

Silicon Valley Cartel Faces 'Nut-Crushing' Fines For Political Manipulation Of The Public

Facebook, Twitter and Google face tech tax to fund fake news crackdown



Margi Murphy



Facebook may be lumped with a levy that will cover costs for greater regulation of its platform and better education on fake news and data privacy - REUTERS
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Facebook, Twitter and Google are facing the threat of new taxes to help fund a crackdown on a tide of fake news and misinformation which is poisoning British democracy, according to MPs.

A damning report from the Digital Culture Media and Sport Select Committee proposed that Facebook and other social media firms should pay a levy to cover the costs of Britain's data privacy watchdog, the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).

Damian Collins MP, Chair of the Committee, called for urgent action to tackle the threat posed by fake news including the possibility of social media being liable for the content posted online, possibly opening them up to lawsuits from members of the general public who have been targeted by hate speech.

He said: "We are facing nothing less than a crisis in our democracy – based on the systematic manipulation of data to support the relentless targeting of citizens, without their consent, by

campaigns of disinformation and messages of hate."

The report warned of "relentless targeting of hyper-partisan views, which play to the fears and prejudices of people, in order to influence their voting plans and their behaviour".

 Christopher Wylie - Credit: AFP

Cambridge Analytica whistleblower Christopher

Wylie gave evidence for the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee report Credit: AFP

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A version was leaked today by Dominic Cummings, the former Vote Leave campaign strategist, ahead of its official publication on Sunday.

The ICO is currently investigating the [Cambridge Analytica scandal](#), in which 87m Facebook users had their personal data collected without their consent and passed to the British election consultants Cambridge Analytica.

A levy, understood to work similarly to the charges imposed on financial services in the UK by the Financial Conduct Authority, would also cover the cost of introducing social media and data privacy protection onto the national curriculum to improve pupils' understanding of how social media information may be used to manipulate them.

MPs also suggested that companies should no longer enjoy the protection of being a grey area between "platform" and "publisher" but face liability for what is published on their products, following in the footsteps of Germany, which has greater powers to fine tech giants for offensive material like hate speech.

The 'fake news' dossier: | Social media regulation on the way?

The warning is the latest crisis for Facebook. [Mark Zuckerberg faces pressure to abandon his dual role as chairman and chief executive after \\$199bn was wiped off the social network's value on Thursday](#), the single biggest one-day loss of value for any company in US market history.

MPs on the DCMS committee have proposed a package of measures designed to clamp down on Facebook in the UK and the “fake news that threatens our democracy”. They include creating a new official category for technology companies under which they are responsible and liable, to be regulated by Ofcom like newspapers and broadcasters.

Investors in Facebook balked after a series of scandals surrounding fake news, cyber bullying, terrorism recruitment and Zuckerberg's recent refusal to remove Holocaust denial from the platform.

Facebook has been forced to hire thousands of moderators to curb the use of the platform to spread extremist content and has already warned that the costs will continue to eat at its bottom line going forward.

However, the days of policing its own platform may be over. MPs claimed that the current legal framework was “no longer fit for purpose” and did not take into account the technology giants that have become prevalent in Britons' day-to-day lives.

 Mark Zuckerberg - Credit: AFP

Mark Zuckerberg appeared in front of US Congress and European lawmakers to give evidence about the Cambridge Analytica scandal but refused to appear in front of British

MPs Credit: AFP

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The report also suggested that the Competition and Market Authority be tasked with auditing Facebook, Twitter and YouTube for fake accounts or “bots”, which have been blamed for the rapid spread of fake news ahead of the European referendum vote and the 2016 US presidential election.

It also said there should be a public register for political advertising, requiring all political advertising work to be listed for public display so that, even if work is not requiring regulation, it is accountable and transparent for all to see.

A ban on micro-targeted political advertising to Facebook “lookalike audiences”, where users have requested not to receive political adverts, should be imposed, it added.

“Our democracy is at risk and now is the time to act to protect our shared values and the integrity of our democratic institutions,” the report stated.

The committee pointed to Facebook’s repeated refusals to cooperate with its investigation into election meddling, advertising practices and the spread of fake news “time after time” as an indicator of its trustworthiness.

“Facebook and social media companies should not be in a position of marking their own homework,” it stated.

The Government was urged to close a loophole post Brexit that allowed social media companies or Cambridge Analytica-styled consultants to process personal data of people from the UK in the US without ramifications because it will not be covered by the General Data Protection Regulation.

Fake news | What exactly is it – and how can you spot it?

Committee chair Damian Collins said: "In this inquiry we have pulled back the curtain on the secretive world of the tech giants, which have acted irresponsibly with the vast quantities of data they collect from their users.

"Despite concerns being raised, companies like Facebook made it easy for developers to scrape user data and to deploy it in other campaigns without their knowledge or consent.

"Throughout our inquiry these companies have tried to frustrate scrutiny and obfuscated in their answers. The light of transparency must be allowed to shine on their operations and they must be made responsible, and liable, for the way in which harmful and misleading content is shared on their sites."