

UK-German Roundtable on countering online harms, March 2021

In March 2021, the UK's Department for International Trade (DIT), the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS) and the North Rhine Westphalian Cyber Crime Agency ZAC invited UK and German stakeholders to a first virtual roundtable on the role innovation and technologies can play to fight online harms. With the aim to spur collaboration between both countries, the roundtable was hosted by UK Consul General Rafe Courage and opened by North Rhine Westphalian Minister for Justice Peter Biesenbach as well as DCMS' Director General Susannah Storey. Participating attendees included senior executives from UK and NRW's government, law enforcement, media authorities, industry, associations and universities.

A positive and productive roundtable with a few key themes emerging from the discussion:

A shared objective of raising awareness

Germany and the UK share a common understanding on the urgency of countering online harms. Participants highlighted the rapid distribution of illegal content such as child pornography, hate speech and misinformation which bears the risk of destroying the integrity of media and our democratic institutions. Both countries have initiated regulatory action to mitigate repercussions. While a strict regulatory framework will be essential, the sheer amount of harmful incidents poses new challenges to police, law enforcement and society as massive data sets need to be scrutinised, a task that is exacerbated by rogue actors' determination to overcome existing safeguarding technologies in real time and circumvent national regulation.

Technology to the rescue

While technology will not solve this alone, it forms a key part of a mitigation strategy. The roundtable participants acknowledged that an increasing number of UK and German organisations offer innovative technologies such as Artificial Intelligence that help government, law enforcement and industry, schools, individuals tackle the issue. While in public debates a narrow view often prevails by focussing on the big social media platforms, much is to be won in taking a more holistic view on the full spectrum where technologies can be used to fight online harms. In both countries, innovators have come up with solutions to help trace, locate and facilitate the removal of illegal content, reduce the risk of children being exposed to harmful content, prevent grooming, bullying, radicalisation, support age verification and help tackle disinformation. A recent report commissioned by DCMS indicates a huge potential for an upcoming safety tech sector that is growing 35% year on year and heading for £1bn revenues.

UK-German collaboration

As online harms is hardly resolved on a national level, the UK is keen to support the growth of the emerging industry; Germany with a highly developed technology sector and key ally in online harms regulation is set to be a strong partner. The roundtable participants identified a keen interest to build up momentum and formalise collaboration structures such as a UK-German safety tech interest group as well as launching a series of events and engagement opportunities to share best practice examples and encouraging the exchange of ideas. Initiating a fast evolving UK-German safety tech eco system with key stakeholders from law enforcement, industry, start-ups, authorities and regulators will lead to strong UK-German collaboration networks and improve efficiency in the fight against online harms.