

ANDREW MARR SHOW

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MATTHEW HANCOCK

EB: What exactly are you going to do in legislation to tackle these problems?

MH: Well, I think clearly we need to make sure that we have a legislative framework to make it safer to be online. And I think that there's a strong support for that, both here at home and also domestically. So the plans we're putting forward –

EB: Here at home and domestically?

MH: Here at home and internationally, sorry. Thank you for clearing that one up. The plans that we're putting in place today include looking at the code of conduct in terms of how people behave online, making sure that those are enforced properly. At the moment the big social media companies have got terms of reference but often they're not enforced properly. Making sure that there's better transparency about what happens online. And also in particular I'm very worried about the – about age verification. About the fact children can go online and just tick a box saying I am 13.

EB: I did ask what you're going to do, so let's talk about fines. You've talked about fines. What level of fines against the likes of Facebook and Google?

MH: Well, in the Data Protection Bill, which is hopefully going to become law this week, then the level of fine can be up to four per cent of global turnover. So in the case of some of the biggest of these internet giants that's over a billion pounds. Now, the plan-

EB: You're going to fine Facebook, Google, Twitter more than a billion pounds if they flout these laws that you're going to create?

MH: Well, I'm saying that yes, in the Bill that's in front of parliament right now that's the maximum level of fine.

EB: That's the maximum. You mentioned age verification. Children are supposed to be 13 to sign up to most of these platforms. Let's talk about what it would take for you to impose that fine. How many British children would have to be under the age of 13 on those sorts of platforms for you to slap a fine on Facebook and the other tech giants, Twitter, Google, whoever?

MH: Well, I want to get to a point where all reasonable steps have been taken so that –

EB: Of course you do, but how many?

MH: Well, at the moment there are millions of children on the platforms. We just don't know how many –

EB: What's the threshold? You must have thought about this because you've come out today saying, 'I've got a plan, I'm going to take on the online giants.' Is it 30 kids, is it 100 kids, is it 100,000 kids? Let's get some figures.

MH: Well, I'm not going to give a figure because we're going to consult on it. What I want –

EB: Because you don't know.

MH: Well, the announcement we've made today is that we will legislate and that we'll bring forward a White Paper later this year with more of the details. But we want this to be a conversation that the nation is involved in.

EB: You don't need a consultation on this, about half of 11 and 12 year olds have a social media account. So I ask you again, how many children would it take to be wrongly on these platforms, under the age of 13, for you to slap a fine on these companies?

MH: Well, ultimately I hope that we get to a position where everybody has to have their age verified otherwise they're not allowed on. There's no point in having a rule and saying –

EB: I can't seem to get an age yet, but let me put something else –

MH: You have an age.

EB: Wait a minute, your colleague Ben Wallace, who's obviously briefed with security, he has spoken about terrorist material being online. How long would terrorist material have to be online on a video sharing website for there to be a fine put on that site?

MH: Well, hardly any time at all. And I'll tell you, the – some of the technology now can allow terrorist material to be taken off within seconds of it going on. So I think we should be very ambitious.

EB: So what, a ten-minute rule?

MH: The Germans have brought in a rule that it's after a couple of hours. The challenge is if you bring in a rule with a set timescale that the social media platforms work up to that timescale. I'd rather that they did it as quickly as possible.

EB: You're now going to tell them that you're going to put fines on them, so they need to know the rules.

MH: That's right.

EB: So you haven't got a timeframe, or we haven't got what will happen in terms of how many kids need to be the wrong age to be on those social media platforms. Your team said you recently invited 14 of these companies to come and meet to talk about this, and I'm sure a range of other issues. How many of them turned up?

MH: Four.

EB: Four. Why so few out of 14?

MH: Because I think one of the problems we've had recently, and having been in this area of work politically for the last, almost two years, one of the problems that we've got is that we engage with Facebook and Google and Twitter and they get all of the press and they get all of the complaints in the public domain debate, but there's now actually a far greater number of social media platforms, like musically and others that –

EB: They didn't show up.

MH: They didn't show up. And the companies, they've now got over a million on their site.

EB: Okay, but it doesn't really inspire confidence does it that you're coming here saying, 'we're going to consult, we're going to have new laws,' and you can't even, as the Culture Secretary, pull rank enough to get all 14 of the companies you invited to come and meet you. On top of that we can't get Mark Zuckerberg, it seems, as a country, to come and answer questions and be held to account by our MPs. He'll go and talk to Senators in America, he'll go and talk to the European Parliament, but he won't come here. We don't have this kind of power.

MH: Well, I very much agree with you. And that's one of the reasons that we're legislating. The fact that only four companies turned up when I invited the 14 biggest in, gave me a big impetus to drive this proposal to legislate through. Before then, and until now, there has been this argument 'work with the companies'. You know, do it on a voluntary basis, they'll do more that way because you're not – the lawyers won't be involved, they'll be doing best efforts. And after all, these companies were set up to make the world a better place. The fact that there are now companies that have social media platforms with over a million people on them and they didn't turn up –

EB: Sorry, let me put this to you.

MH: There's an important point here, which is that having a level playing field is important. There's no other area of life in the UK where we say because these companies are international therefore we can't legislate.

EB: Okay, well companies –

MH: So we will.

EB: Okay well companies are ... and are online and you are simply stressing the importance of online and being safe online. This week you announced that the amount that people can bet in fixed odd betting terminals in those gambling shops all over the high street will be capped at two pounds. I presume you can announce that there's going to be a maximum stake for online gambling.

MH: Yes, there's a whole series of extra support for people who bet online and tightening of the rules online.

EB: But then no capping.

MH: There's tightening of the rules.

EB: Tightening of the rules or a cap?

MH: The rules are dedicated at protecting people online, and it's slightly different online and the reason is this: that when you're betting online the company knows who you are and they can make sure that when they detect behaviour that is the behaviour of problem gamblers, then they shut down the account. The problem with the machines in the high street is that they didn't know who the people were because they're just stand-alone machines, and the –

EB: But the companies have no incentive to do that. They want to take their money. Sorry, do you actually think it's acceptable that someone can max out their credit card on one bet online? You seem to have ignored the internet with your big announcement this week.

MH: On the contrary.

EB: It's an analogue announcement, is it not, in a digital world?

MH: Did you read all 78 pages of the report?

EB: Thoroughly. Go on.

MH: Because then you would have read the many, many pages – dozens of pages –

EB: I actually did go through this report, of course I did.

MH: - which are all about tackling the online problems as well. So I agree, the headline and the announcement that most people noticed was reducing the cap from 100 pounds to two pounds

every 20 seconds that you have spent on these machines. But most of the document is about tackling the problems online, and there it is harder –

EB: But you're still not introducing a cap.

MH: Yes, we are introducing, through the Gambling Commission, tighter rules on problem gambling online.

EB: That's not a cap. But I do have to, while you're here, as a member of the Cabinet, I have to turn to Brexit. Michel Barnier, the EU's chief negotiator, said this week that reading some of the UK's position papers it sounds like we're a country that's trying to get into the European Union not leave. What does that say about the way the government is handling itself in these negotiations?

MH: It says that Michel Barnier is on the other side of the negotiation and it's his job to try to make his position as strong as possible. So he says all sorts of things like that.

EB: But they're not accepting our approach for a compromise and the government cannot agree, even within its own Cabinet, on the way that we should approach things like the customs union. Time is against. It's a farce isn't it?

MH: No, Michel Barnier has throughout this process of course made his argument for his side of the negotiation. It's one of the reasons why this thing's been so noisy, is that the Europeans, both Mr Barnier and others, have made arguments throughout about how weak they think the UK position is. It's their job to do that. Our job –

EB: Are you not helping by not being able to agree?

MH: On the contrary, our job is to get the best possible deal, and we had exactly this noise ahead of the December council, and then we got a good deal. We had exactly this noise ahead of the February council and we got a good deal. And so the nature of a negotiation is that some of it happens by megaphone, and we need to just make sure we focus on getting our position right.

EB: You brought in noise and debate. The person who chairs those debates is the Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow. Were you there when he allegedly called Andrea Leadsom, your Cabinet colleague, a stupid woman this week?

MH: I wasn't. No.

EB: Okay, well in his statement the Speaker's office, in response to that, said, 'Wednesday was an unusual and controversial day and how business was handled in the House, differing views were expressed on all sides of the subject.' Strikingly, he didn't deny it. Therefore should he lose his position?

MH: Well, if he said what has been claimed, then what I'd say is that people should debate in a rational and reasonable way and that sort of language is completely unacceptable. It is, you know, part of making politics a better way of doing things is about having more respect, more respect between men and women, and more respect between people of different backgrounds.

EB: So from what you're saying, though, he should lose his position if he said it.

MH: Well, I haven't seen confirmation that that's what he said, but what I think is that that sort of language is completely unacceptable in our political debate.

EB: But he hasn't denied it?

MATTHEW HANCOCK

MH: Well, that's a matter for him whether he denies it or not. I don't know whether –

EB: But I'm asking you, if it's the case should he lose his position?

MH: That's a conditional question. We don't know whether he said it. What I think, though –

EB: Would you accept it in your team?

MH: No.

EB: So he should lose his position is what I'm saying.

MH: I don't think anybody in my team would talk like that because they're all very professional people.

(ends)