**‘Create, communicate, connect: Social media as a tool to empower people and movements’**

**APPG Media, 3 July 11am**

**Host:**

Andy Carter MP, Chair of Media APPG

**Guest speakers:**

Alexi Mostrous, Editor and Partner, Tortoise Media

Helen Milner OBE, CEO, The Good Things Foundation

Fabio Thomas, Project Manager, BeetFreeks

Liz Kanter, Director of Policy, TikTok

**Structure:**

1. *Connecting people: What can companies do help people and communities stay connected online during Covid-19?*
2. *Creating positive online communities and movements: How can positive online communities that protect users be encouraged on platforms?*
3. *Supporting people: What is the most effective way of platforms communicating with their users to help them stay informed?*
4. *Digital citizenship: How can we promote a depth of understanding online and foster greater digital literacy to empower users?*

Section 1: Connecting people

**Liz Kanter**: During the Covid-19 crisis, TikTok has been a platform for connectivity. In the last few months, we have been more focussed than ever on promoting connectivity. Whether it's families bonding over the #BlindingLightsChallenge, our community sharing experiences of working from home on #quarantine, or TeamGB launching the #isolationgames to make up for the lost summer of sport, we certainly helped people stay connected online.

We've been humbled to see so many turn to TikTok to find brief moments of relief and joy over the past 4 months. We are also proud of how the TikTok community has come together to show their gratitude to frontline healthcare workers, from saying thank you through our #ThankYouNHS challenge to the incredible support we've witnessed for key workers, including delivery drivers, rubbish collectors and supermarket staff, in our weekly #ClapForOurCarers challenge.

**Helen:** It is incredibly important to keep people connected during these times and that is one of the purposes of the Good Things Foundation. Through our online courses, we have been able to make sure that people are connected both with the online space and with one another, as Covid-19 has been a particularly trying time for so many marginalised and isolated demographic groups. In particular, older people, disabled people and those from more deprived backgrounds have struggled throughout this period. Platforms should be constantly looking at how to be more inclusive to these groups.

**Alexi**: It’s not acceptable anymore to have a top down relationship where the reader is being told stuff. We now need a two-way model. What Tortoise is trying to do is to make our members informed, by holding these interactive events called Think Ins, now taking place on Zoom. We try to programme them on subjects which we will pick up journalistically. For media organisations to communicate properly, we need to have an eye on the target audience.

Traditionally news organisations have attracted a middle class, older demographic, which hasn’t been diverse. Media organisations now have a responsibility to attract a wider variety of readership, particularly if trying to integrate this readership into the circle of a Think In. Tortoise has made a consorted effort to get a younger demographic on board, so much so that 51% of our active members are under the age of 35. There is a lot to learn in terms of the communication from attracting a more diverse membership base.

**Fabio**: Regarding the relationship between the media and consumers, we have seen in our research an increased need for information for young people during this time. On top of that, many young people are conscious about the effects of information on their mental health and wellbeing.

Further to this, one of the main methods of aiding their mental health was communicating with each other. More often than not, the space this occupies is social media. We therefore see a paradox: social media is having a negative effect on wellbeing but to cure this young people are going to social media. Companies can play on this to improve: talk to young people about their communication and work with them on the best ways to consume information. There is a clear need to help young people stay connected, and this should be done by talking to them on their own terms.

Section 2: Bringing communities together

**Fabio**: A shocking finding we had in our report is that young people are three times more likely to be concerned about their mental health during this time. Positive online communities really play into that; communicating with each other is a key way of helping our wellbeing. It’s interesting in terms of social media and online communities, we can’t underestimate the power of the social media platforms themselves, they very much influence the way we communicate. The way that online communities organically build is particularly interesting, where spaces are created in which people come together to discuss issues relating to their identifier. But, there are difficulties around echo chambers and the role that social media platforms play in terms of policing this.

**Liz:** Echo chambers are not necessarily a negative thing, such as the body positivity movement on TikTok. We of course recognise that often far right movements are synonymous with echo chambers, but I just wanted to stress that they can be a very positive thing too.

**Alexi**: Social media is obviously a medium through which there is a huge amount of communication and it’s only going to increase. Whilst social media is a place where people can come together and get affirmation, many social media companies have a confluence between their commercial objectives, data extraction, advertising and content. Tortoise attempts to bring people into conversations on an equal basis in order to create online positive communities. For example, we don’t allow anonymous communication and we try to foster an attitude where people can say what they want so long as they say it with respect.

**Helen:** Online positive community building has massively changed as a result of Covid-19, and there has been a huge increase in use. We teach people via online learning platforms how to use the internet and how to keep safe. The relationship between how much the citizen can do and how much the platform can do is not easy and I’m not sure we always get the balance right.

Section 3: Informing People

**Alexi**: There are a number of effective ways of communicating with people. It is important to use variety and to tailor message formats to the message. For example, at Tortoise we need to find a way to filter the facts to ensure they are the most accurate and appropriate for discussions, and it is only after that we can determine how we can best communicate them.

**Liz**: All platforms have a responsibility to support their users in being able to find and identify reliable information. At TikTok we direct people to reliable information and away from inaccurate information by using pop ups and links on pages where relevant, directing people to, for example, World Health Organisation information when they are looking at coronavirus-related content. Recently, content was put up on TikTok related to a pizzagate rumour involving Hilary Clinton; we removed it.

TikTok is very young, only 22 months old, and so we have a lot to learn but we consider ourselves a second generation platform and so have the opportunity to be more proactive, through initiatives like pop ups and using hashtags to direct people to reliable sources of information.

**Andy**: It is interesting when asking constituents where they got certain information from, they will say platforms as sources and say they trust the platform, sometimes without consideration of the creator within.

**Helen**: Social media platforms have a huge responsibility to do more to help their users identify misinformation and be directed to reliable sources. Pop ups are a good development as well as the tiny buttons that people can click on, which are becoming more prevalent. Most social media users are there to have fun, not to be educated or informed. This means that informative content needs to be compelling.

Platforms should be doing way more and investing more of their money to inform users about the dangers of social media and things they can come across on the platform. Having an occasional message sometimes isn’t good enough: it needs to be present, as Liz was saying, at the time they come across the harmful content. While I’m not calling for regulation, I do advocate for social media platforms to do a lot more.

**Fabio**: A very good way of tackling misinformation is to promote positive digital citizenship, which is happening more and more on social media platforms. This looks at how to deal with misinformation, but also goes further to encourage positive usage of the platform. It helps people understand how to be productive digital citizens and then how to do it. This translates into everyone being educated and informed on issues like fake news and harmful content online. There is amazing work to be done here, and this is the route we should take.

Section 4: Digital Citizenship

**Andy:** Sometimes we tend to think education on digital literacy is happening at a younger end when actually it is much more of an issue at the older end.

**Helen:** Digital citizenship needs to be fostered across all ages and it needs to be citizen-led. But there is also a role for education. In school, our children are not taught about democracy, or how to vote or how Parliament works. Digital literacy needs to go hand in hand with this, so we can teach our children to be positive, proactive citizens in a digital world.

The House of Lords Select Committee on Digital Democracy recently published a report on media literacy, and the government was due to publish its media strategy this summer, focused on media literacy for all ages. We need to do more at school and there are charities helping adults – the Good Things Foundation helps around 200,000 to 300,000 adults – but there are around 1.7 million who lack essential digital skills, so we need to be reaching more of them. This has to be via a blend of education, proactive digital citizenship and platform responsibility. As Ofcom takes on its new regulatory role in the digital sphere, it needs to do more than just make rules for platforms, but also be clearer about what their role around media literacy is as well.

**Alexi**: Ofcom could be the right people to promote digital literacy, and I agree that it should form a much stronger part of education than it does currently. I’m worried about the implications of putting the responsibility for identifying misinformation online onto the individual. Social media companies should do a lot more to get rid of misinformation online.

We ran an investigation into the “infodemic” and found that 46,000 tweets containing misinformation around covid-19 were being published every day during March, with a similar story across all platforms. Platforms have taken some steps but they are not being proactive enough. They don’t want to be seen as responsible for their own content so have been reluctant to take positive steps to moderate it, preferring to rely on their members to flag offensive content and then remove it retroactively. To encourage greater digital literacy, platforms need to be less passive on misinformation and more active in trying to root it out. This applies to encrypted peer-to-peer messaging services like WhatsApp.

**Liz**: From a proactive perspective, we are doing a media literacy campaign in France and will do a similar digital literacy campaign in the UK. TikTok has introduced new policies to remove misinformation from the platform, including the two biggest issues: conspiracy theories and medical misinformation. We are currently speaking with organisations about how to allow content on the platform that is educational and allow people to express their opinion without being irresponsible with regard to misinformation.

From a TikTok perspective, misinformation is not a big problem on the platform but we recognise that we are growing and we are seeing bad actors use our platform more. We want to learn and recognise that we have a lot of work to do. I do recognize the public policy implications of discussions around intermedia reliability and we want to do more. We are committed and are actively talking to NGOs working in the conspiracy theories area.

Q&A

1. People are suffering abuse on social media. Many of these people hide behind fake accounts. Do we need legislation?

**Fabio**: When the internet was conceived, it was a radical space where you could express a different version of yourself online. That has changed drastically and now we have a real issue with hate speech online. It would be immensely difficult to have people prove their identities and the implications in terms of GDPR and records would be huge. The correct way to help this issue is education.

**Alexi**: I do not agree that legislation should force people not to be anonymous online; there is a space for anonymous communication. What must get better is information from social media platforms, the police and regulators passing from one to another.

1. What steps should social media platforms take to make sure disabled people are included?

**Helen**: We have regulations in the physical world for disabled people but sadly they’re not always followed through on. Social media needs to be more accessible for the disabled. This is about being user-centered and making sure you’re caring for all of your users. Inclusivity is extremely important and people with low levels of literacy are often overlooked. Half of everyone with a physical disability has some kind of digital exclusion, but disabled people make up a significant number of internet users. By far the biggest reason why people are excluded is poverty: low income, insecure work.

1. In dealing with hate speech and terror groups, what is the role and responsibility on companies to take action?

**Liz**: Those kinds of groups are a violation of our community guidelines. As a new platform, we’ve had to look at the guidelines on how to take someone off a platform, as we did with Tommy Robinson in a matter of 2-3 weeks. We need to be vigilant, engage with NGOs and keep track of key words to see trigger words which are signifiers of hate speech and negativity.

Closing remarks

Many thanks to all attendees and speakers who have attended today. To find out more about APPG Media, visit [www.appgmedia.org](http://www.appgmedia.org).