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Responding to Online Threats Against MPs: Freedom of Speech or Regulation?

Is There a Clash Between Freedom of Speech and Regulation of Violent Online Content?

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A recent parliamentary report by the Speaker's Conference on the security of MPs, candidates, and elections highlighted the growing concern about online harassment, abuse, and intimidation (HAI) of politicians and political candidates. Of MPs surveyed, 83% (of 188) reported being subjected to abusive language and insults, 37% reported threats of harm, and 27% reported death threats.[1] With the murders of MPs David Amess and Jo Cox demonstrating the very real risk MPS face, online HAI incidents can have a chilling effect on politicians and candidates, who often reported feeling depressed and unsafe as a result. Indeed, one in three surveyed MPs had considered not standing for re-election and one in six considered resigning from public office.[2] This suggests that by reducing the number of people willing to run for elected public office, HAI may degrade the democratic process. These findings also underscore the urgent need to address HAI through new government strategies and policy interventions.

Suggested solutions to the rising problem of HAI often include the regulation of online social media, such as by obligating platforms to assume responsibility for violent content and enhanced government efforts to prosecute social media users who post such content. For example, the Online Safety Act of 2023, Section 181 "criminalises instances where a person who sends a message conveying a threat of death, serious injury…and intends that (or is reckless as to whether) someone encountering the message will fear the threat will be carried out".[3] However, imposing tighter regulations and more severe punishments often provokes concerns about free expression, the exercise of which is a hallmark of liberal democracy. Efforts to address HAI therefore present a conundrum: policies intended to minimize HAI's corrosive effects on democracy may be perceived by some citizens as a threat to their core rights and freedoms. However, relatively little is known about how citizens themselves would strike the balance. How do they react to government attempts to regulate discourse on social media and to prosecute those who engage in threats and abuse of politicians and candidates?

Here we examine British public preferences on three policy questions: 1) Should abusive content should be restricted? 2) Should social media companies be responsible for removing that content? 3) Is government regulation needed to hold these companies accountable? Our evidence comes from a survey fielded in January 2025 on a demographically representative sample of 6,400 British adults recruited via the online survey platform Prolific.

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[1] Speaker's Conference on the security of MPs, candidates and elections. This is a House of Commons committee report, with recommendations to government. First Report of Session 2024–25 https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmspeak/570/report.html
[2] Ibid.
[3] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-safety-act-new-criminal-offences-circular/online-safety-act-new-criminal-offences-circular

How widespread is support for regulation?

In a previous study, we demonstrated widespread intolerance of violent online threats directed towards candidates (Shair-Rosenfield et al., 2024). Here we find less consistent support amongst the public about *how to respond* to online violent threats, particularly with regards to restrictions on speech and government regulation. Figure 1 displays the percentage of respondents who agree with a series of statements about removal or restriction of *violent comments* and *users* who make violent comments, as well as regulation *by* social media companies and regulation *of* social media companies (i.e., by the government). The question was asked on a five-point scale with restrictions and regulation where the top two response categories indicate agreement and strong agreement; these are the values reported in all figures below.

Figure 1: Agreement with statements about HAI responsibility and regulation
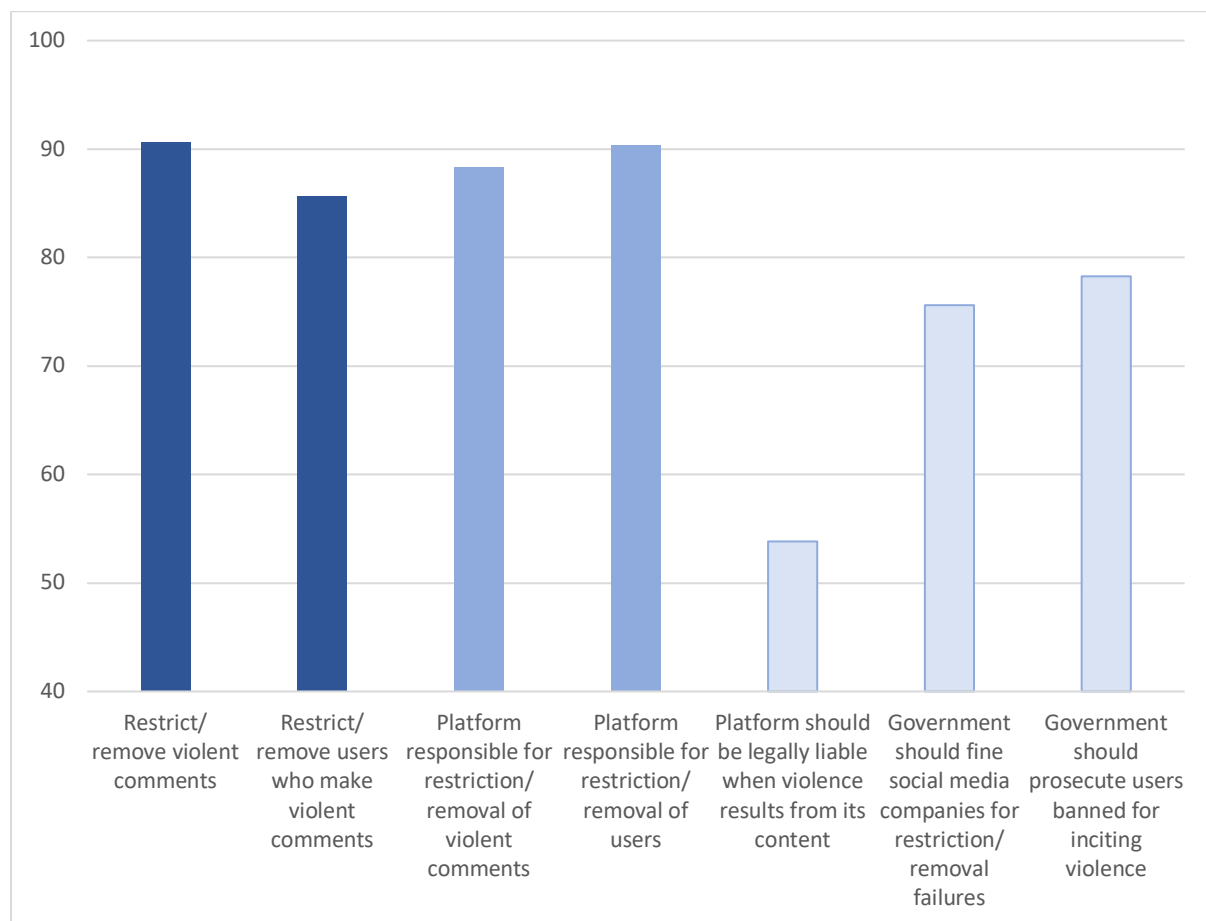
A large majority of respondents agree with all statements except for holding social media companies legally liable. Between 86 and 91% of respondents believe violent comments and users who make these comments should be removed from/restricted on social media platforms

(dark blue bars) with similar percentages supporting regulation by social media companies (medium blue bars).

Our respondents were more cautious about the role of government restricting social media companies or users directly (light blue bars): only a slim majority agreed that social media companies should be held legally liable for episodes of physical violence that result from violent content on their platforms. However, more than 75% supported the government fining social media companies for failing to restrict violent threats and prosecuting users who are banned for making violent statements. This suggests little ambivalence amongst our respondents about responding to violent online comments directed towards politicians and candidates, although regulation *by* social media companies is somewhat more favoured than regulation *of* social media companies.

Who supports restriction and regulation?

What is the source of this ambivalence? First, we look at two demographic characteristics commonly associated with differences in support for restrictions and regulation of online space—gender and age—that confirms patterns established by previous research.

Figure 2: Agreement with statements about HAI responsibility and regulation by sex
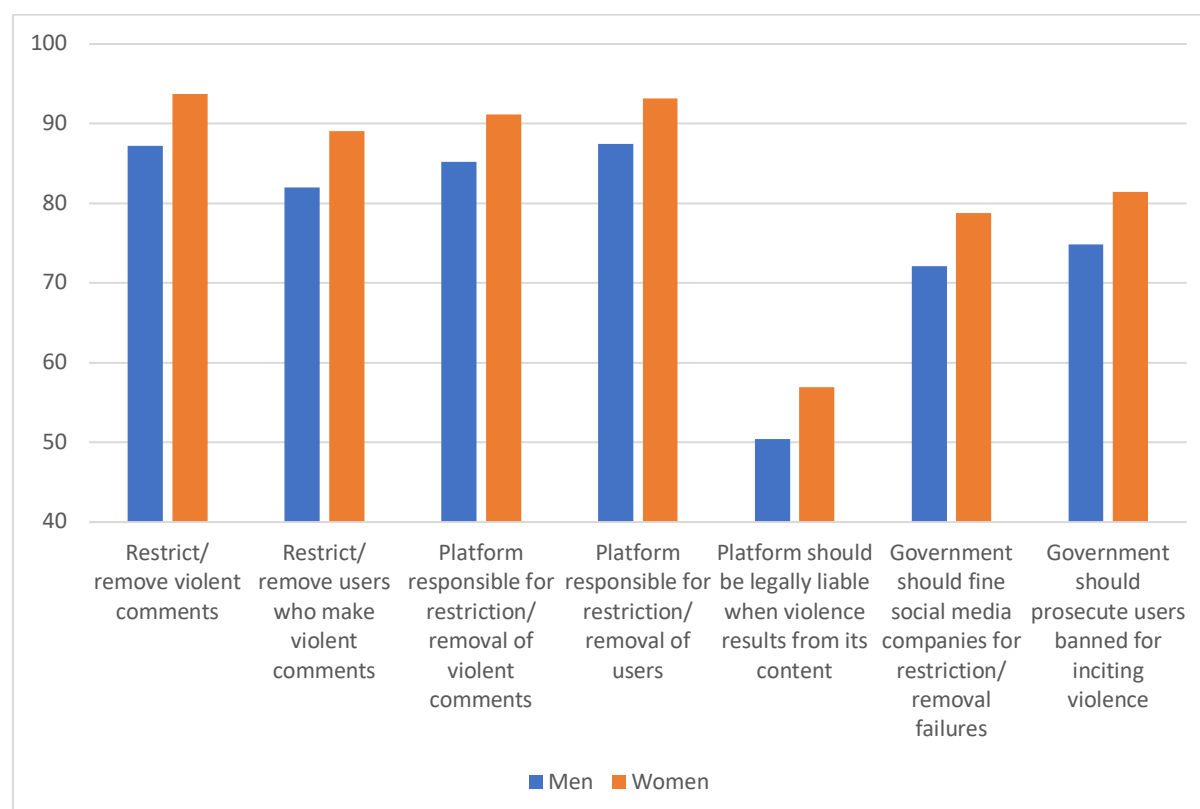
Willingness to restrict and regulate violent social media messages and users have a distinct gendered dimension, with men being less certain about restricting and regulating than women. Figure 2 shows agreement with all the statements as being higher amongst women (in the orange bars) than men (in the blue bars), with the gender gap between 6 and 8 percentage points across the different forms of restrictions and regulations. The findings suggest that women (who are more often the targets of this type of online abuse) perceive greater value in the restriction of online violent speech than men, although men and women are both less supportive of government regulation of social media companies and holding users to account.

In Figure 3 we see support by different age groups for restrictions and regulation. Each set of bars is arranged from the youngest (darkest-coloured bars) to the oldest (lightest-coloured bars) respondents. Generally, there is a clear pattern that younger respondents are far less supportive of both restrictions, regulation and prosecution than older respondents.

Figure 3: Agreement with statements about HAI responsibility and regulation by age
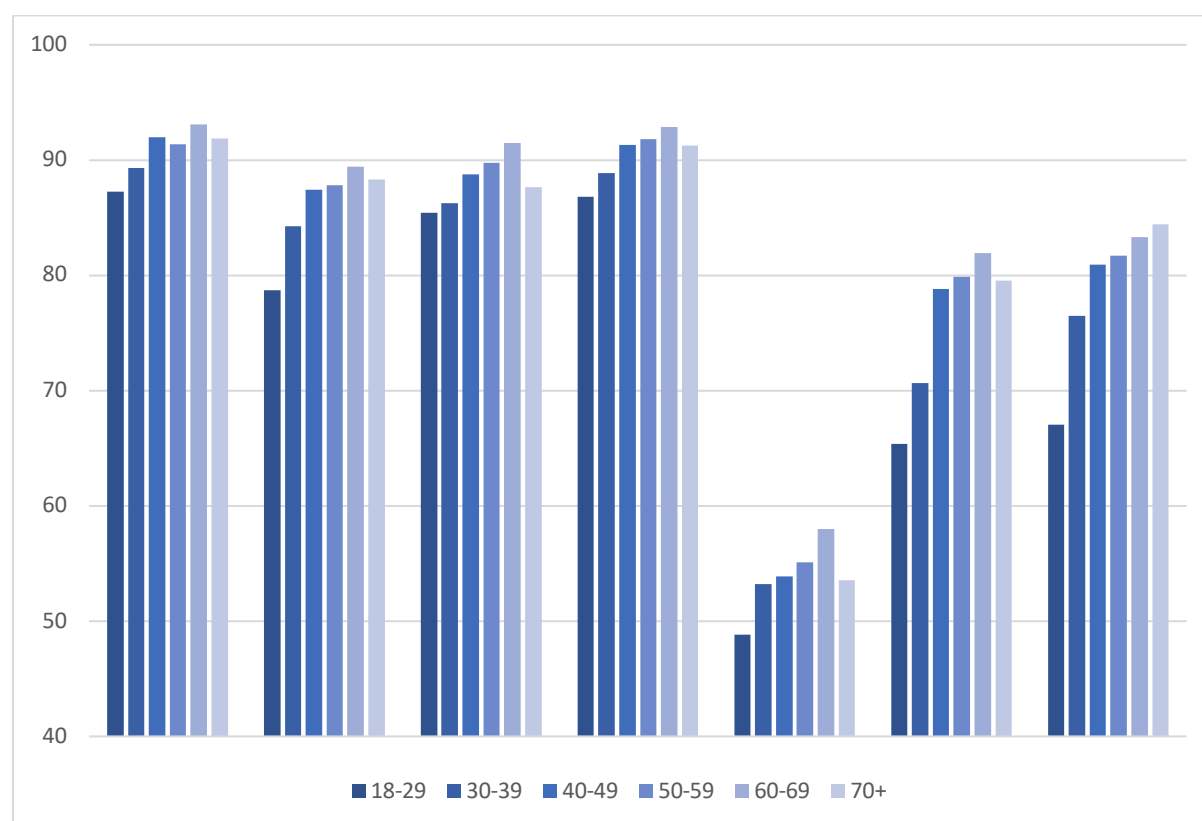
Interestingly, the largest gaps in support across age groups relate to restricting/removing *users* who post violent content rather than the content itself, and in the role of government. For example, the differences between the youngest and older age groups in support for violent

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content removal and social media companies bearing responsibility are less than 6 percentage points. In terms of restricting *users* generally, the difference is more than 10 percentage points between the youngest (18-29 years old) and the oldest age groups (60+); the difference grows to 15 percentage points regarding the government fining social media companies and 17 percentage points regarding the government prosecuting banned users.

These are large differences that may have significant implications for public support of regulation over the longer-term. Social media natives—those who have grown up with and are the most common users of these platforms—are perhaps desensitised to online threats and thus have little appetite to be regulated. If these attitudes persist as these cohorts age, we may see even less support amongst the public for government regulation of social media spaces despite mounting evidence of the potential negative effects associated with a lack of regulation.

Why Support Restriction and Regulation?

What lies behind these attitudes towards regulation? First, we found that attitudes vary depending on respondents' political ideology. To measure a respondent's political ideology, we asked people to place themselves along a continuum between an extremely liberal set of positions (e.g., concerned about climate change, voted "Remain", and support immigration) and an extremely conservative set of positions (e.g., climate sceptic, voted "Leave", and oppose immigration). Secondly, tapping into recent research about the potential for free speech preferences to shape demand for regulation (Jhaver and Zhang 2025), we examine whether individuals who support free speech are less inclined to restrict content even if it is violent. To measure a respondent's attitude towards free speech, we asked them how much they agreed with five statements such as "There should be limits on the freedom of speech of people who threaten society", creating a scale of support for free speech that ranges from low (1) to high (4) support.

Examining the effect of broad political ideology on support for restrictions and regulations in Figure 4, there is a general decline in support as we move from left to right but with a modest plateauing effect for respondents at moderately and right-wing positions for most forms of restrictions and regulations. The results confirm an expected difference by political ideology where those on the left are more inclined for restrictions and government regulation while those on the right are more opposed.

Figure 4: Agreement with statements about HAI responsibility and regulation by political ideology
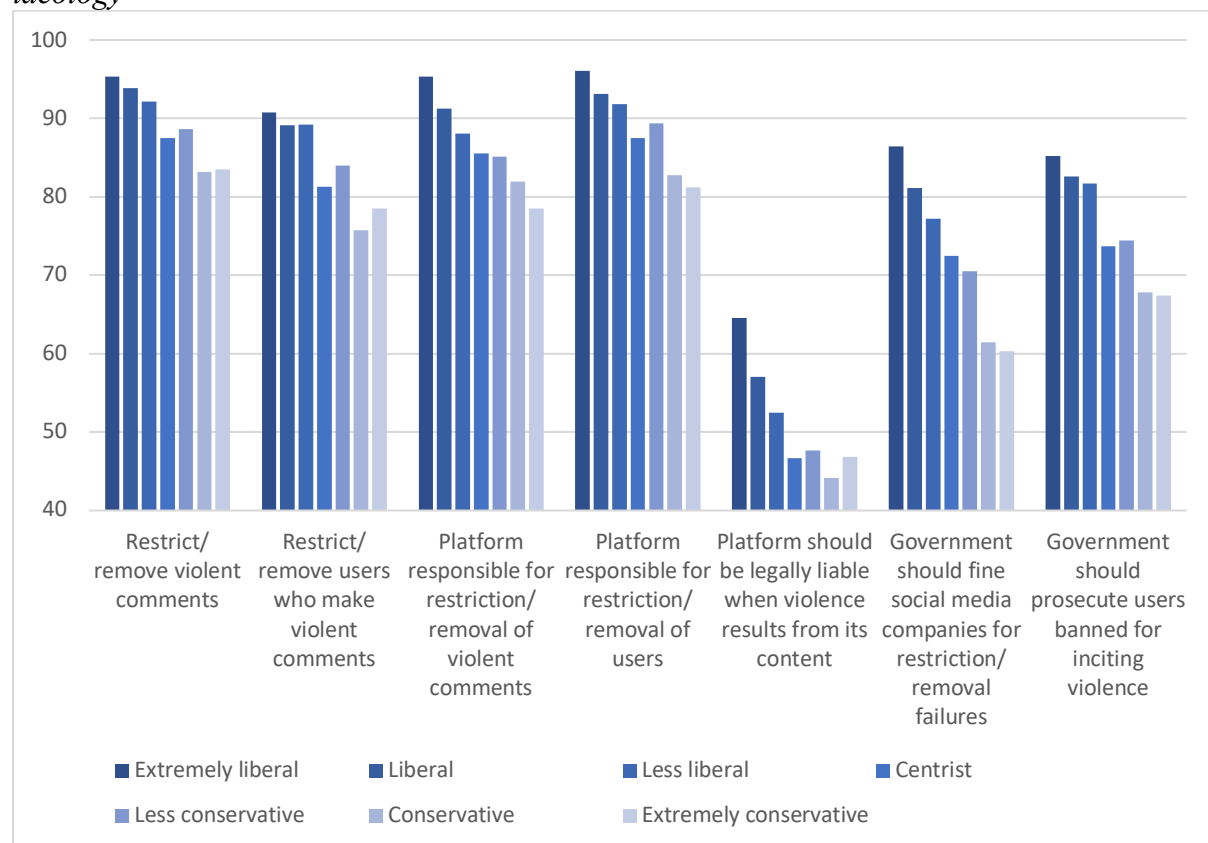
Finally, Figure 5 shows a strong (and unsurprising) relationship between attitudes towards freedom of speech and support for regulation and prosecution of online threats. Recall that freedom of speech is a scale with those expressing the lowest support of freedom of speech (in the darkest blue bars) to those expressing the highest support (in the lightest blue bars). The results suggest that debates around freedom of speech have a large effect on public support for restriction, regulation, and prosecution, but that the gap really grows for individuals identifying at the highest end of the scale. For example, only a minority of those who are most supportive of freedom of speech are in favour of any of the regulations on social media companies or prosecution of individual users. In contrast, no other group shows less than majority support for all forms of restrictions or regulations. While views on freedom of speech clearly shape support for restrictions and government regulation in online space, with only 12% of the sample falling into the highest free speech group this means an overwhelming majority of the population favours some level of greater restrictions and regulations.

Figure 5: Agreement with statements about HAI responsibility and regulation by attitudes toward freedom of speech
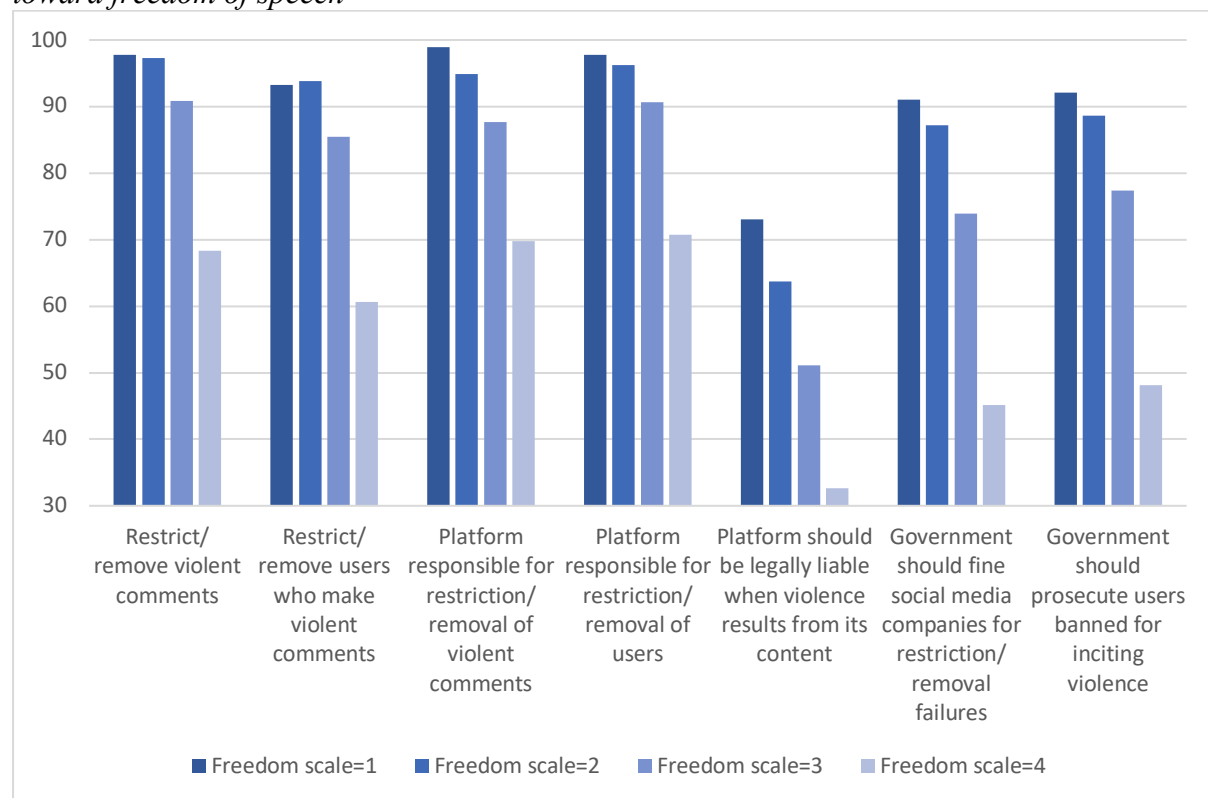
Conclusion

Overall, the British public is clearly in favour of addressing HAI through the regulation of social media space. Few citizens are minded to defend freedom of speech when this means defending the right to abuse politicians online. This is not surprising given how dimly HAI is viewed by the vast majority of British citizens (Shair-Rosenfield et al., 2024). It is also consistent with a general pattern in public opinion—in Britain and beyond—whereby a widespread endorsement of rights and freedoms in the abstract is usually accompanied by a willingness to suspend them in cases and contexts that seem to demand this.

However, while a clear majority of the public strongly support removing or restricting violent content and/or punishing users who make online threats, there remains scepticism in some pockets of society about government intervention as a way to address the problem. Younger Britons, who have grown up online and habitually use social media, are least supportive of fining social media companies and restricting or prosecuting users. Additionally, the most ardent supporters of free speech are often most opposed to government interventions affecting

expression, and this is apparent in the case of social media as well. There is scope for a political party or campaign group to win at least some public support by advocating for less regulated space and greater tolerance of threats (and, with the voting age to be lowered to 16, that scope may have just broadened a little).

Debates relating to free speech on social media platforms such as X and at universities retain significant potential to shape attitudes towards government regulation and prosecution of individuals who incite online violence. Growing public opposition to these interventions would further complicate the situation for lawmakers and campaigners trying to enhance such regulations via the Online Safety Act. Even as implementation of the Act began this year, with no prosecutions or fines issued as of mid-July, it has remained under attack from both opponents—who have argued that the regulations threaten everyday user freedoms and pose existential risk to small online companies—and campaigners—who have criticised the regulations for not being strict enough and for failing to address how platforms amplify misinformation and disinformation.

For the big technology companies operating the platforms that enable much of the online HAI facing politicians, "official" compliance with the Act may be relatively easy to meet and yet ultimately achieve very little in terms of reducing online HAI.[4] There is currently scope for Ofcom to establish meaningful standards and strengthen incentives for big tech companies to comply, but staunch challenges to transparent and consistent enforcement from those companies and within Parliament remain. Our research suggests a healthy appetite amongst the British public for holding big tech companies accountable for HAI and violent content on their platforms, and now is the time for Ofcom to take advantage of that support.

References

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[4] https://counterhate.com/blog/metas-rollback-of-safety-measures-has-big-implications-for-social-media-users-in-the-uk/