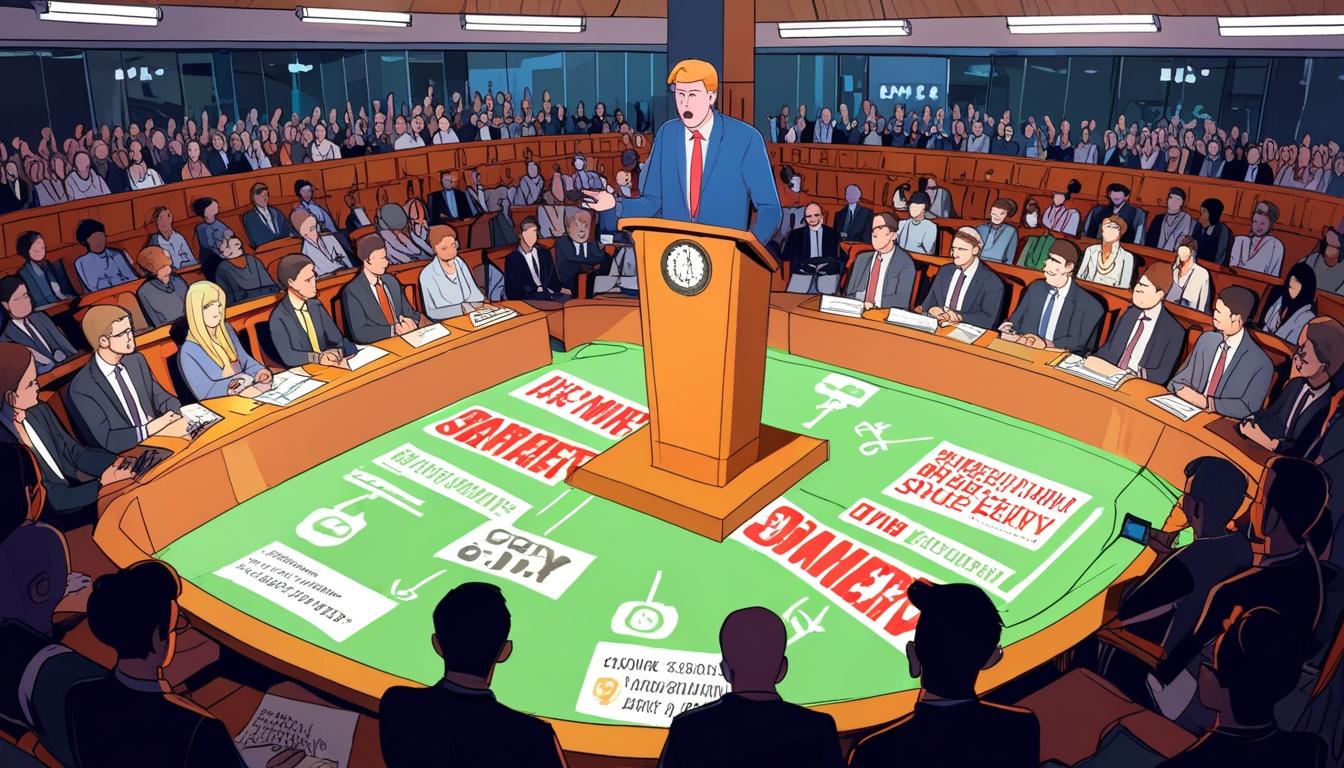
# MPs scrutinise Online Safety Act’s role in curbing riot-fueling misinformation



In the wake of the riots triggered by false social media claims following fatal stabbings at a children's dance class on 29 July 2023, UK MPs examined how the law addresses the spread of misinformation online, with particular focus on the recently implemented Online Safety Act.

The unrest, which unfolded across England and Northern Ireland, was provoked by inaccurate posts falsely asserting that the attacker was a Muslim asylum seeker. These claims, intertwined with racist and anti-immigrant rhetoric, sparked violent attacks on mosques, asylum seeker accommodations, and businesses perceived to be Muslim-owned. The disturbances, which lasted several days, were further fuelled by far-right groups exploiting the racially charged atmosphere.

On 29 April 2024, Baroness Jones of Whitchurch, Parliamentary under-secretary of state at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) and the Department for Business and Trade, appeared before the House of Commons Science, Innovation and Technology Committee. She explained that misinformation and disinformation fall under the remit of the Online Safety Act, which came into force on 17 March 2025. Baroness Jones emphasised that the Act's illegal harms provisions would now apply in incidents akin to last summer’s riots. "I think that is the material difference. Our interpretation of the Act is misinformation and disinformation [are] covered under the illegal harms code and the children's code," she said.

The committee, chaired by Labour MP Chi Onwurah, scrutinised whether the legislation would have prevented the spread of violence last summer. Onwurah highlighted a significant issue: communications regulator Ofcom currently has no statutory duties relating to misinformation, despite codes addressing misinformation and the associated risks. "That seems to be a key issue," she commented.

Mark Bunting, Ofcom's online safety strategy delivery director, clarified that past government decisions excluded legal material potentially harmful to adults from the Act's scope, including some misinformation. However, he noted a "small caveat" — the Act introduced a new offence concerning false communications with intent to cause harm, which service providers must heed if there are reasonable grounds to infer harmful intent. He acknowledged the challenge in proving such intent, as highlighted by Onwurah.

Talitha Rowland, director for security and online harm at DSIT, elaborated on the complexities surrounding misinformation and disinformation. She said, "One of the challenges of this area is mis- [and] disinformation isn't one thing. It can sometimes be illegal. It can be foreign interference. It can be content that incites hate or violence that's clearly illegal. It can also be below the illegal threshold, but nevertheless be harmful to children: that is captured." Rowland added that the largest online platforms already include controls on misinformation within their terms of service, which the Act requires them to enforce consistently. She criticised platforms' claims that they would not have acted differently during last year's events as self-assessment, stating, "They will have to account to Ofcom as to whether they are actually doing those things, not be able to make that assessment and judgment for themselves."

MP Steve Race noted during the hearing that technology companies had indicated the Online Safety Act, even if fully operational at the time, would unlikely have changed their responses to the Southport attacks.

Government guidance accompanying the Online Safety Act underscores that "mis- and disinformation will be captured [...] where it is illegal or harmful to children," obliging services to remove such content if identified.

Despite these provisions, Bunting acknowledged the lack of case law defining how the Act might be applied to misinformation cases, signalling ongoing uncertainty over enforcement.

The Register is reporting these developments as part of scrutiny into the UK's legislative framework for managing online misinformation and its implications for public safety, particularly in the context of racially and socially charged incidents.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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6. <https://www.parallelparliament.co.uk/debate/2024-09-12/lords/lords-chamber/electronic-media-false-information> - This debate transcript includes discussions on the threats posed by electronic media in spreading false information, with Baroness Jones of Whitchurch emphasizing the Online Safety Act's role in addressing these challenges.
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