

From: Louise Parrott
Sent: Tue, 13 Apr 2021 19:36:29 +1000
To: Justin Sowden
Subject: Senate hearing Hansard [SEC=OFFICIAL]

Hi Justin,

Here's the extract from yesterday's committee hearing:

CHAIR: Facebook has a reputation of being a platform where fake news is shared and promoted. If you want to spread misinformation, you get on Facebook and do it. Doesn't having real news and public interest journalism on your platform, give your platform at least some credibility? There must be value in that.

Mr Milner : There is certainly value, as we address the issue of misinformation, in directing people to credible news sources. When our third-party fact-checking partners have identified and labelled content as likely false then we will direct people to credible news sources. That can be from the fact-checking organisation or other organisations. You say we have a reputation for being full of fake news, but that's actually not borne out by the facts. We can very much provide on notice information to the committee where credible, independent third-party academics have demonstrated that actually there is not a lot of fake news on Facebook.

CHAIR: You talk about how you're dealing with misinformation. I want to ask you a specific question in relation to pages that are set up. We know that currently the AEC is investigating Andrew Laming's use of Facebook. I understand he has operated over 30 pages by logging on through his own account. Why isn't this captured by your transparency measures? Is that a loophole that people have been able to use? You get to say you still have transparency, but users who want to promote rubbish can do so without accountability.

Mrs Garlick : I'm happy to share more information about how pages work and how people can administer pages. Certainly any person can administer a large number of pages if they wish to, but all of those pages do have to comply with our policies. If they're administered by fake accounts, for example, when we remove the fake accounts then the pages will come down. If the pages are sharing other content that violates our policy then we will also remove those posts that violate our policies. If there are enough posts that are removed from a particular page then the overarching page may come down. We also have teams that investigate whether pages are being operated in a coordinated way. We can do removals and takedowns based on coordinated inauthentic behaviour.

CHAIR: Does 30 pages being operated by one member of parliament raise any flags for Facebook? Why was that allowed to happen?

Mrs Garlick : Obviously we apply our policies and try to make sure that we are enforcing them [inaudible] policies. We also respond to requests from different regulators when they have questions or concerns. I don't think we would necessarily look into whether a particular person's profession is relevant to how they're administering a page. Certainly one person can administer a number of pages. The question is whether the accounts used to do that and the content that has been shared on that comply with our policies and applicable law.

CHAIR: So there's no way that Facebook's transparency measures have been able to capture the misuse of Facebook and the fake promotion of groups by members of parliament?

Mrs Garlick : I feel that's a very conclusory statement. We've been enforcing our policies consistently. We're responding to requests from regulators. I'm not sure that we can make a declaratory statement like that. Certainly from our perspective we've been actively enforcing our policies and providing transparency in that regard.

CHAIR: The AEC has asked for information about Mr Laming's activities on your platform. Are you cooperating fully?

Mrs Garlick : Yes.

CHAIR: And how many pages did Mr Laming operate unbeknown to the public?

Mrs Garlick : The number of pages that any particular person administers is a question that is best directed to them. That's not something we can disclose.

CHAIR: Do you think there is a responsibility for Facebook, if you have transparency measures for politicians, that this type of information, in and of itself, is part of those transparency measures?

Mrs Garlick : To date, the transparency that people have sought in relation to politicians—obviously we've got general page transparency measures so that you can see when a page is created. You can see any page name changes. You can see how many admins there are and the countries in which they're located. We have listened to feedback that there can be greater transparency around pages and provided that. With respect to political issues, we tend to get feedback and there tends to be regulatory measures around political advertising. So we've been rolling out a number of measures, including here in Australia, to ensure that there is transparency around political advertising. That includes the ad library, where you can go in and see political ads and information of that nature.

CHAIR: But you know that Andrew Laming is a member of parliament, that he is a politician?

Mrs Garlick : Yes.

CHAIR: Facebook has all of the data and is aware of how many other pages he has established? You have all of that information, don't you?

Mrs Garlick : I assume yes. It's not something that we look at, no.

CHAIR: Do you think that the public have a right to know?

Mrs Garlick : In terms of transparency around page administrators, that hasn't been something that people have typically been requesting of us or that there has been public debate about. To date, that transparency around page administrators has been around the date it was created, any page name changes, and where it is being administered from. And then, in response to political issues, it's been a strong focus on political advertising. Those have been the areas of most concern from regulators, community groups and academics to date, and those have been the areas that we've focused on.

CHAIR: Do you think this information not being transparent is in good faith with the transparency measures that the public understands—who a politician is and what money

they are spending on advertising? To be able to keep secret the establishment of fake community pages—surely that's not in line with your transparency goals.

Mrs Garlick : Our transparency measures to date have been focused on removals, under our community standards enforcement report; on giving people more information about pages so they can understand the nature of a particular page; and, more broadly, around political advertising campaigns.

CHAIR: I understand that. But if you want the community to believe that Facebook is actually invested in transparency then surely this type of information should be available.

Mrs Garlick : If that is something the Australian parliament wants to make a recommendation on, we are happy to work with government to make sure that we are responding to community expectations around further transparency measures.

Senator FARUQI: In an international investigation published in December 2019 *The Guardian* newspaper revealed what it characterised as 'a covert plot to control some of Facebook's largest far-right pages, including one linked to a right-wing terror group, and create a commercial enterprise that harvests Islamophobic hate for profit'. Prominent Muslim politicians were targeted with thousands of Islamophobic and racist comments, including me. I am assuming that you remember that investigation. Could you briefly outline what steps Facebook has taken since that investigation took place to ensure that this sort of profit-driven hate cannot proliferate?

Mr Milner : Hello, Senator; it's nice to meet you. I'm sorry about your personal experience of being attacked in this way. Because it wasn't notified to us before the hearing we've not prepared for detailed questions about this, but certainly we can write to you and committee on notice to explain the actions that we've taken with respect to that particular report. What we can perhaps talk about today is our broader approach towards addressing hate speech and incitement to violence on Facebook, if you'd find that helpful.

Senator FARUQI: I was particularly interested in steps taken after this particular report. It was huge. A number of politicians really faced hatred and abuse. I think there were 500,000 followers of one particular page who unleashed their attack on me. So I'm particularly interested in what steps you took after 2019, in particular, to make sure that this doesn't happen again.

Mr Milner : I will turn to Mia in a moment to see if she has anything specific on this. I know we've taken a number of steps since then to address particular groups organising in Australia and New Zealand. So Mia can talk a little bit about that. There's a range of different things that do to address the problem of hate speech, and it combines human expertise and technology. Some of that human expertise is about dangerous organisations. We have a specific team which just focuses on dangerous organisations around the world. It conducts research and engages with academics, different institutions and organisations to really understand what is going on here, how these organisations are changing and how they are manifesting online, so that we can find them, ban them, remove all their content and remove their supporters.

We also use technology to find hate speech. That technology has got much, much better. It's called machine learning. Essentially, you feed into the machine enormous amounts of content such that it then knows what to look for. Our most recent enforcement report, where we provided information on this, has shown that, using this technology, we now manage to get to 97 per cent of hate speech before anybody reports it to us and take it down. Just three years ago that was less than 30 per cent. So this technology has got a lot better.

Our investment in people, including people from many different countries and communities with lots of different languages and experience, also enables us to get to this content. But it's not perfect and we have, frankly, bad people and hateful people who want to try to use platforms like ours, Twitter, TikTok and others to try to spread their manifestos of hate. So we've got to keep working at this, in order to get better at it. Mia, perhaps you can explain some of the actions we've taken around particular organisations.

Senator FARUQI: Before we go to Mrs Garlick, I would just explain very quickly that I'm asking about this because my office has looked at the Australian pages identified in that particular *Guardian* investigation. and it appears that at least four of the six identified pages are still public, with some of them still posting Islamophobia content from websites identified in the investigation and the type of content which *The Guardian* characterised as ranging from misleading to outright fabrications. Does that surprise you?

Mr Milner : I would need to look into it, Senator, in order to understand the specifics there. If your office could send to my team in Australia the details that they've dug up, we will look at it immediately.

Senator FARUQI: But isn't that the problem? There was this huge investigation, and you haven't even taken down those pages. The largest of the Australian pages identified in that investigation, 'No Sharia law—Never, ever give up Australia', has over 100,000 followers. In the last 24 hours, that page has linked to articles posted by the third-party websites identified in that investigation, which are The Politics Online and Free Press Front. These are two of the near-identical websites masquerading as news sites with generic titles that were identified in *The Guardian* as posting reams of Islamophobic content. At that time, I might remind you, Facebook said that it would deal with these problems of hate speech and what it called 'coordinated inauthentic behaviour'. So I'm really shocked and very surprised—why on earth are these pages still up and linking to the same websites that created that mass factory of hate?

Mr Milner : I'll ask Mia to come in and just talk a little bit more about what we've done in Australia, but one thing that's a really tricky area for us is how to enable people to debate issues, including about religions—and we think it's absolutely right that people should be able to debate the rights and wrongs of different religions—without attacking individuals who are members of those faiths. That's a very difficult area—

Senator FARUQI: Debating issues is very different to spouting hate and attacking people.

Mr Milner : I agree, and figuring out how to draw the line is one of the hardest challenges. But perhaps Mia could just talk about some of the actions we've taken specifically in Australia on this issue.

Mrs Garlick : Senator, I think it would be really helpful if you could you share some links to some of the pages that you have concerns about, because, to build on Simon's remarks, it's often quite granular in terms of our assessments in terms of what content gets removed and then when that actually results in a page getting removed. It sounds as though it would be helpful for us to work that through with your office. Please always feel free to let us know the moment that you have concerns about things. We've certainly established a hate speech advisory council to make sure that we're continuing to listen to Australian community groups about issues and concerns that that they have as we continue our work both in enforcing our policies and in rolling out programs to address issues of this nature.

Senator FARUQI: Sure, we can talk to you directly about that, but they have been available for more than two years now, with that investigation. Just coming back to the Christchurch attack on the mosque, I'm assuming you've read the relevant parts of the Christchurch royal commission report that related to Facebook, because there is quite a chunk in that report about Facebook. The royal commission report makes reference, again, to several Facebook pages and groups that the terrorist interacted with, including the United Patriots Front, the Lads Society and the True Blue Crew. I understand, from media reports, that the United Patriots Front page was taken down in 2017. Are there Facebook pages or groups that currently exist at this point for those groups named in the Christchurch report?

Mrs Garlick : Those ones that you've just mentioned have all been removed from our services. We do have this process, which I think Simon mentioned, where we try to review different types of groups that could potentially be considered organised hate and dangerous organisations. So a number of the groups that have been mentioned there have already been removed from our services following those assessments.

Senator FARUQI: Do the administrators of those groups still have Facebook accounts and are they administering any pages currently? Do you have that sort of information?

Mrs Garlick : I'm not sure that we necessarily have that information. The way that it works is that we do look at both groups and individuals, and so there have been certain specific individuals that we have designated to not be allowed to have a presence on our service, and then there are particular groups. It's an assessment at both the profile and group level.

Senator FARUQI: Mr Milner, I think you did explain a little bit about how you take down these groups. But I'm interested in whether there is a threshold and what kind of decision-making process you go through in deciding which pages to remove and which not to remove. Is there a very quick answer to that? If not, you can take it on notice.

Mr Milner : I'd like to take that on notice. We'd very much like to meet with you and take you through that and perhaps introduce you to some of our expert team, who can explain to you and your team and any other colleagues in the Senate who are interested how we go about doing this.

Senator FARUQI: What happens to the profits that you've made on ads placed alongside extreme right-wing content that is later removed?

Mr Milner : That's not how our advertising works. People don't place ads against content. It's not like YouTube in that sense. It's kind of meaningless, really, to think about it like that on Facebook.

Senator FARUQI: What have you done with the profits from ads that were placed alongside the pages you have taken down?

Mr Milner : Again, that's not how it works; you can't advertise on Facebook pages. Adverts are directed at people, not content. It's simply not the case that ads are placed on pages like that.

Senator FARUQI: But people would be coming to those pages to see those ads?

Mr Milner : No. There are no ads on pages or in groups.

Senator FARUQI: I understand that you have tools that automatically remove some comments. I think you explained that—the machine learning kind of stuff. They remove

comments and posts from Facebook, including death threats, without the admin of the page necessarily seeing them—is that correct?

Mr Milner : I'm not sure. I'd have to get back to you in respect of whether we remove content from their page. I'm pretty certain they would be, but I want to be absolutely certain for you. We can come back to you on that.

Senator FARUQI: Could you take the next question on notice as well. If they are taken off, the admin doesn't see it. But I guess my concern is that, as public figures who receive these sorts of terrible messages, we are advised to report all threats because they are the best predictors of actual violence. This is what we have been told. I would like to know how we are meant to do that if they are automatically removed and the administrators don't know about it and can't keep a record of it.

Mr Milner : I will confirm this. But I suspect that, given that we will also take action when a page has accumulated a significant number of strikes, they will be notified. We will look at that and share it with you on notice.

CHAIR: There are some questions you have been given notice. Thank you for appearing today. We look forward to hearing some of those responses in due course. Thanks very much.

Proceedings suspended from 12:27 to 13:43

<https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22committees%2Fcommesen%2F631abdc2-b2bd-4d7c-bd1d-fb56f3d39c95%2F0003%22>