

UK waters down internet rules plan after free speech outcry

LONDON (AP News, 11/29/2022) — The British government has abandoned a plan to force tech firms to remove internet content that is harmful but legal, after the proposal drew strong criticism from lawmakers and civil liberties groups.

The U.K. on Tuesday defended its decision to water down the Online Safety Bill, an ambitious but controversial attempt to crack down on online racism, unwanted sexual content, bullying, and other harmful material.

Similar efforts are underway in the European Union and the United States, but the U.K.'s was one of the most sweeping. In its original form, the bill gave regulators wide-ranging powers to sanction digital and social media companies like Google, Facebook, Twitter and TikTok.

Critics had expressed concern that a requirement for the biggest platforms to remove “legal but harmful” content could lead to censorship and undermine free speech.

The Conservative government of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, who took office last month, has now dropped that part of the bill. The government hopes the change will be enough to pass the proposed law by mid-2023.

Under the revised bill, companies will be free to allow adults to post and see offensive or harmful material, as long as it is not illegal. However, platforms that pledge to ban racist, homophobic, or other offensive content and then fail to do so, can be fined up to 10% of their annual income. Companies also will have to show how they enforce user age limits designed to keep children from seeing harmful material.

Other parts of the bill have not been changed. The bill still criminalizes some online activity, including cyberflashing — sending someone unwanted explicit images — and epilepsy trolling, sending flashing images that can trigger seizures. It also makes it an offense to assist or encourage self-harm, a step that follows a campaign by the family of Molly Russell, a 14-year-old who ended her life in 2017 after viewing self-harm and suicide content online.

Digital Secretary Michelle Donelan stressed that “legal but harmful” material would only be permitted for adults, and children would still be protected.

Comprehension Questions

- 1) Why did the UK abandon plans to force tech companies to remove harmful but legal online content?
- 2) Which companies would have been affected by this proposed law?
- 3) What are some of the changes that the government made to the bill?
- 4) What else does the bill criminalize?

Discussion Questions

- 5) Do agree that “legal but harmful” content should be allowed on the internet? Why or why not?
- 6) What do you think about the revised bill?
- 7) How do you think this bill compares to the laws in Korea? Is it more strict or less strict? And in what ways?

Homework: Write answers in MS-Word for all questions. All answers should be full sentences. Answers for Questions 5-7 should be thoughtful and substantive.