

# The UK Is the World's Internet Censorship Boss

by Mike Robinson

*This is an edited transcript of the opening remarks made by Mike Robinson to The LaRouche Organization's Manhattan Project Dialogue, hosted by Dennis Speed, June 12, 2021. Mr. Robinson is co-editor of the UK Column, and has been writing on political issues since the mid-1990s. His background is in technology infrastructure: he has worked in a wide range of sectors: telecoms, heavy engineering, legal, and finance. Other presenters on the program were the Schiller Institute's Harley Schlanger; EIR Editor Mike Billington; activist/author Dan Kovalik; and Independent LaRouche Candidate for U.S. Senate from New York, Diane Sare. The entire program is available [here](#).*



Mike Robinson TLO

machine tools out of the country into Turkey. And so part of the problem, there, is of course that now Syria doesn't have any manufacturing capability and no way to regain that manufacturing capability because of the sanctions. The other problem that they have that's still ongoing, of course, is the electricity situation. Vanessa lives in Damascus, has lived there for a few years, now. I think her current situation is one hour of electricity and then five hours off. And so it's a pretty difficult situation.

Harley was talking about the "rules-based international order," and this push by Britain, the United States, and other G7 countries to do as they please, and call it the rules. But they can only do this with a complicit media, and in the UK we have seen over the last number of years, a real push to make sure there is only one story being told, one narrative being told, and to shut down every narrative which might contradict the official one. So, I'm going to run through, first of all a little bit of the runup to this,



*To enforce the asymmetrical "rules-based international order," key legislation will come before Parliament in the coming weeks to destroy what remains of freedom of press and freedom of speech.*

Just to start off, we just heard how hard it is for Syria to rebuild, and one of the things that certainly wasn't reported in the mainstream press, but was reported by my friend and colleague Vanessa Beeley, is that during the course of the war, the jihadis were effectively stealing entire factories. They were taking

because this has led up to a really key piece of legislation which is just coming into the British Parliament in the next few weeks. But the reason this is important, is that Britain intends this to be the framework for how the internet and the media are going to be regulated globally.

## A Chronology of Increasing Censorship

I'm going to run through a timeline, first of all. The story begins in 2014 when David Cameron gave his UN General Assembly speech, and he was calling for regulation of the internet. At this point, the story was that we have to protect the general public from "terrorist narratives." And nothing much happened for three years, and then [Home Secretary] Amber Rudd brought all the major tech companies into Whitehall in London, and really started having a conversation with them about what could be done to better manage narratives. She brought Google, Microsoft, Twitter and Facebook in, and that was followed up with meetings with Theresa May who was Prime Minister at the time.

Now, jump forward to May 2017, and Facebook started to join into the narrative about having to "protect" people, so they broadened their campaign to raise

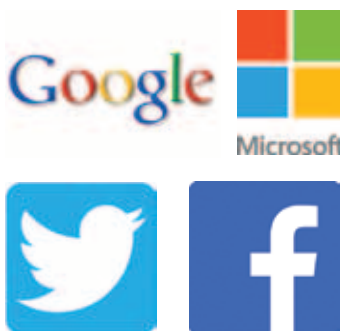
we started seeing the tech companies also taking action against particularly Russian organizations. So Twitter banning advertising by RT and Sputnik—this is still 2017.

## 'You Must Trust Your Media Outlet To Protect You'

And then we started to see the issue of "trust" being raised. This concept of "trust" is really quite important, because this is something the British government is really pushing hard, with the U.S. as well, because if you have a media organization that is trusted, and that organization is putting out a particular narrative, then that narrative doesn't get questioned. It's a "trusted" narrative, and people don't ask questions about it. This became a very big part of the story with respect to Shell-ing Done [as heard] and the alternative points of view. Theresa May in 2018 announced at Davos, at the World



UN



UK Parliament

*In a speech to the UN General Assembly in 2014, then Prime Minister David Cameron first called for regulation of the internet. In 2018, under Prime Minister Theresa May, the UK began regulating the internet, and by 2019, Facebook began censoring content.*

awareness of "fake news." And they published advertisements in the UK press about it. But then, there was a G7 meeting in May 2017, demanding that the major internet companies crack down on extremist contents. The excuse at this time was still terrorism and terrorist content. In the meantime, of course, the war was going on in Syria, and lots of information, lots of videoclips of beheadings, of other things coming out of Syria, and really, the UK government, the G7 governments were very happy for that kind of thing to appear on mainstream news.

In June 2017, the "tech giants," as they're described, created the "Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism." This was the first major effort by the tech companies to get together and decide how they were going to manage speech on the internet, and how they were going to shut down particular types of speech on the internet.

And we start seeing the rise of "fact checker" organizations. "Full Fact" in the UK is the main one. Snopes perhaps is more well-known in the United States. And then

Economic Forum, that the UK was going to start regulating the internet. Later on in 2018, Matt Hancock—at that time he was in charge of the media (he's currently Health Secretary in the UK)—announced that the British government was going to step in to underpin the mainstream press and media.

Now, there was major concern from the British government that the media in the UK weren't financially viable, didn't have a foundation to build off, because as they moved from traditional print on to digital, and moved from print advertising to digital advertising, they were finding their revenues being cut. The British government absolutely wanted to reinforce, underpin, and make sure the businesses didn't fail for financial reasons. So he launched a review, called the *Cairncross Review*, and it was all about making sure the tech companies shared revenues properly with the mainstream media organizations in the UK.

And then, in April 2018, Theresa May set up the

Rapid Response Unit within the Cabinet Office, which still exists and is funded permanently. It patrols the internet for alternative narratives. It's a data-gathering exercise. It's looking for anybody pushing any particular point of view, and it's there to decide how significant, how much traction it's getting, and whether it needs to be countered in the mainstream press. And then we got the intelligence services involved, because the MI5 Director General Andrew Parker told an EU security conference that a great deal more needs to be done about disinformation, misinformation on the internet, and so on.

Later in 2018, Theresa May at the G7 summit in Quebec presented the idea of a Rapid Response Mechanism [not to be confused with the Rapid Response Unit mentioned a moment ago—MR]. It was all about making sure that, particularly with respect to international narratives, that these narratives were agreed amongst the G7, and that there was a common narrative between all the governments and therefore that common narrative was briefed to all the mainstream press and media in each country, so that each country had the same story. This is another very important aspect.

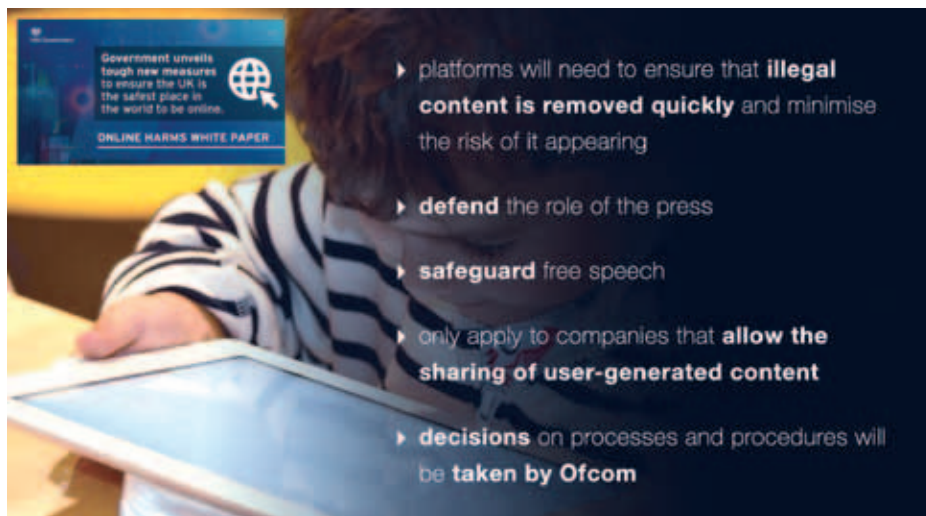
Still in 2018, a new UK Council for Child Internet Safety was set up with all the big players—Apple, BBC, as children's charities—because we started to see the narrative changing from “we've got to protect people from terrorist content,” to “we've got to protect children,” and that has been a big part of how they've pushed this since. GCHQ is involved in this; the Information Commissioner's Office, which is the regulator for data collection in this country; the Independent Advisory Group on Hate Crime; various other organizations including Microsoft; NSPCC (the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children), another children's charity; and Ofcom (the Office of Communications)—you'll hear more about Ofcom in a minute—and so on.

### Now Comes Content Censorship

Then in 2019, Facebook increasingly began censoring content, employing the government-backed fact-

checking organization Full Fact, to provide fact-checking service for UK content on Facebook. In the meantime, Facebook had also employed Nick Clegg, the former Deputy Prime Minister, as an advisor. WhatsApp (owned by Facebook) gets involved in limiting how information is shared on that platform. And then Dame Frances Cairncross published her review on the sustainability of the mainstream press, which provided institutional support, regulatory support. It is now the situation that the mainstream press in the UK is largely funded through advertising by the British government, so there is no possibility for them to push forward any kind of counter-narrative, or even challenge the government's narrative.

Later on that year, the government published what they called their “Online Harms White Paper.” A “white



Courtesy of Mike Robinson

*Under the pretext of “defending the role of the press,” legislation now being prepared will impose a “duty of care” on all internet, press, and media companies, in keeping with what content is allowed by Ofcom, the government regulator, and what is not, forestalling any effective challenge to official narratives.*

paper” is a publication which leads toward legislation, and this white paper was published with a view to getting some kind of general public comment, but also from “stakeholders” (as they like to call them) in how the internet should be regulated, and it came to certain conclusions which are now appearing in the legislation.

So let's just have a look at some of the things they were talking about: Platforms—that's the like of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter—will meet and ensure that “illegal content is removed quickly” and minimize the risk of its appearing. This is important, because the scope has broadened somewhat from this. It is now not just “illegal content” but it's now “illegal or content which might be perceived to be harmful by some

people”; it’s not very well defined, so it’s as broad or narrow as they want it to be.

They’re going to “defend the role of the press.” They did that through the *Cairncross Review*: They’re absolutely funding the British press at the moment. They’re going to “safeguard free speech”—we’ll explain how that’s going to work in a second—but it will only apply to companies that will “allow sharing of user-generated content.” This also has broadened somewhat since that point, because now it not only includes user-generated content like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, but also search engines as well.

And then, they have decided that Ofcom—this is the regulator for not only the telecommunications, but currently the regulator for broadcast media in UK—is going to be given the task of regulating the internet as well.

Let’s just have a brief look at some quotes:

Nicky Morgan, who followed Hancock as head of the Department for Digital, Culture Media, and Sport:

With Ofcom at the helm of a proportionate and strong regulatory regime, we have an incredible opportunity to lead the world in building a thriving digital economy, driven by groundbreaking technology, that is trusted by and protects everyone in the UK.

It’s all about trust, we’ve got to make sure there’s no doubt about the trust we have in the mainstream press and media. And Pritti Patel saying, there can be no “hiding place for criminals” in the internet. This is the excuse that they’re using to shut down any kind of counter-narrative in the UK at the moment.

## **Doublespeak Laws To Restrict Freedom of Speech**

So let’s have a look at the legislation and how it sits at the minute:

I’m going to say, first of all, that the legislation is



10 Downing Street/Andrew Parsons

*In 2018, Matt Hancock, as Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, announced that the British government would begin subsidizing the mainstream press and media.*

about 100 pages long. It’s extremely convoluted, and what I’m going to show you is what we understand of it so far, but there’s a lot more digging to be done on this because—you’ll see, even as we scratch the surface—how this is going to hurt freedom of speech in the UK.

The new legislation applies to what they’re describing as Category 1 platforms. These are the main platforms—Twitter, Facebook and so on; but there are also Category 2—platforms that have slightly lesser regulation in place. It’s still going to be pretty onerous for smaller businesses. It applies to services used in the UK but it also applies to services which UK users can access, so if you

have an office in the UK, you’re certainly falling under this regime, but if you even offer your services in the UK, the UK government is going to attempt to make it fall under this regime. Ofcom will be the regulator, as we said.

There’s plenty of room in this legislation for “scope-creep” through secondary legislation. In the UK, we have this concept of the statutory instrument, so the primary instrument gives the Secretary of State the option to make new legislation as he sees fit, within certain limitations. So this is an enabling act in a sense. And although that secondary legislation is supposed to be placed before Parliament, it usually happens on a Sunday evening when nobody is there, so it doesn’t get much scrutiny.

They’re saying the platforms have a “duty of care”—so they’re saying, “In line with the government’s response to the Online Harms White Paper, all companies in scope will have a duty of care towards their users such that what is unacceptable offline will also be unacceptable online.” Well, that sounds very reasonable, but then it goes on to say, “The largest and most popular social media sites (Category 1 services) will need to act on content that is lawful but still harmful”—now think about that: “content that is lawful but still harmful”—they will need to act on, in other words take it down, “such as abuse that falls below the thresh-

old of a criminal offense, encouragement of self-harm and mis/disinformation.” This is what the government considers “mis/disinformation.” “The draft Bill contains reserved powers for Ofcom to pursue criminal action against senior managers whose companies do not comply with Ofcom’s requests for information.” So this is not equivalent to, for example, a corporate manslaughter charge. This is criminal charges being brought against individuals within companies; there’s no hiding behind the corporate structure on this, so this is going to have a very chilling effect on freedom of speech.

But, “The Bill will ensure people in the UK can express themselves freely online and participate in pluralistic and robust debate.” The problem here is, when you start getting into the detail of this, what that means is that there will be nothing in the legislation that will prevent anybody from setting up their own website, but if they attempt to share any of the content from that website on any of the main platforms, and therefore develop an audience of some kind, that will be stopped at that point. So therefore, freedom of speech is guaranteed, because “you can say what you like, you just can’t be heard,” is basically how they’re going to manage this problem.

“People using [platforms’] services will need to have access to an effective route of appeal for content removed without good reason, and companies must reinstate that content if it has been removed unfairly,” is what they claim. Well, anybody that has already engaged before this legislation is in place, anybody who has already engaged with the appeal processes with YouTube or Facebook, knows that these organizations simply say that the content was not removed unfairly, or that they had good reason, without specifying what the reason was. So this is in fact no protection for freedom of expression at all. “Users will also be able to appeal to Ofcom and these complaints will form an essential part of Ofcom’s horizon-scanning, research and enforcement activity.” So this is about Ofcom’s horizon-scanning, it’s about data collection, it’s about making sure they understand that the companies are doing a good job in shutting down particular narratives.

But there is protection for what they describe as “democratic content.” This is any content that is viewed as “democratically important,” in other words, any content which comes from the government. The journalistic content then, “content in new publishers’ websites is not in scope,” because, of course, there is an absolute

right to freedom of speech, so anything that’s on any website is not in scope, that isn’t a user-to-user website, has to be a social media platform, or a search engine. “This includes both an author’s own articles, and user comments on those articles.”

The reason for that is, as they stated from the beginning, all user comments on news websites are already regulated by other bodies, so there’s no need for duplication of effort here. “Articles by recognized news publishers shared on in-scope services will be exempted”—so in other words, if you are the BBC or the *Guardian* or the *Times*, your content is protected and it cannot be removed by the social media companies; but if you’re a smaller media organization which is not recognized by Ofcom or the government, then your content is not protected in any way!

However, they do go on to say, “Citizen journalists’ content will have the same protections as professional journalists’ content.” Again, the definition of “citizen journalist” here is not terribly clear, but we understand that to mean the likes of Bellingcat (the Netherlands-based investigative journalism website), for example, who are viewed as “citizen journalists” are, again, approved citizen journalists.

So, we have a piece of legislation here which is about to progress through the House of Commons; it is widely backed by most MPs at this point in time; most MPs will not read the legislation because it’s extremely difficult to read. But what it does is, establish a framework which the UK expects other G7 countries and the EU to get onboard with, certainly what they’ve been negotiating over the last several years with all these other countries.

This leaves people in the position that narratives cannot be challenged, unless we think back to what happened in Syria, and think back to what is continuing to happen now with respect to Russia and China. This activity by Western governments could not happen, if there were a proper Fourth Estate, proper press scrutiny of what they’re doing. But because they effectively have the press in their pockets, and are effectively shutting down anybody that might be able to provide some information that would help people make a proper decision about what their governments are up to, we are heading in a pretty dangerous direction.

I think that this particular legislation is extremely important, that it get revised, at the very least in the UK. Everybody in the United States and other countries needs to be looking out for similar efforts.