

Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> April 2020

To the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport,

We are writing with regards to the new 'Rapid Response Unit' operating from within the Cabinet Office and No10, which we understand is working with the 'Counter Disinformation Cell' led by DCMS to "combat false and misleading narratives about coronavirus". In particular, we are writing to ask that these teams engage with our groups to ensure the fundamental right to freedom of expression remains a vital consideration when rapidly responding to misinformation and engaging with social media companies.

We would like to better understand the activity of these teams. In a Government press release, it was reported that, "When false narratives are identified, the government's Rapid Response Unit coordinates with departments across Whitehall to deploy the appropriate response" which can include "working with platforms to remove harmful content." As you know, the relationship between Government and social media companies, particularly where the removal of lawful content is concerned, has been the topic of considerable debate in relation to the proposed Online Harms Bill and has profound implications for human rights in the UK including privacy and freedom of expression. Therefore, we invite the Rapid Response Unit and Counter Disinformation Cell to engage with us and to be fully open and transparent as to their activity.

As organisations that defend freedom of expression, we're concerned that social media companies are limiting free speech on their platforms at this moment of international crisis, in ways that are not proportional or time limited.

It is through a free forum of ideas that citizens understand, contextualise and trust information, not through harsh restrictions on information sharing. The right to freedom of expression protects our ability to freely share ideas, opinions and information without interference. This vital democratic right has never been restricted to the expression of views that are rational, desirable or proven to be true.

During this crisis, trust is incredibly important and it is a dangerous time to hastily re-write rules without considering the consequences, and especially without time limits. Trust may reduce when speech is suppressed. Blanket, automated mechanisms may suppress truthful and vital information.

Some censorship efforts by both social media companies and governments around the world have already been realised to be misguided and even to harm public health efforts. Great care must be taken in this area and measures must have close regard to the importance of the right to freedom of expression. We would be grateful for an opportunity to contribute our analysis and expertise.

Yours sincerely,

Silkie Carlo, Big Brother Watch  
Rachael Jolley, Index on Censorship  
Jim Killock, Open Rights Group  
Matthew Lesh, Adam Smith Institute