Meeting Report of 24th July 2015

Preparatory meeting of the EU Internet Forum

SUMMARY REPORT ON PREPARATORY DISCUSSIONS OF THE IT FORUM

Introduction

On 24th July, the Commission chaired a meeting of practitioners and policy makers from 18 Member States, along with representatives from Facebook, Google/Youtube, Ask.fm and Microsoft to discuss online terrorist material. The EU's Counter Terrorism Co-ordinator's Office and the External Action Service were also in attendance. This was the first meeting which brought the industry and Member States together, in preparation for the launch of the ministerial EU IT Forum to be chaired by the Home Affairs Commissioner towards the end of the year.

In opening, the Commission explained how this priority piece of work underpinned the proposals set out in the European Agenda on Security, and the Internal Security Strategy which was currently being revised. The freedom of expression remained the priority. Whilst the internet had revolutionised communication, it was also clear that criminals, including terrorists, were exploiting the internet for criminal and terrorist gain. The purpose of these discussions was to discuss how EU citizens could best be protected from such harmful material, whilst avoiding any encroachment or conflict with fundamental rights. This initial meeting was an opportunity for industry to meet with Member States and set out their efforts in this area. Its focus was primarily on reducing accessibility to terrorist content, with a view to further discussions – possibly in October – being held on challenging terrorist propaganda online. DG HOME explained how this work fitted together with other EU workstreams such as the Radicalisation Awareness Network and Europol's Internet Referral Unit.

Twitter had sent their apologies but also their assurances that they remained committed to this initiative.

Industry Presentations

Google/YouTube, Facebook, Ask.fm, and Microsoft then proceeded to set out in detail their efforts in this area. It was clear from discussions that the large internet companies are advanced in this area, with reporting mechanisms in place and clear policies on what material is forbidden, including that relating to terrorism. Profiles of individuals linked to terrorist organisations are forbidden. Whilst violent and graphic material will not be tolerated, if there is an educational purpose to serve, an assessment will be made as to whether to show at least some of the material. The companies are reliant on Member States to bring material to their attention (both from the public and law enforcement partners). 'Trusted Flagger' approaches had proved effective but there was a need for

more flaggers, particularly those who could 'flag' in different languages. There was a question as to whether a legal definition of what constitutes illegal material would help the industry. Terrorist material was compared to child-abuse material, whereby it is often easier for the companies to determine what kind of media item should be considered illegal and be reported.

Most of the companies had been involved in supporting NGOs in promoting material to challenge the extremist narrative. This will need to be explored in more detail at the next meeting.

Member States' Response

Member States then intervened, updating on their approaches. Some Member States have enhanced their legislation in this area, whilst others had set up their own national teams to help identify material of concern. A number of Member States expressed their support for the new Internet Referral Unit at Europol.

Europol

Europol provided an overview of the IRU. The IRU would scan for and identify material, assessing it against the principles set out in the Council Framework Decision 2008 on Combating Terrorism as well as against the host company's terms and conditions. Most Member States had now provided points of contact. The Unit was in its early stages, but there might be scope to reach out to those third countries with whom Europol already had existing relationships.

Best Practice for Referrals

There was then a helpful discussion about what makes a good referral.

Assessment of Meeting

- This was a productive and promising first meeting of its kind with a good turnout from both Member States and those industry representatives who had been invited.
- The ongoing support of the large companies is vital considering the large volumes of terrorist material that remain so easily accessible. The IRU can play a key role in supporting these companies identify terrorist material hosted on their sites. The discussion on what makes a good referral was helpful, but highlighted that this process will only work if the companies themselves have robust terms and conditions in place. This demonstrates the need to use the Internet Forum to reach out to the smaller companies and initial attempts have been difficult. Smaller companies will be reliant on the experience and expertise of the larger ones. Some work is already underway, but more needs to be done.
- Consideration should be given as to what extent enhanced legislation would assist, taking account of the Council Framework Decision 2008 and UN and EU lists designating terrorist organisations.
- There was appetite for a further meeting to consider how the internet companies and Member States can work together to empower civil society partners to challenge terrorist propaganda.