

Labour: Duty of care needs billion-pound fines

Social media firms that fail to protect children should face penalties that seriously affect them, says Watson

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SOCIAL media firms that fail to protect children from online harm would face fines of more than a billion pounds that would “seriously affect” their bottom lines, under a legal duty of care proposed by Labour. In a speech today

Tom Watson, the party’s deputy leader, will back the creation of a regulator to rein in social media firms with the power to fine them up to four per cent of their global turnover, the level currently in place for data protection laws.

For Facebook, with its revenues last year of £43 billion, that would amount to at least £1.5 billion.

Endorsing *The Daily Telegraph*’s campaign for a statutory duty of care to protect children from online harms, Mr Watson will say: “For the duty of care to be effective we need penalties that seriously affect company bottom lines.”

Citing the case of Molly Russell, 14,

who took her life after viewing self-harm material on Instagram, which her family say “helped to kill her”, he will say: “Molly’s family is not alone. This is the kind of harm online content can contribute to when the right safeguards are not in place, a consequence of an industry that too often chooses to profit from children, rather than protect them.”

Rejecting Ofcom and other existing regulators, Mr Watson plans a bespoke operator, paid for by a levy on the tech giants, to ensure they take down illegal content within a fixed time, as in Germany, where they face massive

fines if they fail to act within 24 hours. It would set rules for taking down harmful but legal content and ensure the firms published regular reports to show they were delivering on targets to protect users.

He proposes tougher rules to publicise and audit social media platform algorithms, which are often blamed for driving content, such as self-harm images, toward vulnerable people.

“Users should know when and how their data is subject to automated decisions,” he will say.

The rules would be enshrined in a digital bill of rights that would also

give people greater control over how their data was used and monetised.

“Each year, businesses make billions by extracting and monetising personal data from each and every one of us. And yes, they offer us a service in return but only worth a fraction of the fortune they gain. This is surveillance capitalism,” he will say.

Because the size of tech giants now poses a threat to competition, Mr Watson will argue they will need to be scrutinised by the new regulator as potential monopolies. “We should take seriously the calls to break them up if it is in the public interest,” he will say.

Mr Watson will also propose new rules – or “digital democracy guarantees” – to protect democracy from subversion online.

“Conspiracy sells better than truth and hate sells better than compassion. Digital platforms are ideally suited to propagandists peddling bigotry and division to the disillusioned,” he will say.

Tech firms would have to by law confirm that political advertisers targeting British citizens were located in the UK, and automated accounts would have to be labelled as such, to prevent a repeat of the alleged Russian interference during recent elections.