

Reference: 01881655

Information Requests
information.requests@ofcom.org.uk

29 September 2024

Freedom of Information request: Right to know request

Thank you for your request for information about the definition of harmful and disinformation.

We received this request on 9 August 2024 and we have considered your request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (“the FOI Act”).

Your request

“On 7th August 2024 OFCOM published an open letter, from Gill Whitehead, to online service providers in the UK. In that letter “harmful disinformation” is referred to.

Please can you:

- 1. provide OFCOM’s definition of “harmful”; and*
- 2. provide OFCOM’s definition of “disinformation”.*

Our response

In her open letter to online service providers operating in the UK, Gill Whitehead’s reference to “harmful disinformation” was made in the specific context of additional duties which will be placed on some of the most widely used services (‘categorised services’) under the Online Safety Act. Under these duties, categorised services will be required to consistently apply their terms of service. Some of the most widely used platforms have policies which ban disseminating different forms of mis/disinformation, including some that can contribute to a risk of harm to users. However, the statement in Gill Whitehead’s open letter was not based on a specific definition of harmful disinformation (and indeed the definition may vary from platform to platform).

More generally, Ofcom does not have a specific definition of disinformation (or harmful disinformation). However, you may be interested in our [Discussion paper: Understanding online false information in the UK](#), which provides some commentary on that terminology and the potential harms that may arise (see pages 7-9).

Under the Online Safety Act, where services are aware of misinformation or disinformation that amounts to a criminal offence, they will need to have proportionate systems and processes to swiftly take down the content. This would include content that amounts to the False Communications Offence or the Foreign Interference Offence under the National Security Act 2023. Our proposed approach to these illegal harms can be found in our [consultation on protecting people from illegal and harmful content](#).

We hope this information is helpful. If you have any further queries, then please send them to information.requests@ofcom.org.uk – quoting the reference number above in any future communications.

Yours sincerely,

Information Requests

Request an internal review

If you are unhappy with the response you have received to your request for information, or think that your request was refused without a reason valid under the law, you may ask for an internal review. If you do, it will be subject to an independent review within Ofcom. We will either uphold the original decision, or reverse or modify it.

If you would like to ask us to carry out an internal review, you should get in touch within two months of the date of this letter. There is no statutory deadline for us to complete our internal review, and the time it takes will depend on the complexity of the request. But we will try to complete the review within 20 working days (or no more than 40 working days in exceptional cases) and keep you informed of our progress. Please email the Information Requests team (information.requests@ofcom.org.uk) to request an internal review.

Taking it further

If you are unhappy with the outcome of our internal review, then you have the right to [complain to the Information Commissioner's Office](#).