Written evidence from Protection Approaches

Executive Summary

1. Protection Approaches understands that the DCMS Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation are calling for members of the public to provide examples of disinformation and misinformation on private and public social media channels about COVID-19. However, this submission is not purposed to provide the Committee with specific examples of disinformation related to COVID-19.

2. Protection Approaches is confident that other organisations and individuals will provide sufficient evidence to demonstrate the prevalence of disinformation related to COVID-19. However, we are concerned that proposed solutions to combat dis- and misinformation will be implemented via purely digital means. As demonstrated by the Government's 2019 Online Harms White Paper, little attention is given to the offline contexts in which online harms arise, nor the offline actions that can demonstrably contribute reducing risks online.

3. We present the case that strategies to respond to online harms including intimidation, hate speech, incitement to violence, misinformation, conspiracy, disinformation, and their impacts impacts should not be confined to the online space; and that online interventions should be informed by evidence..

About Protection Approaches

4. Protection Approaches is the UK's leading organisation working to predict and prevent identity-based violence, from hate crime to violent extremism and genocide. Protection Approaches is registered charity in England and Wales, charity number 1171433 For more information please see www.protectionapproaches.org.

5. This submission was prepared by Nasyah Bandoh, and Dr. Kate Ferguson, Co-Executive Director, all at Protection Approaches. Nasyah Bandoh is a communities and policy analyst with a BA in Modern History and Politics from Royal Holloway, University of London. She is a volunteer with the Black Cultural Archives in Brixton, London and #WOKEWeekly as a Discussions Coordinator, facilitating debates centred around and beyond the black community. Dr. Ferguson is an experienced analyst in the fields of atrocity prevention, violent extremism, and civilian protection. She has published widely on the subject of communications-based strategies to reduce violence and has advised governments in the UK, US and elsewhere on counter-extremism policy. She is Chair of Policy at the European Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, University of Leeds and an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of East Anglia. She is a member of the Centre for Science & Policy's Network for Evidence and Expertise at the University of Cambridge. Dr. Ferguson holds a PhD from UEA and an M.Phil in Russian and East European Studies from the University of Oxford.

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7. Prejudice has become mainstream in the UK. Our communities feel more divided than ever before, and these divisions – and perceptions of division – are having a tangible impact on the resilience of our communities. This, coupled with the manipulation of identity, has caused us to enter a period where exclusionary populist movements, hate crime, violent extremism, and all forms of identity-based violence (IBV) are growing in strength, threating democracies, fragile states, and the security of minority or vulnerable groups.

8. The internet is the latest mode through which prejudice is exploited, driving IBV. The Government's 2019 *Online Harms* White Paper sought to examine the ways in which 'online harms' could be combatted and regulated. Some of their solutions included establishing and implementing a regulatory framework to tackle a broad range of harms, the development of a safety framework and support for innovation in safety technologies, and a new online media literacy strategy. The response to the Government's proposals has been largely positive, yet commentators and stakeholders have been vocal about the areas the proposed course of action has fallen short. However, commentary has been primarily focused on Government regulation, the importance of internet citizenship education, and the responsibility of tech companies to implement measures to keep the online space safe. Little attention – if any at all – has been given to how 'offline solutions' alongside the proposed measures could contribute to the tackling of these online harms.

9. As part of our 2019 'A Gathering Storm' series, Protection Approaches conducted two national social attitudes surveys in partnership with Attest to assess the risks of IBV in Britain. Our research showed that prejudice towards minorities has become mainstream. There is a relationship between the apparent normalization of abusive, divisive, and exclusionary commentary in both public and political spheres, and the rise in IBV. This has been exacerbated by a weakened confidence in the political establishment post-Brexit. The idea there is wide-spread dissatisfaction with the political establishment is supported the HOPE not hate. Their 2019 *State of Hate* report also expressed a relationship between this increased polarization and extremism – especially that of the far-right.

10. According to the Commission for Countering Extremism's 2019 report on *Challenging Hateful Extremism,* the online threat of hateful extremism has changed drastically since the Counter Extremism Strategy was written. Social media platforms and the internet have become 'key tools' for extremists, with disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories reaching 'countless people in an unprecedented way'. This is supported by evidence from the APPG on Hate Crime who stated children and young people were particularly vulnerable to hate crime 'through absorbing harmful online content' in their *How do we Build Community Cohesion when Hate Crime is on the Rise?* report. This report also expressed the overlap between the digital and physical realms can have real consequences, referring to the murder of Labour MP Jo Cox in June 2016. For this reason, the APPG described the online world as "a fertile breeding ground for hate crime and acts of speech which are hateful and/or seek to encourage violence".

11. Such is the concern, that the Commission for Countering Extremism discovered 56% of the public and 73% of practitioners agreed that "a lot more" should be done to counter extremism online. It is evident that new forms of media and communication are, perhaps, a conduit for the divisions we are witnessing in our world today, and so a threat to social cohesion.

12. The Government's *Online Harms* White Paper has been welcomed by practitioners, civil society, charities and stakeholders concerned about the safety of the online space. The paper examined how the regulation of the internet and tech company practices might be effective in the reduction of 'online harms'. Some of the conclusions drawn included establishing a regulatory framework tackling a broad range of harms, the development of a safety framework and support for innovation in safety technologies, and a coordinated and strategic approach to online media literacy education for children, young people, and adults.

Offline solutions to online harms

13. **We recommend that these online strategies are matched by investment in offline interventions that reduce vulnerability to falling victim to or perpetrating harmful behavior online. We argue that offline solutions to online harms remain startingly absent from policy and civil society efforts to respond to the growing online challenge.**

14. We are concerned that the discourse of how to combat online harms rests upon assumptions that online communities are replacing offline communities; that online behavior can be influences by online interventions; and that communications-based challenges require communications-based solutions.

15. We are likewise concerned that the growing emphasis on internet regulation and citizenship has unintentionally led to a deprioritisation of offline, in-person community building and school-based educational strategies which equip young people with the tools they need to navigate a complex online world.

16. **Covid-19 presents a particular challenge, with its own waves of dis- and misinformation, both organically and malevolently generated. However, many are ill-equipped to navigate these new challenges, particularly at times of high stress – and high screen time**.

17. No amount of blocking or reporting of content will be sufficient to protect the public at large from the scale of this challenge. And yet the most vulnerable in our society are now physically distanced from their support networks and without the tools they need to properly question, challenge, delete or ignore dangerous or misleading information.

18. In response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, Protection Approaches has asked 110 primary and secondary school teachers what resources they most need during and after the pandemic**: 74% of teachers said they would like resources that help students recognise fake news and think critically about information consumption.**

19. Many of the people spreading harmful content do so not because they believe they are doing something wrong but because they believe the messages or information it contains. This key point is often missed during the design phase of online interventions. Whether online or offline, our responses to online harms and the challenges of harmful content, need to be informed by a preventative framework that works backwards from the perspectives of the wrong-doer, in order to interrupt the processes that encourage that behaviour.

20. This approach should never replace or supersede activities aimed to protect people from online harms or harmful content, but be pursued concurrently and at times intersectionally.

Recommendations

21. We therefore recommend the Committee considers taking evidence from civil society and HMG relating to offline solutions to online harms, including but not limited to:

a. **Immediate responses in the time of Covid:** Local community groups and school teachers require the resources they need to be able to better inform those they come into contact with how to recognise harmful content and think critically about information consumption.

b. **Holistic school education practices**: Our research and expertise, our work with local and vulnerable communities, our national school-based programme, and our 2019 consultation with more than 100 civil society practitioners and organisations across Europe consistently provide the same answer to the question of how to meet the challenge of dis and misinformation: Education that equips the next generation with the skills to think critically about the causes and solutions to prejudice and marginalisation. It is vital education is prioritised that helps to teach young people about differences, identity, and communication in order to enable them to engage in pluralistic, respectful and informed conversations.

c. **Offline and online community building:** The best ways to tackle harmful dis and misinformation is by building strong resilient communities online and offline, where people are able to debate, question and disagree kindly; where people understand the best ways to help others to question harmful dis and misinformation. We need to resource, upskill and capacity build the tens of thousands of grassroots organisations up and down the country to take the lead on helping those they work with to build networks, have difficult conversations, and think critically about information. Those grassroots organisations/group, are the experts in their local areas and have built local networks and vitally, trust, particularly among marginalised groups, that take years to cultivate.