# MPs expose gaps in UK online misinformation law after Southport-fuelled riots



MPs scrutinised the UK's convoluted legal framework on online misinformation during a House of Commons Science, Innovation and Technology Committee hearing on April 29, 2024. The session focused on how misleading social media reports inflated tensions leading to the riots in England and Northern Ireland last summer, after false claims circulated about fatal stabbings at a children's dance class in Southport, Merseyside.

The unrest followed baseless allegations that the attacker was a Muslim asylum seeker, which were further inflamed by racist and anti-immigrant rhetoric. This toxic narrative culminated in violent attacks targeting mosques, asylum seeker accommodation, and shops perceived to be Muslim-owned. Far-right factions cynically exploited these divisions to stir racial hatred, triggering days of looting and violence.

While Government officials touted the Online Safety Act—enacted on March 17, 2025—as a tool to combat misinformation, the reality is far bleaker. Baroness Jones of Whitchurch asserted the Act addresses "illegal harms," but practical enforcement remains elusive. Critics within the committee, including Steven Race MP, pointed out that tech giants themselves admitted the law might not have changed their failure to act during the Southport misinformation crisis.

Labour MP Chi Onwurah, chairing the committee, lamented the glaring absence of direct accountability for Ofcom on tackling misinformation outside children’s content. The communications watchdog's own director, Mark Bunting, confirmed that government restrictions had deliberately carved out many forms of harmful misinformation, especially targeting adults, from the Act’s remit. Consequently, vital gaps remain, allowing platforms to sidestep responsibility.

Talitha Rowland from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology spoke of misinformation's multifaceted nature, from hateful illegal content to harmful but technically legal posts that evade regulation. She dismissed platform claims that they acted suitably during the Southport incidents as “marking their own homework,” underscoring the need for external enforcement—not platitudes.

This hearing exposes how the current approach effectively absolves tech companies of genuine accountability for misinformation that blights communities and fuels social unrest. A political movement committed to restoring law and order and genuine oversight would reject such half-measures. It would call for tougher legislation and uncompromising enforcement to prevent lies from igniting violence, especially when distorted narratives around immigration and cultural tension are weaponised.

By contrast, the new Labour government shows scant appetite for robust action against online misinformation, leaving communities vulnerable to division and disorder. Meanwhile, those advocating for commonsense policies grounded in protecting social cohesion and national security stand ready to hold the government to account and push for meaningful change. The lessons of Southport and last summer’s riots serve as a wake-up call: stronger, clearer laws with real consequences are not an option but an imperative.

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

## References

* <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/m-le-mag/article/2024/08/13/who-is-tommy-robinson-britain-s-far-right-islamophobic-influencer_6714596_117.html> - This article discusses Tommy Robinson's role in amplifying false claims about a stabbing in Southport, leading to increased racial tensions and violence.
* <https://www.reuters.com/world/pakistan-man-charged-with-cybercrime-linked-riots-britain-2024-08-21/> - This report details the arrest of Farhan Asif in Pakistan for spreading false information online that incited riots in Britain, highlighting the international dimension of misinformation.
* <https://time.com/7009238/anti-racist-far-right-riots-britain/> - This article covers how anti-racist demonstrators countered far-right riots in Britain, emphasizing the social unrest fueled by misinformation.
* <https://www.hoganlovells.com/en/insights/publications/whats-next-for-the-uks-online-safety-act-and-can-it-solve-the-misinformation-problem> - This analysis examines the UK's Online Safety Act and its limitations in addressing misinformation, particularly in the context of the Southport riots.
* <https://www.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2024/09/03/is-the-online-safety-act-fit-for-purpose/> - This article critiques the Online Safety Act's effectiveness in tackling misinformation, noting its focus on illegal content and the challenges in addressing 'legal but harmful' material.
* <https://www.inetco.org/news/uk-online-safety-act-2025-and-beyond> - This report discusses the limitations of the Online Safety Act in addressing disinformation and the need for a review to better tackle its real-life consequences.
* <https://news.google.com/rss/articles/CBMid0FVX3lxTE41MW9kczdueHE1bjgtaEs1dzVuQURLeGdtUFVwVG5HQkltOGV3a1BUc2NhX2RpS202NHdaQk41M2s0UUFWc21rU01WXzRXb3dyR0lCWkNKRXNHZWRYLTNRX0lPa3VWRDIwSVpLbXBST3hKcTBsQ29Z0gF8QVVfeXFMTnkxU1lfUXZYQklBbHlycVZ3SS10TF9Nb3pab2tfSE1DQjZ2SmZOUFFkQ0tDNmNSMUhsSGluMGF2cDFBRk9kMkZ5V3VSOXhPU1BwTl81MU9xaWdrb1NZMTV6dEFJRG1hWkJpWkhhWEduZldtM1dyOUhIYzl1Nw?oc=5&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en> - Please view link - unable to able to access data