Twitter Thread by Rowland Manthorpe



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I just wish I knew what an online harm actually was

Funny to see the online harms bill positioned as a blow against big tech when it will give them the power to make sweeping decisions on enforcement while simultaneously making it much harder for smaller competitors

Rule of politics: displays of strength are often signs of weakness. Online harms delegates many aspects of justice to tech companies. It's effectively an admission that the state can't do the work itself

This might be only practical way to proceed, given the scale of the challenge. But as the tech companies are going to be writing their own rules, then enforcing them, it embeds the existing way of doing things to an astonishing degree

The duty of care idea comes from health and safety, but I think the best analogy is financial market regulation pre-2008. It's trying to answer the question: how do we protect people* without interrupting the existing way of working?

*Defined as: keeping stories out of the news

A tech industry source gets in touch:

"I was involved in the consultation and it was pretty crazy
The two big messages were:
1. Could you first define and then solve this problem for us please?
2. Don’t worry, we won’t do anything to inconvenience you"

Perhaps I'm being overly negative. This is not an easy area to legislate. Govt needed more tools to deal with some parts of the internet

I just can't help see this as the product of a process where everyone ran around saying "something must be done!", but never worked out *what*

Yep https://t.co/mY8c00brE3

> .@OliverDowden states that he has talked about e2e with Sheryl Sandberg/Nick Clegg but not Online Harms as if it's because the UK has intimidated them. Um. Large tech firms are loving being made indispensable pseudoregulators, dampening risks of competition and interoperability.
>
> — Michael Veale (@mikarv) December 15, 2020

Good example of what I'm talking about: use of AI for moderation. Fraught with difficulty, but tech companies love it. Oliver Dowden was just asked about it in the Commons

He advised the MP "to go along to some of these tech companies and see the advances that they're making"

I am sympathetic to the government's dilemma here. It's not easy. But the potential for unintended consequences is v.high

In his speech Dowden said tech companies should try to "engineer the harm out of their platforms from the very outset"

I have no idea what that means either

A piece from last year on online harms, focusing mainly on cyberbullying

I like to be constructive, so I suggested a concrete proposal for action. If the government had taken my advice back then, it'd be a lot better off right now
https://t.co/Jo6iBz2rLC

Good question from @DamianCollins in the debate: will Ofcom be able to audit the transparency reports from tech companies? Oliver Dowden say they will

But will Ofcom be auditing a quarterly pdf or an API with data it defines itself?

Another good question, this time from @darrenpjones. Didn't get answered, but there you go
https://t.co/hjSbskGEmY

> If @Ofcom is going to regulate online harms it needs to be able to understand what is causing harm. That means it must be able to demand access to information on how users are using technology products. The Secretary of State wouldn't confirm whether Ofcom will have these powers. pic.twitter.com/Kf4HqTm7IA
>
> — Darren Jones MP (@darrenpjones) December 15, 2020