

# Home Affairs Committee

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Rebecca Stimson  
Head, Public Policy  
Facebook

16 July 2019

Dear Ms Stimson,

I am writing in response to your letter of 1 July, which was in turn a response to our letter of 14 May. Our initial letter requested information from Facebook following the evidence session the Committee held on 23 April, including on the issue of closed and secret groups on your platform. I am writing to you again due to our dissatisfaction with your previous response.

While closed and secret groups are used for many legitimate purposes on Facebook, you will be aware that many have been found to be sharing hate and dangerous, offensive and illegal content. These have included the white supremacist Young Right Society, described as "awash with appalling racism";<sup>1</sup> Jewish Ritual Murder (previously called 'truthaboutjews'), an anti-Semitic page which the Community Security Trust repeatedly requested Facebook to remove;<sup>2</sup> extremist, racist and Islamophobic groups frequented by US law enforcement officials<sup>3</sup>; groups promoting bogus cancer cures and bleach enemas as cures for autism;<sup>4</sup> and several revenge porn pages which have been found to have been sharing images of girls under the age of 18.<sup>5</sup> One of these groups has already been associated with a real-world hate crime.<sup>6</sup> While some of these pages have been taken down following complaints or media reports, several have been re-established under different names.

One secret Facebook group which came to our attention made threatening references to Members of Parliament, including members of this Committee. Comments posted in the group, which had over 30,000 members, included:

- "Deselection would be to [sic] good for these rats they should be shot";
- "Kill them all.. every \*\*\*\*\* one [...] I dont [sic] care As long as they are Eradicated"
- "Just shoot them, criminals"
- "Die \*\*\*\*\*!"
- "Chuck those remoaners over the bridge, bunch of muppets"

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<sup>1</sup> Hope not Hate, '[Exposed: Breitbart writer's vile racist group](#)', 23 November 2017

<sup>2</sup> The Jewish Chronicle, '[CST challenges Facebook to close down Jew-hate page](#)', 1 April 2017;

<sup>3</sup> Reveal News, '[To protect and slur](#)', 14 June 2019

<sup>4</sup> Washington Post, '[They turn to Facebook and YouTube to find a cure for cancer – and get sucked into a world of bogus medicine](#)', 25 June 2019; The Mirror, '[Secret Facebook group reveals how parents use bleach enemas on autistic children in bid to 'cure' disability](#)', 7 August 2017

<sup>5</sup> Sydney Morning Herald, '[Teenage girls traumatised by revenge-porn network aimed at 'teaching us a lesson'](#)', 19 April 2016; Marine Corps Times, '[A nude photo scandal has shaken the entire Marine Corps](#)', 5 March 2017

<sup>6</sup> Montreal Gazette, '[Pig's head discussed on secret La Meute Facebook page before incident at Quebec mosque](#)', 4 May 2018

This is the content of just one group which we have been able to see. We are extremely concerned about what other groups might exist, including those which may promote extremist content, racist threats or other incitements to violence against people and communities.

Concerningly, when we raised this group with Facebook we were told that the company was unable to find the group on its platform until we provided them with screenshots.

We therefore wrote to you in May asking:

- what oversight Facebook has of closed groups on its platform;
- how Facebook ensures that closed groups are not used to commit or encourage criminal or civil offences;
- why Facebook was unable to find closed groups which were visible and accessible to Committee staff;
- how many closed groups with over 10,000 members exist on Facebook, and how many of these are moderated by British users; and
- how many users in these groups are estimated to be fake, duplicate or anonymous accounts.

In your response you stated that “closed groups are not closed to our systems or our rules” and that Facebook’s Community Standards and AI detection systems apply in closed groups. Either this is not true or Facebook’s systems are allowing death threats to be made against Members of Parliament. You will be aware that one MP was murdered in 2016, while another was the subject of a plot foiled by counter-terrorism police and many others have had to increase their own and their staff’s security following the receipt of death threats.

As closed and secret groups are not publicly visible or accessible, oversight and enforcement of content standards is the responsibility of the groups’ administrators or moderators, who are also members of the group. In your letter you mentioned that “all of the content in closed groups can be reported by group members in the usual way”. This is clearly not an appropriate way of ensuring maintenance of Facebook’s standards in these groups. Relying on a member of a hateful group to report threatening posts or users is an abdication of duty by Facebook.

You also claimed that Facebook does not have figures on how many fake accounts may be in secret or closed groups or on how many groups contain more than 10,000 members. We find this remarkable. Facebook possesses a massive amount of personal information on its users and their activities online, which supports its technical systems and which the company uses for commercial and competitive advantage.

You did not answer why Facebook was unable to find the group we highlighted.

We are aware that Facebook has taken some action on secret groups including announcing that, as part of its Safe Communities Initiative, it will be holding the administrators of groups more accountable for Community Standards violations.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Facebook Newsroom, [‘Remove, Reduce, Inform: New Steps to Manage Problematic Content’](#), 10 April 2019; [Q1019](#) [Neil Potts]

However, it is important that Facebook does more to assuage the concerns many people have about closed and secret groups, not only because there is the evident potential for them to be used to encourage or plan dangerous or criminal behaviour, but also because it appears to be Facebook's intention to move towards becoming a more privacy-orientated network. In a blog post in March 2019 Mark Zuckerberg said:

I believe the future of communication will increasingly shift to private, encrypted services where people can be confident what they say to each other stays secure and their messages and content won't stick around forever. This is the future I hope we will help bring about.<sup>8</sup>

We therefore request that you provide responses on the following points:

- Why Facebook was initially unable to find a group, which had been specifically brought to its attention, in which users were making threats towards Members of Parliament;
- Why Facebook's systems are not detecting death threats made in closed or secret groups, and what the company is doing to fix this;
- Why Facebook believes that relying on members of a group to monitor and enforce content standards in that group is an appropriate policy;
- How many reports of inappropriate content/behaviour or violation of Facebook's Community Standards were made by the administrators of closed or private groups in the last year; how many groups were subject to more than 10, 50 and 100 reports; and which groups were subject to the most reports;
- How many times Facebook has taken action against group administrators, and what this action has entailed, since the rolling-out of the policy to hold group admins more accountable for content violations in April 2019;
- How many closed or secret groups with over 10,000 members exist on Facebook, and how many of these are moderated by British users. Please can you also provide us with the number of closed and secret groups with over 5,000 members. We do not accept that you cannot easily gather this information;
- Why Facebook does not monitor the number, size or membership of groups it hosts on its platforms, and whether it plans to do so in the future.

I would be grateful for your response by 30 July 2019.

Yours sincerely



**Yvette Cooper MP**

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<sup>8</sup> Facebook, '[A Privacy-Focused Vision for Social Networking](#)', 6 March 2019