

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE: ONLINE HARMS

Westminster Hall Debate, Damian Hinds MP

Wednesday 26 October 2022

- **Online bullying and harassment are issues of genuine concern that the Countryside Alliance has campaigned on for many years. We surveyed members and supporters as to their views of online bullying and harassment in late April 2022, following a previous exercise in 2018.**
- **The Online Safety Bill entered its Report Stage in July but has yet to return for a second day, amid reports that the Government is re-thinking elements connected to freedom of speech. Its Remaining Stages are now provisionally scheduled for Tuesday 1 November.**
- **Assuming it is not radically overhauled, the Countryside Alliance believes several improvements could be made that would allow it better to address the issue of activist-motivated online bullying and harassment, and thereby better safeguard the mental health and general wellbeing of potential victims.**

Online abuse and the countryside

- The Countryside Alliance has campaigned for protection against online bullying and harassment over many years. We surveyed members and supporters as to their views of online bullying and harassment in late April 2022, following a previous exercise in 2018.
 - 57.1% of respondents reported having experienced online bullying.
 - 82.1% of those had experienced it in relation to their involvement with farming, country sports or other targets of animal rights activists.
 - Of those, 66.0% had experienced it specifically in relation to hunting.
 - Of those who had been targeted in relation to their professional activities, the commonest occupation (27.7% of applicable respondents) was livestock farming.
 - 62.1% of respondents reported having changed their online behaviour in response to abuse.
 - 74.7% expressed the view that the problem has got worse over the last year.
- The survey drew particular attention to online threats against farmers from militant vegans and animal rights groups who disagree with their livelihoods.
- A common, insidious tactic of extreme activists is to target businesses associated with farming and country sports with false, negative reviews on services such as Tripadvisor and Google Reviews. Businesses rely on maintaining a positive image on these sites to help attract custom, so this activity can risk serious financial loss.
- In early 2019 a group of militant vegan activists set up a website – projectcalf.com – that gave a detailed map showing the locations of around 9,000 dairy farms, including instructions on how to access them and encouragement to “document” information,

“protest peacefully” and “expose” the “dirty business” of farming.¹ The site is no longer live, but a linked Facebook page remains accessible.

- A similar campaign was set up by a group calling itself ‘Stop the Cull’, which targeted game farmers. Again a map was hosted online showing the locations of game farms, one of which was subsequently broken into by members of the so-called ‘Animal Liberation Front’ who vandalised equipment and stole by releasing a claimed 9,000 breeding pheasants. A video of this transparent criminality remains live on Facebook.²
- Another tactic has been to source leaked data stolen from large companies during security breaches, comb it for the names of people involved with activities such as hunting and badger culls, and posting and sharing the results online, including over social media. In 2016 the ‘Stop the Cull’ group threatened to do this in relation to farmers in south Devon³, yet its Facebook page – which appears to be entirely devoted to promoting criminal activity – remains active to this day⁴.
- We also recently surveyed our supporters in connection with the EFRA Committee’s inquiry into rural mental health. 30% of respondents reported that they, or people they know, have suffered a negative mental health impact as a result of bullying, including online bullying, prompted by participation in or support for activities such as hunting and shooting.
- Comments by respondents included:
 - *“Many friends and family have been subjected to offensive comments online or in person by people who don't understand what we do. My wife in particular has had to block people from social media to prevent retaliation. We’ve also had to increase security at our house following the leak of our personal information from Guntrader. I am also unable to speak about my involvement in country sports and work and have to keep my personal life and social media accounts totally separate from anything to do with work.”*
 - *“My Facebook account was once targeted by anti-hunt supporters, following a comment I put on a very obviously fake photo of a fox that had apparently been murdered by the hunt. When in fact you could clearly see it had been hit by a vehicle on a road. I merely stated this and I started receiving abusive and threatening messages. I blocked all and removed the supposed friend responsible. But for a long time it made my anxiety and panic attacks significantly worse, as my ex friend knew my address.”*
 - *“There needs to be far more action by the big tech companies to tackle the abuse online. I personally have reported hundreds of abusive comments with no action taken. As well as reporting the various animal extremist pages that are raising money to commit hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of criminal damage, again with no action taken from either the social media sites or PayPal, etc.”*
- Nobody should have to find themselves the subject of abuse, but the isolation and social exclusion that so often accompanies a rural lifestyle can make it all the harder to deal with.

¹ The Argus, [09.02.19](#)

² Facebook, Stop the Cull, [ALF release 9,000 pheasants from game farm](#)

³ The Guardian, [22.03.16](#)

⁴ Facebook, [Stop the Cull](#)

Farmers and other rural workers are already at an elevated risk of depression and suicide. Ideologically-motivated online bullying and harassment represent an especially unwelcome extra pressure.

Online Safety Bill

- The Online Safety Bill entered its Report Stage in July but has yet to return for a second day, amid reports that the Government is re-thinking elements connected to freedom of speech. Its Remaining Stages are now provisionally scheduled for Tuesday 1 November.
- While we appreciate that there are controversies around this Bill, if it is to be taken forward we are calling on the Government to ensure it can be the effective response to the problem of online bullying and harassment that is sorely needed.
- A key consideration with regard to content that does not rise to the level of an offence will be the definition of “priority content that is harmful to adults”, which the Bill will require the largest user-to-user platforms to act against in addition to illegal content. The Bill offers no such definition and leaves this to the Secretary of State in secondary legislation.

Countryside Alliance position

- Assuming the Online Safety Bill is not to be radically overhauled, the Countryside Alliance believes several improvements could be made that would allow it better to address the issue of activist-motivated online bullying and harassment, and thereby better safeguard the mental health and general wellbeing of potential victims.
- The False communications offence should be widened to include, first, financial harm and second, harm to the person or organisation (including a business) to whom or to which the information in it related. This would address the issue of ideologically motivated false reviews of businesses and ‘false flag’ efforts, where disagreeable messages are sent under false branding to discredit the organisation that is purported to have sent it.
- The interpretation of the communications offences should be broadened to include the incitement of others to online abuse, perhaps using language introduced in Part 2 of the Serious Crime Act 2007 to define the inchoate offence of incitement.
- Schedule 4, which defines OFCOM’s objectives in setting out Codes of Practice for regulated user-to-user services, should be expanded to require the body to consider the protection of individuals from communications offences committed by anonymous users.
- Schedule 7 of the Bill should be expanded to include the new offences of Harmful communications, False communications and Threatening communications, listed in part 10, as priority offences for social media platforms to guard users against.

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