man-jailed-after-posting-vile-rants-about-burning-down-mosques-and-getting-revenge-7674023/>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “Man arrested after disturbing racist video goes viral”, MEND, February 2019. Accessed: 29th May 2019. <https://www.mend.org.uk/news/man-arrested-disturbing-racist-video-goes-viral/>.

think what we might have to do is think of something like old doctor Mengele [...] so the c**ts can't f***ing multiply".

Meanwhile, Demos have noted that, between March 2016-March 2017, 143,920 Tweets were sent from the UK that were considered to be derogatory and anti-Islamic – this amounts to almost 400 per day.¹³ Such anti-Muslim sentiments are particularly acute following incidents such as the London Bridge attack in 2017, following which the Guardian reported that 32 of the top 100 most shared tweets expressed negative sentiments about Muslims.¹⁴

A more recent report by Demos, entitled *Russian Influence Operations on Twitter*, considered the exploitation of 'Twitter bots' by the Russian state, looking at a dataset of "9 million tweets from 3,841 blocked accounts" which were associated with the Internet Research Agency (IRA).¹⁵ The report found that there was a significant amount of effort expended by the network of bots to propagate hate rhetoric against Muslims in particular. Indeed, the "most widely-followed and visible troll account" shared more than 100 tweets, 60% of which related to Islam. One such tweet was "London: Muslims running a campaign stall for Sharia law! Must be sponsored by @MayorofLondon! #BanIslam" another was "Welcome To The New Europe! Muslim migrants shouting in London "This is our country now, GET OUT!" #Rapefugees". The report found that the most frequent topic of tweets sent during the six months prior to the 2016 EU referendum was "Islam" and "Muslims".¹⁶

Another report by the New York-based research institute, *Data & Society*, entitled *Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube*,¹⁷ was a project that aimed to highlight a network of far-right and non-far-right channels that operate in synchrony to spread far-right narratives. They are described as the Alternative Influence Network (AIN), with the report investigating 81 channels on YouTube that gave platforms to around 65 political influencers. The report describes "political influencers" as individuals "who shape public opinion and advertise goods and services through the 'conscientious calibration' of their online personae" by building audiences and "selling" them far-right ideology. Members of this network include infamous far-right activists such as: Stephen Yaxley Lennon, also known as Tommy Robinson, founder of the English Defence League (EDL) which is considered an "Extreme Right Wing activity" group by Max Hill, QC, the former Independent Reviewer of Counter-Terror Legislation; Richard Spencer, a prominent American white supremacist; and Lauren Southern, a Canadian far-right activist who was denied entry to the UK because of her anti-Islamic views.¹⁸

The mainstreaming of online hatred

Moreover, the perpetuation of Islamophobic content online is in no way limited to the extreme fringes of the far-right. In 2019, MEND released a report, *From 'Letterboxes' to 'Ragheads': Over 100 Examples of Islamophobia in the Conservative Party*, detailing over 120 incidents of Islamophobia in the Conservative Party.¹⁹ Far from highlighting a small population of traditional "keyboard warriors" the report demonstrates that Islamophobia is endemic and is being fuelled on online platforms even by some of the most senior members of our Government. As but one example, Nadine Dorries, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department of Health and Social Care, has a reputation for promoting

¹³ Carl Miller and Josh Smith, "Anti-Islamic content on Twitter", Demos, April 2017. Accessed: 29th May 2018. <https://demos.co.uk/project/anti-islamic-content-on-twitter/>.

¹⁴ Mark Townsend, "Anti-Muslim online surges driven by fake accounts", The Guardian, November 2017. Accessed: 29th May 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/nov/26/anti-muslim-online-bots-fake-accounts>.

¹⁵ "New Demos analysis finds Russian influence operations on Twitter targeted at UK were most visible when discussing Islam", Demos, November 2018. Accessed: 29th May 2019. <https://demos.co.uk/press-release/new-demos-analysis-finds-russian-influence-operations-on-twitter-targeted-at-uk-were-most-visible-when-discussing-islam/>.

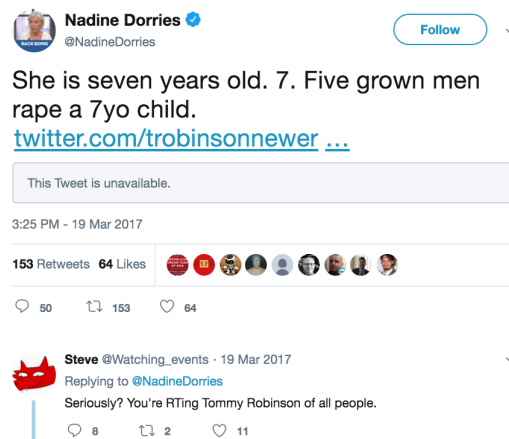
¹⁶ "Social media and the propagation of far-right hate", MEND, November 2018. Accessed: 29th May 2019. <https://www.mend.org.uk/news/social-media-propagation-far-right-hate/>.

¹⁷ Rebecca Lewis, "Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the reactionary right on YouTube", Data & Society, September 2018. Accessed: 29th May 2019. <https://datasociety.net/output/alternative-influence/>.

¹⁸ "Social media and the propagation of far-right hate", MEND, November 2018. Accessed: 29th May 2019. <https://www.mend.org.uk/news/social-media-propagation-far-right-hate/>.

¹⁹ "From 'Letterboxes' to 'Ragheads': Over 100 Examples of Islamophobia in the Conservative Party" (London: MEND, 2019) <https://www.mend.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Islamophobia-in-the-Conservative-Party-MEND.pdf>

Islamophobic rhetoric on social media platforms, and frequently retweets and comments upon materials from known far-right and Islamophobic sources. Most recently, she was heavily criticised after for sharing a video from a Twitter account which “regularly posts anti-Islam messages and other far-right content”. The video falsely claimed that Keir Starmer, the leader of the opposition, obstructed the prosecution of grooming gang members when he led the Crown Prosecution Service. The issue of grooming gangs has been regularly used by infamous far-right figures such as the founder of the EDL and Pegida UK, Tommy Robinson, to direct hatred towards Muslims. Indeed, Dorries has been known to participate in the perpetuation of such narratives through retweeting content from Tommy Robinson.²⁰



Ms. Dorries shared a tweet from Tommy Robinson's account which has since been suspended.²¹

Similarly, in 2018, Dorries shared a misleading news story about Muslims being able to claim multiple benefits with their “several wives.”²² The story was ten years old and was being promoted by the far-right *For-Britain* group.²³ While she deleted the tweet quickly thereafter, we can find no evidence that she acknowledged the mistake nor that she apologised.



An inaccurate tweet posted by Ms. Nadine Dorries.²⁴

Another incident can be found in Dorries’ response to a tweet by the Mayor of London, after Sadiq Khan shared a video regarding Islamophobic hate speech that had been directed to him. In response, Dorries tweeted: “How about, ‘it’s time to act on sex abusing grooming gangs,’ instead? #TelfordGrooming #Rotherham #Priorities #leadership”.²⁵

²⁰ @NadineDorries, *Twitter*, March 2017. Accessed: 1st May 2019. <https://twitter.com/NadineDorries/status/843589240961273856>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Shehab Khan, “Tory MP Nadine Dorries deletes misleading tweet about Muslims claiming benefits for multiple wives”, *Independent*, September 2018. Accessed: 1st May 2019. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/nadine-dorries-islamophobia-muslims-benefits-multiple-wives-muslim-council-britain-mcb-a8541176.html>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ @miqdaad, *Twitter*, September 2018. Accessed: 16th May 2019. <https://twitter.com/miqdaad/status/1041586768246657024>.

²⁵ @NadineDorries, *Twitter*, March 2018. Accessed: 1st May 2019. <https://twitter.com/NadineDorries/status/973488121701683200>.



A tweet by Ms. Dorries in response to Islamophobic hate speech experienced by Mr. Khan.²⁶

It is interesting that both Telford and Rotherham fall outside the remit of the Mayor of London (as they are not located in London). Therefore, it would appear that Dorries used social media as a tool to push the issue upon Khan in what can only be considered to be a reinforcement of inaccurate Islamophobic tropes.

Meanwhile, following Boris Johnson's article referring to Muslim women who wore the burka as "bank robbers" and "letterboxes",²⁷ Dorries argued that Johnson's comments did not go far enough.²⁸ She stated "I'm disappointed Boris didn't go further. He could have called for a ban on the burka".²⁹ She further suggested that "these women are not free to choose their own husbands" and women were being forced to wear the burqa to hide their "bruises."³⁰ Such sentiments fuel Orientalist tropes and ignore the agency, voices, and experiences of Muslim women themselves, further marginalising them from socio-political life.



A tweet by talkRADIO quoting Nadine Dorries following Mr. Boris Johnson's article.³¹

²⁶ @miqdaad, Twitter, September 2018. Accessed: 16th May 2019. <https://twitter.com/miqdaad/status/1041587306442973184>.

²⁷ Boris Johnson, "Denmark has got it wrong. Yes, the burka is oppressive and ridiculous - but that's still no reason to ban it", *The Telegraph*, August 2018. Accessed: 2nd May 2019. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/08/05/denmark-has-got-wrong-yes-burka-oppressive-ridiculous-still/>.

²⁸ James Hingle, "Nadine Dorries: Boris Johnson's burqa article didn't go 'far enough'", *talkRADIO*, August 2018. Accessed: 1st May 2019. <https://talkradio.co.uk/news/nadine-dorries-boris-johnsons-burqa-article-didnt-go-far-enough-18080827492>.

²⁹ Hingle, "Nadine Dorries: Boris Johnson's burqa article didn't go 'far enough'".

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ @talkRADIO, Twitter, August 2018. Accessed: 22nd May 2019. <https://twitter.com/talkRADIO/status/1027090369186590720>.

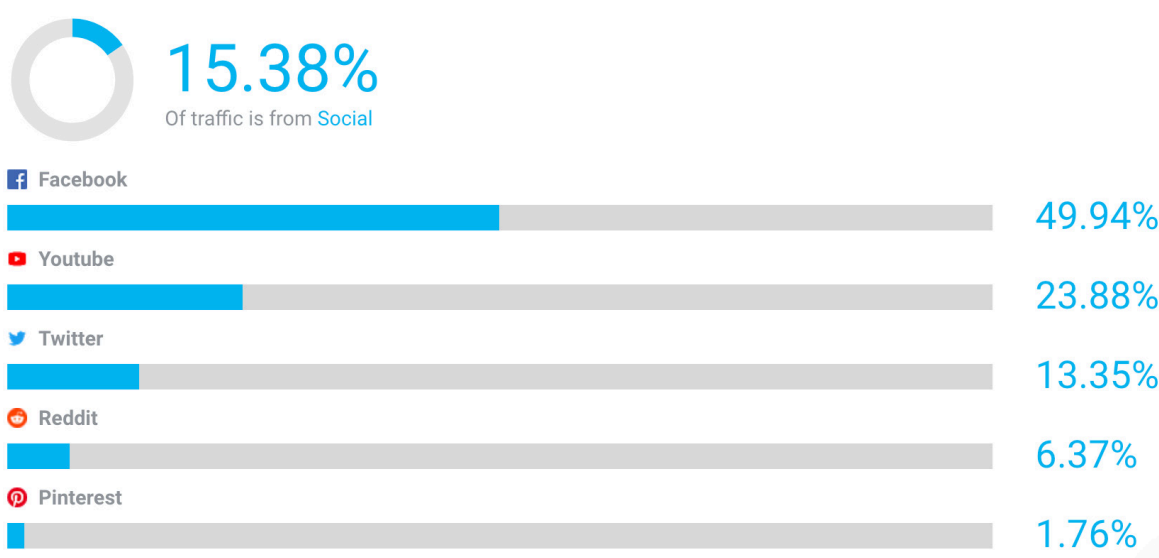
When senior political figures engage and promote such Islamophobic views in online spaces, they serve to legitimize hate-filled discourses and transform them in to mainstream narratives, thereby providing tacit approval for the continuation of such hatred across all media platforms.

The role of newspapers in spreading online hatred

Newspapers are also another medium that serves to legitimize online hatred. While they are often considered to be excluded from responsibility for online harms (as appears to be the position of the Online Harms White Paper),³² their role in disseminating “fake news” and misinformation cannot be overlooked within the context of online harms.

On a very basic level, newspaper websites, such as that of *the Daily Mail*, receive millions of visitors every day. As such, an abusive post of Facebook may accrue thousands of views, but it is unlikely to receive the same online public visibility as posts by major online newspapers.

To provide perspective, as of 1st April 2020, the Daily Mail’s website is the 10th most viewed website in the UK,³³ averaging over 365million visits per day, with each visitor viewing almost ten pages, and over 15% of traffic being directed from social media platforms.³⁴ What is also interesting is that over 50% of visitors referred from other websites have been directed from *the Drudge Report*,³⁵ a conservative website in the US with distinctive popularist overtones, that has (until recently) traditionally been heavily supportive of Donald Trump and has been widely condemned for its misleading headlines concerning refugees and migrants.³⁶



Percentage of traffic originating from social media sites to dailymail.co.uk.³⁷

³² “Online Harms White Paper”, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and the Home Office, April 2019. Accessed: March 12th, 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/online-harms-white-paper>.

³³ “Top Sites Ranking for All Categories in United Kingdom,” Top Websites in United Kingdom - SimilarWeb Website Ranking, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/united-kingdom>

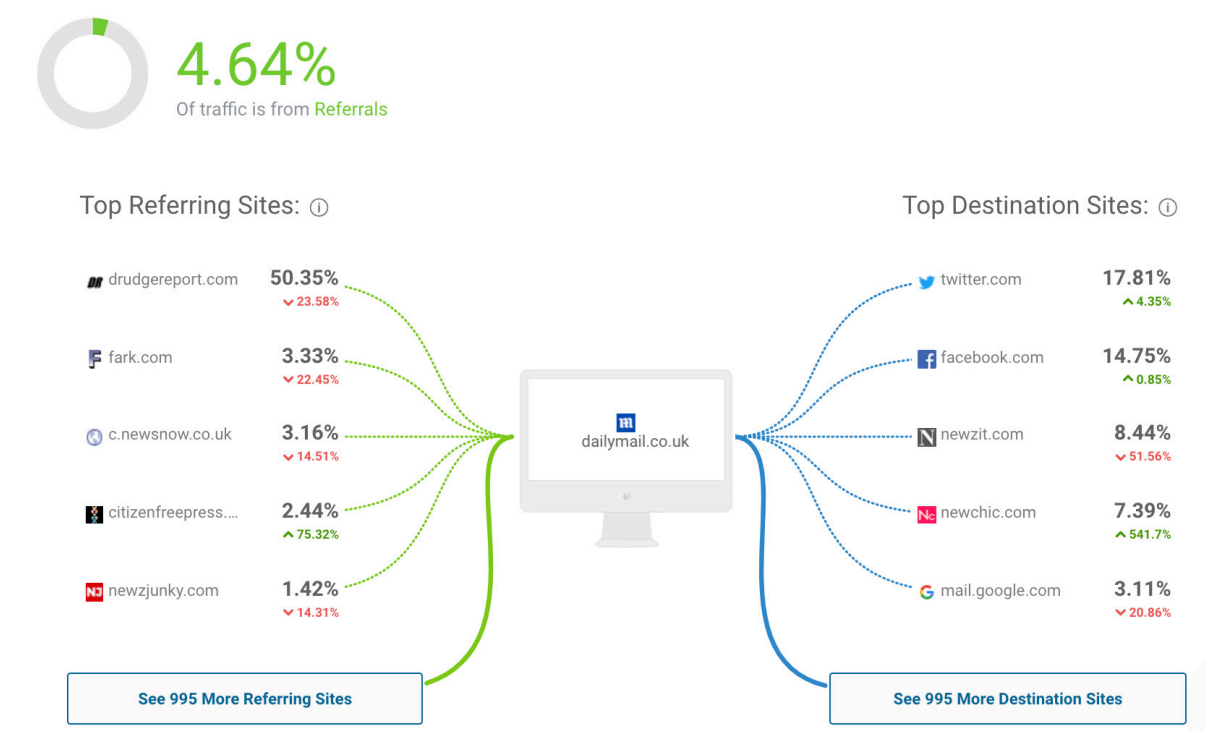
³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Lopez, “The Drudge Report Chose a Very Misleading Photo for a Child Immigration Story,” Vox (Vox, June 18, 2018), <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/6/18/17475356/drudge-report-immigration-families-children-trump>

³⁷ “Top Sites Ranking for All Categories in United Kingdom,” Top Websites in United Kingdom - SimilarWeb Website Ranking, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/united-kingdom>

Moreover, after visiting the Daily Mail's website, the top two destination sites of users are Twitter and Facebook.³⁸



Traffic flow to dailymail.co.uk and subsequent destinations.³⁹

Consequently, the direct link between newspapers and social media platforms cannot be underestimated, particularly considering the ever-transforming landscape of news consumption, wherein almost half of the population now rely on social media for receiving news.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, notable tabloid publications have developed an infamous reputation for publishing controversial, xenophobic, and Islamophobic stories, including The Sun and The Daily Mail; both being singled out for criticism by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI).⁴¹ The ECRI accused the Daily Mail, of playing a “prominent role in encouraging prejudice” against vulnerable groups, whilst also reporting that both the Daily Mail and the Sun “are responsible for most of the offensive, discriminatory and provocative terminology”. Concluding that “hate speech in some traditional media continues to be a serious problem”,⁴² the report highlighted articles such as the Sun’s “Rescue boats? I’d use gunships to stop migrants”, in which the columnist, Katie Hopkins, likened migrants to cockroaches, and also highlighted The Sun’s front-page headline “1 in 5 Brit Muslims’ sympathy for jihadis” which was subsequently found to be wholly inaccurate and a forced retraction was issued. Furthermore, in 2017, the Daily Mail was banned as a reliable source on Wikipedia due to its “reputation for poor fact checking and sensationalism”.⁴³

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ “Half of People Now Get Their News from Social Media,” Ofcom, July 24, 2019, <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/features-and-news/half-of-people-get-news-from-social-media>

⁴¹ “ECRI Report On The United Kingdom”, Council of Europe, October 4, 2016, accessed 20.12.2017, https://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/country-by-country/united_kingdom/gbr-cbc-v-2016-038-eng.pdf

⁴² “ECRI Report On The United Kingdom”, Council of Europe, October 4, 2016, accessed 20.12.2017, https://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/country-by-country/united_kingdom/gbr-cbc-v-2016-038-eng.pdf

⁴³ Jackson, Jasper. “Wikipedia bans Daily Mail as ‘unreliable’ source.” The Guardian. February 8, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/feb/08/wikipedia-bans-daily-mail-as-unreliable-source-for-website>

Also highlighting the role of certain elements of the British press in fuelling moral panic, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) pointed to the questionable journalism of the Sun and the Daily Mail, arguing that, "The two right wing tabloids in our sample, the Daily Mail and Sun, were unlike anything else in our study... what really differentiated these two titles was their aggressive editorialising around threat themes, and in particular how they presented refugee and migrants as a burden on Britain's welfare state. Both papers also featured humanitarian themes at a much lower level than any other newspapers in our study. Overall, this meant that the Sun and the Daily Mail exhibited both a hostility, and a lack of empathy with refugees and migrants that was unique."⁴⁴

However, the Sun and the Daily Mail are reflective of a wider problem. Indeed, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al-Hussein, drew similar conclusions in 2015, when he noted that "decades of sustained and unrestrained anti-foreigner abuse, misinformation and distortion" were identified as a significant problem in the British press. He called on all European countries to take a firmer line on racism and xenophobia which "under the guise of freedom of expression, are being allowed to feed a vicious cycle of vilification, intolerance and politicization of migrants, as well as of marginalized European minorities".⁴⁵

The exclusion of newspapers from the Government's strategy to tackle online harms is a point which shall be returned to further below. However, in the meantime, it is important to appreciate how distorted newspaper reporting published online directly contributes to the anti-Muslim and xenophobic sentiments that become embedded within social media discourses.

Developments during COVID-19

Pandemics often present a uniquely opportune moment for the spreading of misinformation amidst public nervousness at a time when public information is frequently slow to be disseminated. Numerous studies have thus highlighted the prevalence of misinformation during epidemics, such as the outbreak of Ebola in 2013-16 and Zika in 2015-16. Content analysis performed by Sommariva, et al.⁴⁶ on relevant news stories during the Zika outbreak revealed that rumours were three times more likely to be shared on social media platforms compared to verified news stories.⁴⁷ Another study by Oyeyemi, et al. investigating patterns of information spread during the Ebola pandemic discovered that the majority of tweets in the countries studied contained misinformation. This perhaps comes as little surprise when the over-saturation of communication on social media sites is met with both dry medicinal information being produced by scientists, and a frequently slow to materialise or complete lack of more accessible information from governments.

At the same time, the Online Far-Right Space (OFRS) has often acted as the producer, sustainer, and propagator of conspiracy theories that are used to substantiate far-right thought. It is, therefore, perhaps unsurprising that the current pandemic has been utilised by far-right forces to disseminate dubious information that fuels a far-right ideological worldview at the expense of minority communities.

Recent months have witnessed the rise of anti-Chinese sentiment and prejudice against individuals from other East Asian countries, as well as the reinforcement of other forms of racial prejudices, including Islamophobia. Meanwhile, the OFRS has been particularly active

⁴⁴ "Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries", UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), accessed 20.12.2017, <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/protection/operations/56bb369c9/press-coverage-refugee-migrant-crisis-eu-content-analysis-five-european.html> p. 253.

⁴⁵ "UN Human Rights Chief urges U.K. to tackle tabloid hate speech, after migrants called "cockroaches"", United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Accessed on: 19/07/2019. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15885>.

⁴⁶ Silvia Sommariva et al., "Spreading the (Fake) News: Exploring Health Messages on Social Media and the Implications for Health Professionals Using a Case Study," *American Journal of Health Education* 49, no. 4 (July 2018): pp. 246-255

⁴⁷ Michael J. Wood, "Propagating and Debunking Conspiracy Theories on Twitter During the 2015-2016 Zika Virus Outbreak," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 21, no. 8 (2018): pp. 485-490

in capitalising on the current crisis to further themes of perceived threats posed by Muslim communities. Traditionally, popular far-right narratives surround images of Muslims as threats to security and public safety. These themes have been furthered by theories that Muslims are also a unique threat to public health in relation to COVID-19.

While international conspiracies connecting Muslims to the spread of the coronavirus continue to abound,⁴⁸ groups in the UK have given these conspiracies particular momentum on social media, with counter-terrorism police recently investigating far-right groups accused of “trying to use the coronavirus crisis to stoke anti-Muslim sentiment”.⁴⁹ Specifically, social media sites are replete with insinuations that Muslims are flouting lockdown measures, with mosques featuring prominently in unsubstantiated claims that Muslims are continuing to hold communal gatherings.

A report produced by members of the Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group (AMHWG) investigated posts from major social media platforms during the pandemic and noted several key themes emerging amongst anti-Muslim narratives. In particular, these themes include:

- Associating mosques with continued communal gatherings and the spread of COVID-19;
- Claims that Muslims are failing to observe social distancing rules and are “super-spreaders” of the virus, including the assertion that the “UK’s Muslim population is responsible for a quarter of the country’s COVID-related deaths”;
- Arguments that the police are giving favourable treatment to Muslims due to fears of being accused of racism.⁵⁰

Professor Imran Awan, co-author of the report, noted that: “The COVID-19 crisis has been used to create ‘others’ of Muslims, blaming them for the spread of the virus. The spread of fake news online is contributing to this extremely worrying trend”.⁵¹

Indeed, a variety of fake stories and images have circulated online depicting Muslims as flouting social distancing measures by attending mosques for congregational prayers.⁵² Many of these stories include historic images and videos of mosques in operation prior to lockdown measures being enforced. Such misinformation has led to police being inundated with false complaints by members of the public, with some posting messages online calling for the demolition of all mosques to “cure” COVID-19.⁵³

These conspiracies have been given further impetus by far-right voices and commentators, including Daily Mail commentator, Andrew Pearce, who suggested that “If families gather for holy month of Ramadan will there be a huge spike in Covid cases. Doctors are very worried”.⁵⁴ Similarly, Katie Hopkins inferred that the UK police should follow the example of India in deploying violence against Muslims during lockdown. In a video she shared on Twitter Muslim worshippers in India can be seen being beaten by police using a ‘lathi’ (a

⁴⁸ Omar Suleiman, “Like India, Sri Lanka Is Using Coronavirus to Stigmatise Muslims,” Coronavirus pandemic | Al Jazeera (Al Jazeera, May 20, 2020), <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/india-sri-lanka-coronavirus-stigmatise-muslims-200519134939934.html>

⁴⁹ Nazia Parveen, “Police Investigate UK Far-Right Groups over Anti-Muslim Coronavirus Claims,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, April 5, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/05/police-investigate-uk-far-right-groups-over-anti-muslim-coronavirus-claims>

⁵⁰ Roxan Khan Williams, “CORONAVIRUS, FEAR AND HOW ISLAMOPHOBIA SPREADS ON SOCIAL MEDIA,” Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group, April 20, 2020, <https://anti-muslim-hatred-working-group.home.blog/2020/04/20/coronavirus-fear-and-how-islamophobia-spreads-on-social-media/>

⁵¹ Lizzie Dearden Home Affairs Correspondent @lizziedearden, “‘Dangerous’ Conspiracy Theories Could Spark Wave of Islamophobic Attacks When Lockdown Lifts, Report Warns,” The Independent (Independent Digital News and Media, April 19, 2020), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-muslim-lockdown-conspiracy-theories-tommy-robinson-katie-hopkins-a9471516.html>

⁵² Vikram Dodd, “Fears of Rise in UK Terrorist Recruits as Anti-Radicalisation Referrals Collapse,” The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, April 22, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/apr/22/fears-of-rise-in-uk-terrorist-recruits-after-anti-radicalisation-referrals-collapse-coronavirus>

⁵³ Lizzie Dearden Home Affairs Correspondent @lizziedearden, “‘Dangerous’ Conspiracy Theories Could Spark Wave of Islamophobic Attacks When Lockdown Lifts, Report Warns,” The Independent (Independent Digital News and Media, April 19, 2020), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-muslim-lockdown-conspiracy-theories-tommy-robinson-katie-hopkins-a9471516.html>

⁵⁴ Aina Khan, “Anger as Right-Wing UK Voices Suggest Ramadan Virus Spread,” News | Al Jazeera (Al Jazeera, April 13, 2020), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/anger-wing-uk-voices-predict-ramadan-virus-spread-200413170844190.html?xif=>

wooden stick that can measure up to 1.8m). This was accompanied by a comment suggesting that Humberside Police force should perhaps aspire to the same measures.⁵⁵



A tweet from Katie Hopkins' account.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, Tommy Robinson shared a video on his Telegram channel allegedly showing British Muslims attending prayers at a "secret mosque" in Birmingham.⁵⁷ The West Midlands police subsequently dismissed these claims, however, the video had been watched more than 14,000 times⁵⁸ and continues to be shared as evidence of Muslim communities allegedly undermining the British state.⁵⁹

The consequences of online hatred

The dangers of online hatred and conspiracy theories translating into far-right violence directed at minority communities should not be underestimated. One of the most unavoidable reminders of this danger in recent times is the tragic events in Christchurch, New Zealand in March 2019, when an attacker opened fire on worshippers in two mosques during Friday prayers. In his manifesto, the largely credited his motivation to the "Great Replacement" theory, claiming that he wished to show "to show the invaders that our lands will never be their lands, our homelands are our own and that, as long as a white man still lives, they will NEVER conquer our lands".⁶⁰ The theory itself posits that White people are being actively erased by non-White populations through measures that are both violent in nature ('jihad') and non-violent (for example, through migration, reproduction, and miscegenation). The theory also often suggests that this erasure of White people and culture is not a passive

⁵⁵ @KTHopkins, *Twitter*, March 2020. Accessed: 20th May 2020. <https://twitter.com/kthopkins/status/1243625444139769858>

⁵⁶ @KTHopkins, *Twitter*, March 2020. Accessed: 20th May 2020. <https://twitter.com/kthopkins/status/1243625444139769858>

⁵⁷ Nazia Parveen, "Police Investigate UK Far-Right Groups over Anti-Muslim Coronavirus Claims," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, April 5, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/05/police-investigate-uk-far-right-groups-over-anti-muslim-coronavirus-claims>

⁵⁸ Imran Awan, "Coronavirus: Conspiracy Theories and Fake Videos Fuel Rise in Islamophobia," *The Conversation*, May 7, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-and-fake-videos-fuel-rise-in-islamophobia-137107>

⁵⁹ Lizzie Dearden Home Affairs Correspondent @lizziedearden, "'Dangerous' Conspiracy Theories Could Spark Wave of Islamophobic Attacks When Lockdown Lifts, Report Warns," *The Independent* (Independent Digital News and Media, April 19, 2020), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-muslim-lockdown-conspiracy-theories-tommy-robinson-katie-hopkins-a9471516.html>

⁶⁰ Jane Coaston, "The New Zealand Shooter's Manifesto Shows How White Nationalist Rhetoric Spreads," *Vox* (Vox, March 15, 2019), <https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/3/15/18267163/new-zealand-shooting-christchurch-white-nationalism-racism-language>

occurrence, but a result of an active conspiracy by minority communities against the naïve White populace.

Closer to home, the murder of Jo Cox by Thomas Mair in 2016 and the murder of Makram Ali by Darren Osborne in the Finsbury Park attack in 2017 are reminders of the need to radically recalibrate the ways in which far-right violence is understood and tackled within security discourse and strategies. The activity of OFRS has very tangible consequences and as mounting conspiracy theories are given life on online spaces during the current pandemic, there are concerns that Muslims and mosques may be vulnerable to a wave of Islamophobic attacks once lockdown measures are lifted.⁶¹ Any government response should therefore be mindful of the potential for misdirected frustration (which is currently largely contained to online spaces as a consequence of lockdown) to be violently targeted at minority communities once public restrictions are eased.

⁶¹ Lizzie Dearden Home Affairs Correspondent @lizziedearden, "‘Dangerous’ Conspiracy Theories Could Spark Wave of Islamophobic Attacks When Lockdown Lifts, Report Warns," The Independent (Independent Digital News and Media, April 19, 2020), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-muslim-lockdown-conspiracy-theories-tommy-robinson-katie-hopkins-a9471516.html>

Steps that could be taken to mitigate these concerns and the adequacy of the Government's Online Harms proposals to address issues arising from the pandemic, as well as issues previously identified

Last year, the UK Government committed to the reviewing and updating of domestic legislature governing cyberspace to make the UK “the safest place in the world to go online”.⁶² This resulted in the Online Harms White Paper.⁶³ However, crucial concerns still remain unresolved, particularly regarding the remit of the protections, how harms are defined, and the mechanisms through which protections will be enforced.

Platforms covered by the Online Harms White Paper

As it is currently written, the remit of the white paper is limited to User Generated Content (UGC). Therefore, this appears to exclude newspaper websites from oversight as they are not UGCs, but rather project harms without the influence of users. Crucially, concerning the devastating attack on mosques in New Zealand in 2019, the white paper notes that there was a “co-ordinate cross-platform effort to generate maximum reach of footage of the attack”.⁶⁴ However, there is no acknowledgement of platforms such as MailOnline, the Sun, and the Mirror which shared footage of the attacks and the attacker's manifesto on their websites.⁶⁵

The initial consultation response by the Home Office and Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, failed to clarify the issue but did reveal that press freedom organisations and media actors “expressed the view that journalistic content should not be in scope”.⁶⁶ Considering the reach of newspaper websites, it is vital that they are held to the same standards of reducing harm as other platforms. Certainly, with social media platforms rightly under pressure to remove extremist content, including the Christchurch attacker's manifesto, it seems counter-intuitive that newspaper websites should be free to host the same extremist content.

However, as stated by Hacked Off and evidenced in their submission to the Committee for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's Online Harms and Disinformation Sub-Committee inquiry into COVID-19 Disinformation and Misinformation, “The social media platforms operated by news media publishers have been responsible for circulating dangerous and deeply irresponsible disinformation about COVID-19. Any approach to regulating or otherwise tackling User Generated Content (UGC) disinformation must cover the platforms operated by the largest newspaper publishers... Established news publishers have themselves been responsible for publishing false information (“fake news”) regarding COVID-19 in their news stories. Any approach to tackling online harm and disinformation will be ineffective if it addresses UGC exclusively, while permitting established publishers with the largest reach to publish conspiracy theories and fake news with impunity (whether on their own websites or via republication on social media platforms)”.⁶⁷

The current regulator overseeing newspaper content, IPSO, has been proven to be unfit for purpose and cannot be considered an appropriate mechanism to fill this gap. As such, and particularly considering the previously mentioned relationship between newspapers and

⁶² “Online Harms White Paper”, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and the Home Office, April 2019. Accessed: March 12th, 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/online-harms-white-paper>.

⁶³ “Online Harms White Paper”, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and the Home Office, April 2019. Accessed: March 12th, 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/online-harms-white-paper>.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Jim Waterson, “Facebook removed 1.5m videos of New Zealand terror attack in first 24 hours”, *The Guardian*, March 2019. Accessed: March 16th, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/17/facebook-removed-15m-videos-new-zealand-terror-attack>.

⁶⁶ “Online Harms White Paper”, Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and the Home Office, April 2019. Accessed: March 12th, 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/online-harms-white-paper>.

⁶⁷ “Online Harms and Disinformation - Committees - UK Parliament,” submission to the Committee for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's Online Harms and Disinformation Sub-Committee inquiry into COVID-19 Disinformation and Misinformation, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://hackinginquiry.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Hacked-Off-Inquiry-Submission.pdf>.

social media, to exclude newspapers from oversight would fundamentally impede the positive impact that such a strategy could have across other social media platforms.

As an example of but one area that newspapers remain essentially unregulated, opinion articles are exempt from many of the clauses found in IPSO's Editors' Code of Conduct, including requirements of accuracy. At the same time, there is an inability for the current code to properly address issues of group discrimination. Indeed, the discrimination clause does not allow complaints to be brought by groups. Therefore, whilst newspapers are rightfully restricted from discriminating against individuals, the misrepresentation of entire groups is prolific and a practice that remains unaddressed by the current code.

With the consequences of misinformation on all online platforms being so severe, there must be a distinction between fact and opinion. In the face of a lack of effective regulation, comment pieces within print and online media news outlets are frequently replete with heavily distorted or invented 'facts' or opinions that are presented as fact. Moreover, when this is combined with the lack of protection against group discrimination within the code, this lack of oversight has led to authors such as Trevor Kavanagh being permitted to discuss the "Muslim Problem";⁶⁸ no remedy for the Fatima Manji case;⁶⁹ and Rod Liddle being free to argue that "there is not nearly enough Islamophobia within the Tory party"⁷⁰ and to urge suicide bombers to blow themselves up in Tower Hamlets, which he described as being a "decent distance from where the rest of us live".⁷¹

Whilst the protection of the freedom of speech is important, ensuring newspapers are not being used as platforms to propagate hate speech against vulnerable communities is also of paramount importance. Meanwhile, considering the reach of newspapers in online spaces, to exclude them from the same levels of oversight as social media platforms has the potential of devaluing any protective benefits of the online harms strategy as a whole.

Equally concerning, is the recent announcement of the Minister for Digital and Culture, Caroline Dinenage, confirming that the Government's proposed online harms regulatory regime will not only exclude online newspaper outlets, but also exclude the comments sections on these websites (which does indeed constitute user generated content). According to Dinenage, IPSO is currently moderating newspaper comment sections in a manner that is "clear and effective".⁷² This is categorically and demonstrably devoid of truth. Public experiments have been performed posting Nazi propaganda on the comments section of the Daily Mail which have highlighted the popularity with which such sentiments are received on the platform, with even direct quotes from Adolf Hitler being "up-voted" to prominence amongst the comments.⁷³ Other examples from the Daily Mail comments section include abusive messages directed at Malala Yousafzai after she won the Nobel prize, including calls to "send her back home and "praise some British kids for a change."⁷⁴ In reality, comments sections on some of the largest newspaper publishers in the country are characterised by abusive and prejudicial content and remain essentially unregulated.

⁶⁸ "The Sun Cleared over 'Muslim Problem' Trevor Kavanagh Article," BBC News (BBC, November 23, 2017), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-42102361>

⁶⁹ Decision of the Complaints Committee 05935-16 Manji v The Sun, IPSO, accessed 10.01.2018, <https://www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=05935-16>

⁷⁰ Rod Liddle, "Why Boris is wrong about burkas", *The Spectator*, August 2018. Accessed: 13th September 2019. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2018/08/why-boris-is-wrong-about-burkas/>.

⁷¹ "Sunday Times' Rod Liddle suggests extremists should blow themselves up in London's Tower Hamlets away 'from where the rest of us live.'" *The Independent*, accessed 21.05.2019 <https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/TowerHamlets>

⁷² "Parliamentlive.tv," Parliamentlive.tv, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/e5ed9e46-6100-475e-9f29-c5918a096eed>

⁷³ "What Happens When You Comment on Daily Mail Articles with Hitler," indy100 (indy100, August 10, 2015), <https://www.indy100.com/article/what-happens-when-you-comment-on-daily-mail-articles-with-actual-nazi-propaganda-Zy4ccsnBEx>

⁷⁴ Tom Pride, "Daily Mail Readers' Vile, Racist Attacks on Malala for Winning the Nobel Peace Prize," Pride's Purge, October 11, 2014, <https://tompride.wordpress.com/2014/10/10/daily-mail-readers-vile-racist-attacks-on-malala-for-winning-the-nobel-peace-prize/>

[Back](#)

Car passenger launches foul-mouthed racist tirade of abuse at Muslim worshippers paying their respects to the dead at a cemetery as part of Eid rituals

By Keiran Southern For Mailonline
Updated at 11:49 am on 2 September 2017

+5

- A woman was filmed shouting 'f***ing p****!' at Muslims in Dewsbury, West Yorks
- The blonde-haired middle-aged woman abused worshippers celebrating Eid

In the 29-second clip posted to [Facebook](#), the racist is seated in the passenger side of a red Mini and can be heard shouting 'F*** off! You f***ing p****! Come on, film me you f***ing black c****! You British f***ing p****.'

Newest	Oldest	Best	Worst
Comments have been moderated in advance.			
TommyTwoTaps , London, United Kingdom, 4 hours ago Freedom of expression. Just like when they burn our flag.			
Reply	40	3	
Comments have been moderated in advance.			
Mike , Oxford, United Kingdom, 7 hours ago Doesn't shock me, the only thing that does is the suppression of free speech.			
Reply	59	10	
mike , Garden County, United Kingdom, 7 hours ago The woman should have kept her thoughts to herself. But I ask, why is the British media so obsessed with muslims and what happens within their religion. How about some focus on OUR religion? Christmas is coming, no doubt with the proliferation of 'happy holidays ' cards and non relevant school Nativity plays.			
Reply	4130	695	
Comments have been moderated in advance.			
Moober , Manchestet, United Kingdom, 1 hour ago Well said lady			
Reply	484	325	
Comments have been moderated in advance.			
LukeMcC278 , Belfast, United Kingdom, 7 hours ago Islam isn't a race. She has a right to her own opinion.			
Reply	69	21	
Comments have been moderated in advance.			
Fiona999 , Plymouth, United Kingdom, 1 hour ago What about anti-white racism?			
Reply	567	133	
Comments have been moderated in advance.			
Kirkham11 , Stafford, United Kingdom, 7 hours ago Stop calling it racist			
Reply	2836	1004	

Righthtatsit , London, United Kingdom, 4 hours ago So it's alright for Muslim patrols abusing Christian people? Why don't you report on that? ? ? Reply 47 10	Sooze666 , London, United Kingdom, 2 hours ago Who cares - we have free speech in this country, like it or not! Reply 56 31
JakBauer , Bolton, United Kingdom, 3 hours ago Whats new? Evryone is racist behind closed doors its as simple as that Reply 38 6	Captain Hurricane , Wallasey, United Kingdom, 6 hours ago She gets my vote ! Reply 43 16
Time for revolution , Stockton, United Kingdom, 5 hours ago No different to Muslims shouting at our poppy day remembrance days....but the mainstream media never publishes that Reply 34 10	Angelina2016 , London, United Kingdom, 3 hours ago there's no winning in the country if you ain't white Reply 28 22
	Blossom98 , London, United Kingdom, 5 hours ago Freedom of speech Reply 26 3

A story published on the Daily Mail and associated comments.⁷⁵

The space in this submission does not allow for a full analysis of IPSO's flaws, however, MEND and other organisations such as Hacked Off have written extensively on these failings, and MEND can provide any further supplementary evidence that may be required by the Committee as evidence that IPSO cannot be considered an appropriate vehicle to protect against the online harms that plague many of the UK's major news publishers, both in terms of published content and in terms of the user generated content in their comments sections.

Defining Harm

Whilst the white paper has demonstrated a strong stance in tackling hate crimes online, concepts such as 'Islamophobia' still remain undefined. Defining Islamophobia is essential as it will provide much-needed clarity in legislation and policies that are intended to protect vulnerable minorities, including in relation to the proposed online harms strategy. However, the Government has yet to accept a definition of 'Islamophobia', having rejected one put forth by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for British Muslims; a definition that has been accepted by all other mainstream political parties in the UK. Therefore, considering the prevalence of Islamophobic content across social media platforms, the absence of an agreed definition will severely curtail the ability of the online harms regulatory regime to successfully approach some of the most potentially damaging content online.

MEND has extensively analysed the arguments surrounding the definition of Islamophobia and our full briefing can be found [here](#). Meanwhile, we would be happy to provide any additional supplementary evidence that may assist in producing a meaningful and policy-applicable understanding of Islamophobia that would provide clarity and focus within strategies to limit online harms.

Method of protection

The Government has proposed regulation by an independent regulator, as opposed to primary legislation enforced by law. However, MEND urges the Government implement primary legislation to deal with social media offences and hate speech online and commit to working with social media companies to protect free speech while developing an efficient

⁷⁵ @DMReporter, Twitter, September 2017. Accessed: 20th May 2020 <https://twitter.com/dmreporter/status/904286247182532608>

strategy to tackle hate speech online in consultation with Muslim grassroots organisations. Considering the severity of some of the abuse that can be found on online platforms and the enormity of the challenge for a single regulator, combined with the unprecedented failure of regulators set up in similar circumstances such as IPSO, MEND firmly believes that primary legislation is the only mechanism that would have sufficient weight to tackle the current problems effectively.

Furthermore, amongst the list of proposals by the Government is to facilitate the “annual transparency reports from companies in scope, outlining the prevalence of harmful content on their platforms and what countermeasures they are taking to address these. These reports will be published online by the regulator, so that users and parents can make informed decisions about internet use. The regulator will also have powers to require additional information, including about the impact of algorithms in selecting content for users and to ensure that companies proactively report on both emerging and known harms.” MEND would further advise that annual transparency reporting be extended to include reporting on the volume of content reported, the proportion removed from sites and how companies deal with users’ complaints, as well as a requirement for data on complaints and reported content to be broken down in relation to types of complaints and affected groups (under 18s, women, religious groups, ethnicities). It is only through the procurement of accurate data that effectiveness can be measured and further strategies devised that are reflective of the scale and nature of the challenges.