



CENTRE FOR MEDIA MONITORING

Promoting Fair And Responsible Reporting Of Muslims And Islam



House of Commons Public Bill Committee Online Safety Bill

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Submission by Centre for Media Monitoring

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PROMOTING FAIR, ACCURATE AND RESPONSIBLE REPORTING OF MUSLIMS AND ISLAM

1. ABOUT CENTRE FOR MEDIA MONITORING

The Centre for Media Monitoring (CfMM) was set up in 2018 by the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). Our aims are to:

- i. Create an evidence base on how Islam and Muslims are reported in national print and broadcast media.
- ii. Develop insights on potential areas of improvement through evidence-based analyses, reports, and guidelines.
- iii. Advocate change through constructive engagement with key stakeholders.
- iv. Empower Muslim communities to proactively engage with the media and help change the narrative.

CfMM monitors and analyses thousands of articles and broadcast clips daily. Our monitoring methodology has been developed and approved by leading academics and experts in the field of corpus linguistics. CfMM is recognised as an authority in this field and a valuable resource by all stakeholders, including the media, regulators, politicians, and community organisations.

CfMM works closely with editors and journalists from the national print and broadcast media to highlight inaccuracies, generalisations, and misrepresentations of Muslims & Islam in the media as well as promote good practice and increase religious literacy. To date we have analysed over 50,000 online print and broadcast clips, published three ground-breaking reports, and made submissions to parliamentary inquiries and industry consultations such as OFCOM's Thematic Review of Representation and Portrayal on the BBC, the BBC's Editorial Guidelines Consultation, the Editor's Code Review, APPG's Religion in the Media Inquiry into Religious Literacy, APPG British Muslims Report on COVID 19, and the Lords' Select Committee Inquiry on the Future of Journalism (see [here](#)). We hold regular roundtable and panel discussions, "Meet The Media" events between media executives and community organisations, and deliver training to journalists and community organisations to help improve the narrative in the media. CfMM also sits on a number of advisory boards.

We welcome the opportunity to make this submission to the House of Commons Public Bill Committee scrutinising the new Online Safety Bill. Our submission below relies on our evidence base resulting from monitoring both print and broadcast media.

2. CENTRE FOR MEDIA MONITORING'S SUBMISSION TO HOUSE OF COMMONS PUBLIC BILL COMMITTEE ONLINE SAFETY BILL

2.1 INTRODUCTION

1. This submission will argue that due to the “**News Publisher Content Exemption**”, and the “**Comment Forum Exemption**”, this new **Online Safety Bill** does not protect Muslim communities from online harm.
2. We will provide the following in support of our arguments:
 - An evidence base which shows how the British media’s portrayal of Muslims & Islam is contributing to growing hostility online and offline towards Muslim communities
 - Examples from online publications which show how Muslims and Islam are being misrepresented and portrayed negatively
 - Examples of how far right individuals and organisations use this content, amplify it on social media and target Muslims & Islam online and offline
 - Why the new Online Harms Bill should regulate publications online and extend the definition of harm to include harm caused to Muslims and Islam

2.2 NEWS PUBLISHER CONTENT EXEMPTION

The new Online Safety Bill provides a new regulatory framework to tackle ‘harmful’ content on social media and elsewhere online, however, it does not affectively deal with the harm caused intentionally or inadvertently at times by mainstream media publications online towards Muslims and Islam. On the contrary, the Bill exempts journalistic and news content from the broad statutory duties set out under the bill (“**the News Publisher Content Exemption**”). Social media accounts of news publishers and any online search results which republish their content will also be exempt. This creates a double standard with more freedom of expression being afforded to publishers (no matter how harmful some of their content can be) than social media content produced by others.

With the growth of the internet and online platforms, the amount of online news content and the number of online news publishers has increased rapidly. Given that this Bill’s definition of what constitutes a “**recognised news publisher**” is very broad and the criteria for what amounts to “**online journalism**” too wide, publishers will be free to publish harmful content without any regulatory oversight. Definitions of what “recognised” news publishers look (or should) look like clash with the press regulation systems that were passed by parliament and enshrined in law following the Levenson Inquiry. The threat therefor of far-right and anti-Muslim websites arguing that they constitute a “**news publisher**” is not only inevitable but also very dangerous. As a “**news publisher**”, they would have the freedom to propagate fake news, disinformation and conspiracy theories about Islam and Muslims and be exempt from any future legislation as long as they publish “news” (the definition is so loose it could include gossip), have their own office, a standards code and complaints process. No guidelines or details are provided about the latter two criterion.

2.3 COMMENT FORUM EXEMPTION

Many news publishers look and act like platforms as they encourage user engagement on their websites by allowing readers to interact with each other by posting comments under articles and content. Unfortunately, online forums and comment sections on news sites often contain a wide range of harms including misinformation, disinformation, hate speech and abuse. Harmful content posted on newspaper below the line comments and comment forums reach vast audiences. Publishers like Mail Online reach audiences of almost 25 million people per month,¹ compared with an estimated 17.55 million UK users of Twitter.² Yet, the newspaper comments sections are exempt from regulation under this current Bill. Furthermore, the **“Comment Forum Exemption”** in this draft bill creates one rule for audiences interacting on news websites, and a different rule for those interacting on social media platforms. Often the harmful content in below the line comment sections of news sites can resemble that found on other social media platforms and therefore needs to be held to the same standards of regulation.

For Muslims and other minority communities that are often the target of online hate and abuse on user generated content in the comment sections of news platforms, the **“Comment Forum Exemption”** in this bill is very worrying and needs to be reconsidered. The sections below on free speech, Islamophobia, common tropes, and the concrete examples of harmful content towards Muslims and Islam will show how important it is to clarify the definitions of what constitutes a **“news publisher”** and **“online journalism”** but also for this Bill to include some form of accountability and regulation for harmful content produced by **“news publishers”** and **“Comment Forums”** online.

2.4 ISLAMOPHOBIA

Despite its deniers, Islamophobia is real and impacts Muslim communities all over Britain. The Equality and Human Rights Commission found that 70% of Muslims had experienced religious based prejudice in 2017,³ whilst a Census 2021 report from the Home Office reported that almost half of recorded religious hate crimes were targeted against Muslims.⁴ Although the media cannot be held directly responsible for the actions of those who commit hate crimes online or offline, it is important to note that the majority of Britons polled believe that **“the media”** is to blame for the prejudice Muslims

¹ https://d212k0qo5ygz53.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/20210804134554/Media-Packs_MOL.pdf

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/242606/number-of-active-twitter-users-in-selected-countries/>

³ Dominic Abrams, Hannah Swift & Diane Houston, Developing a national barometer of prejudice and discrimination in Britain, 11-Oct-2018 at www.equalityhumanrights.com (Accessed on 01 June 2019)

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2020-to-2021/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2020-to-2021#contents>

face in daily life in Britain.⁵ The Muslim Council of Britain's polling of British Muslims also found that **74% of respondents identified the media's portrayal of Muslims as the most important issue in terms of Islamophobia**. This aligns with research by the University of Cambridge which concluded that **mainstream media reporting about Muslims is contributing to an atmosphere of rising hostility toward Muslims in Britain**.⁶ Centre for Media Monitoring's own evidence base shows that almost **60% of the coverage of Muslims & Islam by online publishers is negative**.⁷

With stiff competition online, the rise of fake news, populism and growing anti-Muslim sentiments both in the UK and across the West, certain sections of the media have resorted to employing click bait practices to attract eyeballs and thus increase circulation and revenue. While it is generally understood that unregulated internet blogs and communities share fictitious beliefs and stories, mainstream news platforms are expected by the general public, and particularly their respective readerships, to be both reliable and accountable. Unfortunately, common tropes about Islam and Muslims which once occupied the dark corners of the web now overflow onto the platforms of mainstream media and in political discourse online.

2.5 COMMON TROPES

The media can be viewed as both a symptom, and in some cases, an active participant, of a wider anti-Muslim industry which is gaining precedence in British politics and society. Their common message is that Muslims are generally a threat to Western societies, and that this threat is harboured by individual British Muslims. This is reinforced by conspiratorial claims about the **"Islamisation"** of Britain (18% of people polled believe that Muslim immigration to this country is part of a bigger plan to make Muslims a majority of this country's population⁸), so-called no-go areas where Shariah law operates (a false trope believed by over a third of British people⁹) as well as abundant endorsements of anti-Muslim spokespersons. The significance of these conspiracies appearing on reputable and authoritative news platforms is that they are translated from fringe ideas into legitimised theories.

Commentator **Rod Liddle** is a prominent purveyor of such tropes, and commonly employs stereotypes and racist language referring to Muslims as **"savages"**¹⁰ with **"stunted IQ's"**¹¹, and to **"Islamic countries"** as **"hellholes"**.¹² He describes Islamophobia as **"entirely rational"** and writes the suggestion to pay **"Muslim immigrants not to come**

⁵ <https://www.comresglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/MEND-Islamophobia-Poll-October-2018-1.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/media-fuelling-rising-hostility-towards-muslims-in-britain>

⁷ <https://cfmm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/CfMM-Quarterly-Report.pdf>

⁸ YouGov – *Conspiracy Theories (GB), August 2018* at yougov.co.uk (Accessed on 01 June 2019) & YouGov – *Hope Not Hate exclusive survey of more than 10,300 people, reported in Independent*; Lizzie Dearden, "Third of British people wrongly believe there are Muslim 'no-go areas' in UK governed by sharia law", 17-Oct-2018, *The Independent* at www.independent.co.uk, (Accessed on 01 June 2019)

⁹ YouGov – *Conspiracy Theories (GB), August 2018* at yougov.co.uk (Accessed on 01 June 2019) & YouGov – *Hope Not Hate exclusive survey of more than 10,300 people, reported in Independent*; Lizzie Dearden, "Third of British people wrongly believe there are Muslim 'no-go areas' in UK governed by sharia law", 17-Oct-2018, *The Independent* at www.independent.co.uk, (Accessed on 01 June 2019)

¹⁰ R. Liddle (2009), "Somali Savage Update", (*The Spectator*) available online at: <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2009/11/somali-savages-update/>

¹¹ R. Liddle (2010), "I refuse to buy meat from supermarkets until they ban halal slaughter" (*The Spectator*) available online at: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2010/10/i-refuse-to-buy-meat-from-supermarkets-until-they-ban-halal-slaughter/>

¹² R. Liddle (2010), "After all the fuss, will anything actually change" (*The Spectator*) available online at: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2010/05/after-all-the-fuss-will-anything-actually-change/>

here”. While Liddle expresses the anxiety of a numerical takeover by immigrants within Europe, The Times columnist, **Melanie Phillips**, promotes a fear of an ideological takeover. In 2009 she wrote in The Spectator: **“The Islamists, or jihadis, are intent upon snuffing out individual freedom and imposing a totalitarian regime of submission to religious dogma which erodes and then replaces British and Western Values”**.¹³ Later in the same article, Phillips writes: **“Support for the BNP would plummet if the political mainstream were to limit immigration, denounce cultural Islamic imperialism, and refuse to give one inch to sharia law, saying no to polygamy, sharia finance, sharia courts and all attempts to set up a parallel Islamic society in Britain.”**¹⁴

The fact that the television presenter **Jeremy Clarkson** and **Melanie Phillips** appear in the manifesto of the white supremacist, **Anders Breivik** who murdered 77 people in Norway, and in turn, **Brenton Tarrant**, who harnessed the power of social media to livestream the massacre of 51 Muslim worshippers in two mosques in Christchurch, said he took inspiration from Breivik and the **“Great Replacement Theory”** just shows how far reaching a journalist’s words can be, however unintended they might be.

2.6 IMPACT

A report by the University of Leicester highlights the impact of mainstream politics and reporting by stating that: **“Politicians and media fuel hate crime in Britain.”**¹⁵ No better example exists than the comments made by the current Prime Minister’s controversial Telegraph column in August 2018 which compared veiled Muslim women to **“letterboxes”** and **“bank robbers”**.¹⁶ In the week after the article was published, **hate crime incidents rose by 375 per cent.**¹⁷ In the following weeks, 42% of street attacks referenced Boris Johnson or his words. Online abuse repeated the same words or incorporated them into pictures and memes that were then sent to Muslims online. A report examining the impact of online and offline anti-Muslim hate crime on individuals and communities said: **‘Participants described living in fear because of the possibility of online threats materialising in the ‘real world’**.¹⁸

Despite the high standards in British journalism, CfMM’s evidence has shown that the most basic of journalistic principles are often not adhered to when it comes to Muslims and Islam. Furthermore, when establishment publications give credence to far right tropes, these are picked up by Islamophobic organisations like **Britain First, The English Defence League and anti-Muslim individuals like Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (AKA Tommy Robinson), Pamela Geller, Paul Watson and Laura Loomer** to mention a few and amplified on social media - reaching millions of people in the digital space worldwide.

¹³ M. Phillips (2009), “Clash of uncivilisations” (The Spectator) available online at: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2009/10/the-clash-of-uncivilisations/>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ <https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/press/press-releases/2016/june/politicians-and-media-fuel-hate-crime-in-britain-2019-say-university-of-leicester-experts>

¹⁶ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/08/05/denmark-has-got-wrong-yes-burka-oppressive-ridiculous-still/>

¹⁷ <https://www.tellmamauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Tell%20MAMA%20Annual%20Report%202018%20-%20Normalising%20Hate.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Religion/Islamophobia-AntiMuslim/Civil%20Society%20or%20Individuals/ProfAwan-3.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Religion/Islamophobia-AntiMuslim/Civil%20Society%20or%20Individuals/ProfAwan-3.pdf>

2.7 EXAMPLES OF HARMFUL CONTENT ONLINE

Below are some examples of inaccurate and misleading articles and broadcasts which were given a new lease of life online:

- **The Times** front page story **“Christian child forced into Muslim foster care”**.¹⁹ IPSO upheld a complaint and ruled the Times "distorted" its coverage of a five-year-old Christian girl who was placed with Muslim foster carers and breached the accuracy clause 1 of the editors’ code of practice.²⁰ The story was shared widely on social media and further fostered the idea of Muslims and Islam being a threat and incompatible with Western Christian values.

The screenshot shows a Twitter thread. At the top, Tommy Robinson (@TRobinsonNewEra) shares a link to a news article titled "Christian child forced into Muslim foster care | News | The Times & The Sunday Times". Below this, Paul Golding (@GoldingBF) asks "Why is this allowed to happen?". The article preview shows a headline "Christian child forced into Muslim foster care" with a sub-headline "Concern for girl who 'had cross removed and was encouraged to learn Arabic'". Below the article preview, the English Defence League (@EDLofficialpage) shares a tweet with the hashtag #adoptionjihad and a link to the article. The tweet includes a snippet of the article text: "Christian child forced into Muslim foster care" and "Concern for girl who 'had cross removed and was encouraged to learn Arabic'".

- **Sky News** and **The Express**, wrongly reported that the shooting of twelve people in Thousand Oaks, California in November 2018 was carried out by a **“Middle Eastern man”**.^{21,22} Centre for Media Monitoring submitted complaints and elicited corrections from both The Express and Sky News. However, these false reports, based on weak eye-witness sources, had already been shared millions of times on

¹⁹ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/christian-child-forced-into-muslim-foster-care-by-tower-hamlets-council-3gcp6l8cs>

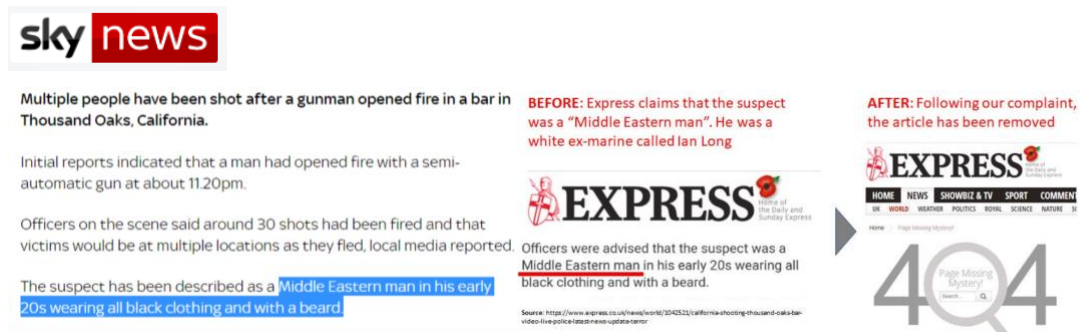
²⁰ <https://www.ipso.co.uk/rulings-and-resolution-statements/ruling/?id=20480-17>

²¹ <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1042521/california-shooting-thousand-oaks-bar-video-live-police-latest-news-update-terror>

²² <https://news.sky.com/story/multiple-people-shot-as-gunman-opens-fire-in-california-bar-11547848>

social media and gave ammunition to the anti-Muslim agitators and Islamophobes to use this description of the assailant to incite hate towards Muslims. Given the reputation of Sky News, this error was repeated on the MSN UK homepage, Yahoo! UK and Ireland as well as on LBC Radio. Between 3:17 AM (GMT) and 6:46: AM

(GMT) this collective mass platform had an estimated audience of just under 60 million, according to Critical Mention - the media monitoring platform.²³



The image shows a side-by-side comparison of a news article's content before and after a correction. On the left, a Sky News article titled "Multiple people have been shot after a gunman opened fire in a bar in Thousand Oaks, California." contains the text: "The suspect has been described as a Middle Eastern man in his early 20s wearing all black clothing and with a beard." On the right, a screenshot of the Express website shows the same article with a red box highlighting the original description and a note: "BEFORE: Express claims that the suspect was a 'Middle Eastern man'. He was a white ex-marine called Ian Long." Below this, the corrected text reads: "Officers were advised that the suspect was a Middle Eastern man in his early 20s wearing all black clothing and with a beard." A large "404" error message is visible on the Express website screenshot, indicating the article has been removed.

Pamela Geller, who has been banned from entering the UK and who has been called, **“one of the most flamboyant anti-Muslim activists in the United States”** by the Southern Poverty Law Centre, tweeted Sky News’ article link to her 200,000 plus followers.²⁴



Paul Watson, from the conspiracy site Infowars also referenced the Sky article.²⁵ Watson is known for posting false information and has pushed fringe conspiracy theories about 9/11 and mass shootings.²⁶ When challenged on why he had chosen to reference this point by fellow tweeters, Watson cited mainstream media reporting. This inaccurate reporting provided him with the exact ammunition required to further his own narrative against Muslims and Islam.

²³ Coverage of California Bar attack with Sky News copy replicated on 42 other online news websites as found on the Critical Mention Media Monitoring Platform (A full list of these websites can be found at www.CfMM.org.uk)

²⁴ SLPC (n.d.). Pamela Geller Profile. [online] Southern Poverty Law Center. Available at: <https://www.splcenter.org/fightinghat/extremist-files/individual/pamela-geller> [Accessed 1 Sep. 2019].

²⁵ Watson. PJ, (2018), Twitter. [online] @PrisonPlanet , <https://twitter.com/prisonplanet/status/1060592893528809473?lang=en> [Accessed 8 Nov. 2018]

²⁶ <https://www.salon.com/control/2017/06/19/infowars-paul-joseph-watson-cannot-get-anything-right/>



Laura Loomer, who was found to have connections with the anti-Muslim hate group, United West,²⁷ not only used it for her own purposes to target Muslims but also the media.²⁸



- **The Sun's "SUPERMARKET TERROR: Gunman "screaming Allahu Akbar" opens fire in Spanish supermarket while "carrying bag filled with petrol and gunpowder"**²⁹ was later retracted after Spanish police and a spokesman for the supermarket denied that the gunman had shouted **"Allahu-Akbar"**, with a police officer stating that the suspect had spoken something in the Basque language of **"Euraska"**. Similar stories appeared in **The Mail** and **Express**. **Tommy Robinson** was quick to republish this false story on his twitter account.

²⁷ <https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/the-anti-muslim-hate-group-backing-laura-loomers-independent-journalism/>

²⁸ Greg Evans, California shooting: Conspiracy theorists spread false reports that shooter was 'Middle Eastern' INEWS [LINK](#)

²⁹ <https://twitter.com/miqdaad/status/819821028784349184/photo/1>



- **TalkRADIO** host **Christo Fofas** gave a caller (claiming to be a paramedic) over five minutes airtime to allege that, on a call out to a mosque in Oldham to attend to someone who had suffered a heart attack, he was refused entry because he was gay. The caller went on to allege that he needed police escorts to enter certain Muslim areas and that he had received emails at work from Muslims threatening to decapitate him. Following enquiries by CfMM, the North West Ambulance Service denied that they had any calls recorded to attend a heart attack in a mosque in Oldham. Neither did they have any other evidence of an employee receiving threats or answering to the description of the caller in their employment. The chair of the LGBTQ group at North West Ambulance Service confirmed that they were not aware of any paramedic raising any of the allegations with them either. Christo did not challenge any of the caller's claims. Instead, he took to social media to amplify these untruths.



2.8 FREE SPEECH

Whilst freedom of expression and free speech should be protected, the argument that regulating publications will curtail this is not necessarily true. Many other countries have regulatory frameworks that restrict absolute free speech, as well as clauses that disallow group discrimination for example, and yet, they perform better than the UK when it comes to free speech and free media indices. Furthermore, the question of free speech should not be limited to journalists and the media. Discussions around free speech often exclude the same right being extended to minorities and those without influence or power to challenge false narratives published online. Opinion writers and columnists who write Islamophobic content online frequently accuse Muslims of being in favour of curtailing free speech or even promoting censorship. This is far from the truth. What minorities targeted by racist content are asking for is accountability and regulation to counter the consequences of harmful content online.

Whilst no one wants to curb free speech nor see backdoor state regulation of the media

(something critics of the bill warn against), neither does anyone want to see news publishers being given carte blanche to publish what they want on their own online, digital, and social media platforms without being held to the same standards as other citizens or evading scrutiny and consequences for what they publish. Given the growing evidence which points to inaccurate, irresponsible, and unfair reporting of Muslims & Islam online, and the physical, emotional, and psychological harm done to individuals, communities, and society at large, some form of accountability of what news publishers produce online is paramount.

3. CONCLUSION

The claim that certain sections of the media have played no role in the growth in Islamophobia and increased hatred and harm online, in digital spaces and on tech platforms towards Muslims and Islam is no longer a tenable position given the wealth of evidence on the issue, and the lack of any evidence to the contrary. In December 2019, the outgoing chair of IPSO, Sir Alan Moses, admitted that: **“The portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the British press has been “the most difficult issue”** facing the press watchdog in the past five years. He said: **“I speak for myself, but I have a suspicion that [Muslims] are from time to time written about in a way that [newspapers] would simply not write about Jews or Roman Catholics.”**³⁰ The far-reaching impact and harm this causes Muslim individuals and communities online, on tech platforms and in the global digital space needs to be addressed by the Online Safety Bill.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Online Safety Bill needs to extend its definition of harm and recognise the harm caused towards Muslims and other minorities by online news publishers
2. The Online Safety Bill needs to tighten its definition and criteria for what constitutes a **“news publisher”** and **“online journalism”** to avoid the risk of exempting

³⁰ <https://www.ft.com/content/60d5bea6-1ff9-11ea-b8a1-584213ee7b2b>

publishers (including far right and white supremacist publications) from disseminating harmful and dangerous content online.

3. The Online Safety Bill should not exempt all “**news publishers**”, their social media accounts or their comments section from regulation.
4. The Online Safety Bill should eliminate the “double standard” between the free speech of citizens on technology platforms and the content of newspaper publishers.