

The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media - Discussion about online disinformation and media literacy

Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to speak today. My name is Frances Haugen. Last year I left my job at Facebook as I felt I could no longer be part of a system which harms children, stokes division, and weakens our democracies. I disclosed what I felt governments and the public should know about what is happening within these social media giants. The deliberate choices they make to maximize their profit at the expense of public safety – the never ending pursuit of growth at any cost.

I hope that my revelations have been valuable for Committees like this one. It is clear that governments all over the world had been searching for answers about how to tackle some of the biggest issues of the day - how to protect their citizens and their democracies. But they didn't have enough information even to ask the right questions, let alone write the answers.

That is beginning to change, with European nations leading the way in developing game-changing online safety regimes. And, as the European home to some of the most powerful companies in the world, Ireland has a unique role to play in holding these companies to account. As your Online Safety Bill acknowledges, self-regulation of social media has not worked. Platforms cannot be trusted to act in the public interest. They are often - as my revelations showed - fully aware of the harms caused by their products and services, and yet choose to ignore these in favor of growth and profit.

So your Bill is an important intervention, as is the EU Digital Services Act. Both regimes say "enough is enough". Their alignment is critical, not least because Ireland will need to implement the DSA, but also because regulatory fragmentation does nothing to help Irish citizens. It only creates complexity and uncertainty at a time when what we really need is clarity. The DSA and Ireland's Online Safety Bill should align on key principles which allow quick, effective regulatory implementation. There is of course no silver bullet to make the internet safer. The challenge is how to make things easier, not harder. Alignment between Ireland and the EU will be crucial in smoothing that path.

And part of that alignment is about how to develop robust, rights respecting regimes which go to the heart of the business model of platforms, addressing the algorithms and design features that enable the spread of disinformation and hate. We all want Ireland's Bill to succeed, and to do so it must focus *less* on content and *more* on how that content is shared, spread and amplified. It is the *systems* of these platforms that should be your priority, not the *content* - systems which promote harm, which target you with conspiracy theories, which drive people to hate and abuse. You cannot simply rely on the deletion or criminalisation of harmful content. Not only because

that risks infringing on free speech, but because it doesn't work. Regulatory regimes which have focused solely on deleting content have failed. There's just too much out there.

We have seen too many examples of how hyper virality and amplification of lies and hate can lead to division and polarization online, and violence and harm offline. The US insurrection and COVID infodemic are just a couple. But this is far from just a Western issue. In fact, some of the most egregious harms caused by the decisions made in the shiny, glass headquarters of Facebook in Dublin have been in faraway places like Myanmar and Ethiopia. The ethnic violence fuelled by Facebook in those countries are the opening chapters of a book too horrific to read.

That's why I came forward - I could no longer be part of such a company. And that's why I am urging the Irish Government to reflect deeply on its own role - and on the responsibilities which come with housing these social media manipulation machines. An important, live decision currently rests with you. A few Rohingya youth from Myanmar have filed a complaint with the OECD National Contact Point in Ireland demanding justice for the genocidal violence unleashed against their community. They are desperate for financial support to be able to continue their studies from refugee camps in Bangladesh. Facebook has admitted it failed to stop horrific hate speech in Myanmar on its platform. The UN concluded Facebook played a "[determining role](#)" in fuelling hate against the Rohingya. Despite this, this trillion dollar tech company refuses to provide any meaningful remedy for fuelling violence, while pouring money into video games and virtual reality. That's why these Rohingya youth are now appealing to Ireland to intervene.

Ireland has been part of the OECD for over 50 years, and has committed to promoting its standards for responsible business conduct. It rests with Ireland to evaluate the facts and decide whether it will promote justice or the interests of a trillion dollar profit machine. I'm hopeful that Ireland will do what [Leo Varadkar](#) promised when Ireland got a seat at the UN Security Council - champion "peace and security, conflict resolution and reconciliation."

Finally, as you set up the new regulator for your Online Safety regime, I would urge you to learn lessons from the criticisms of your other digital regulator - the Data Protection Commission. The DPC is widely considered to have stepped back from its responsibilities in properly enforcing GDPR. The tech companies on your shores have, once again, got away with it. As you create an independent, robust and effective online safety regulator, you must launch an independent review into the DPC so that it too can start to enforce the law thoroughly and boldly.

Governments and citizens around the world will be watching Ireland's regulatory regime closely. It is reassuring that you are taking this agenda seriously, and I urge you to lead by example when holding these companies to account. You have the power and responsibility not only to improve the online safety of Irish citizens, but of people across the world.