

Julian Knight MP
Chair
Digital Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

April 2021

Call for Evidence into Influence Culture

Dear Mr Knight,

I am writing to you in response to your Committee's Call for Evidence into influencer culture and with particular reference to the real-world impact that misinformation perpetuated by influencers can and has had on the mobile industry.

As the 'call for evidence' recognises, influencers are now a significant component of the marketing mix. Brands of all sizes – large (including mobile operators) and small – employ them as part of their strategic brand strategies. Influencers underpin their value by commanding a large social media following across multiple digital platforms, and their followers are often influenced or take a strong interest in their opinions. Your Committee should take a broad view of the term 'influencer' – not just messages designed to sell products and services; those with large followings stray into expressing views about a wide range of issues. These opinions are not always just their own but also those they share, retweet or repost from multiple sources via their digital channels. In some instances such opinions, or those of others, are shared without a full understanding of the topic or the real world consequences.

At the height of the global pandemic in 2020 the mobile industry became a target for conspiracy theorists who sought to link the COVID-19 outbreak with 5G. On several occasions, celebrities and influencers, including Amir Khan ((2.1m & 1.3m followers on Twitter and Instagram) and Letitia Wright (deleted account)¹, chose to support or share stories that claimed to validate the false accusations about 5G, even when it is clear this is biologically impossible. We have even been told of one occasion where a mishap with the technology led to an inadvertent post about this topic (1.9m followers on Twitter).

Such endorsements, even when posted unknowingly, provide credibility to claims that have no basis in science and ultimately stand to risk people's lives and health, particularly when at the time when the nation was working towards a strategy to defeat the COVID-19 pandemic.

The false linkage between 5G and COVID-19, fuelled by retweeting and even endorsement led to abuse and intimidation of field engineers and arson attacks on mobile infrastructure, even masts that were not 5G, at time when people critically needed a mobile connection to stay in touch with family, work and the emergency services. On one occasion, the connectivity provided to one of the

¹ Account apparently self-deleted: <https://variety.com/2020/film/news/letitia-wright-deletes-twitter-1234847112/>

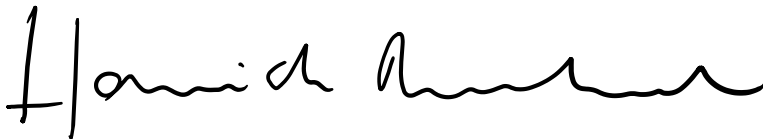
Nightingale Hospitals was impacted by an attack on a mast, not to mention the wider mobile connectivity needs of the emergency services, such as the ambulance service.

From April to August 2020 the industry recorded 133 arson attacks on masts and mobile equipment and over 300 incidences of abuse on telecoms staff and engineers and these incidents persist, even though it has been widely reported that it is not biologically possible for 5G to spread COVID-19.

As an industry we have worked closely with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and its counter-misinformation team to highlight social media activity where misinformation is being spread or where it could have negative impacts on our infrastructure. I am happy to say that the department worked effectively with us and the technology companies to remove material but there is still more work needed to ensure that misinformation cannot be so easily spread, and to ensure that people who command massive audiences recognise their duty to act responsibly in disseminating information.

Where tech companies rely purely on algorithms there must be more open channels for industry organisations such as Mobile UK to feed into when misinformation is detected. Equally, these channels must be quick to respond in order to stop the spread of misinformation which, as in the case of the arson attacks, was able to spread extremely rapidly.

Yours sincerely



Hamish MacLeod
Director
Mobile UK