



Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee

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I am writing to you in light of both the planned merger and end-to-end encryption of Facebook Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp, and Facebook's recent changes of policy regarding online ads.

First, I wish to understand why Facebook has decided to merge the three instant messaging services and provide end-to-end encryption throughout. In his blog post of 6 March 2019, entitled 'A Privacy-Focused Vision for Social Networking', Mr Zuckerberg described his belief that users want increasingly private, not open, platforms. I fail to understand the consumer argument for expanded use of encryption given the availability of WhatsApp and other similar services. More importantly, the announcement raises questions of safety, as the 5 October letter from the UK Home Secretary, the US Attorney General, the Acting US Secretary of Homeland Security, and the Australian Minister for Home Affairs underlined. The letter quoted the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's estimate that 70% of Facebook's reporting to NCMEC of illegal content and activity (12 million reports globally) would be lost if encryption goes ahead.

Question 1: Why can't WhatsApp remain the only end-to-end encrypted service, and what is the opinion of the Facebook Safety Team? Have they expressed any reservations regarding the planned merger-encryption?

Second, I would appreciate a description of the level of encryption Facebook is proposing to apply to the merged service. I note from WhatsApp's privacy policy that the service collects "*information about your activity (such as how you use our Services, how you interact with others using our Services, and the like), log files, and diagnostic, crash, website, and performance logs and reports*", from which I understand that Facebook are still able to identify with whom a Whatsapp user has spoken or has messaged, if not the content of their communications. Describing 'Why Metadata Matters' for the Electronic Frontier Foundation on 7 June 2013, Kurt Opsahl outlined an example where collecting metadata would reveal if a user contacted in rapid succession an HIV testing service, then their doctor, then their health insurance company.



Question 2: Is this the policy that Facebook proposes to apply to the new messaging service, and will that information be used in any way for advertising purposes?

Turning to Facebook's rules regarding political adverts, I note the recent change to Facebook's rules, from banning "*deceptive, false or misleading content*" to only banning adverts that "*include claims debunked by third-party fact-checkers, or, in certain circumstances, claims debunked by organisations with particular expertise*"; and furthermore, that any website or page "*with the primary purpose of expressing the opinion or agenda of a political figure*" is now ineligible for fact-checking.

This is particularly concerning in light of the publication of Volume 2 of the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, entitled: 'Russia's Use of Social Media'. The report notes that Facebook provided the Committee with "*information related to a number of IRA affiliated social media accounts, including advertisements purchased in connection with those accounts*", approximately 61,500 posts and 3,393 paid advertisements connected to 81 Facebook pages and 116,000 posts connected to 133 Instagram accounts. The change in policy will absolve Facebook from the responsibility of identifying and tackling the widespread content of bad actors, such as Russia's Internet Research Agency.

I also note that Facebook's former Head of Global Elections Integrity Ops, Yael Eisenstat, has described that when she advocated for the scanning of adverts to detect misinformation efforts, despite engineers' enthusiasm she faced opposition from upper management.

Question 3: Why was the decision taken to change Facebook's policy regarding political adverts, given the heavy constraint this will place on Facebook's ability to combat online disinformation in the run-up to elections around the world, and a possible UK general election in particular?

Question 4: Given the onus placed on third-party fact-checkers, what plans does Facebook have to formalise a working relationship with third-party fact-checkers in the long-term?

Question 5: What proposals for political advert scanning has Facebook's Global Elections Integrity Ops team made, to what extent were these proposals determined to be feasible, and on what grounds were they not progressed?

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