

Thursday 16th April 2020

FAO WhatsApp policy team

Dear Niamh Sweeney,

As organisations that defend freedom of expression, we're concerned that tech 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.

It is particularly concerning to see the UK Government and the European Commission pressuring companies to become more censorious and thus undermine commitments to free expression. 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.

We urge WhatsApp to carefully review recent decisions. You should act as narrowly as possible. Our rights are no less important online than offline and tech companies that act as modern public squares have a duty to respect these rights.

Yours sincerely,

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