



The Digital Services Act: how it will impact the internet

The internet is an astounding box of tools through which we connect, inform ourselves and communicate even when miles apart. But in many ways, hate speech, disinformation, and harmful content have become like CO2 - the pollution of our digital spaces. The Digital Services Act (DSA) was passed with a huge majority in the European Parliament on 5 July 2022, setting industry standards that will be the digital equivalent of the Paris Agreement for Climate Change.

For years, Avaaz has been providing lawmakers with data and analysis evidencing the harms inherent to the platforms' operating systems, shining a light on the scope and the scale of harmful content that was able to thrive on these platforms. Avaaz welcomes this regulation, and hopes that the EU can now act on the crises that whistleblowers like [Frances Haugen](#) have been long warning us need urgent action.

1) It will help make social media algorithms less toxic

Social media platforms are not neutral platforms, they use algorithms to select the content they think will grab our attention and keep us on their services. The longer we spend there, the more ads we see, and the more money they make. The problem is, that the best kind of attention-grabbing content is often content that provokes an intense, emotional reaction, like disinformation or hateful speech. And, as it 's the algorithm's job to keep us wired in, **it then amplifies this harmful, polarising content** (see [Avaaz reporting](#)).

However, the DSA will oblige platforms to prioritise **our fundamental human rights** in their service design and businesses:

- **Risk Assessment and Mitigation of harm:** Platforms will have to scrutinise how their services, including algorithms, can damage individual human rights and negatively impact society by identifying, assessing and mitigating any risks (Arts 26 & 27).
- **Better moderation of harmful content like disinformation:** Platforms will have to publish annual reports about the measures they take and policies they implement to moderate content (Art 13).
- **Co-regulatory backstop:** Codes of Conduct can be adopted setting standards and KPIs to address harms and these Codes can be updated to keep pace with innovation (Art 35).

2) It will force platforms to be MUCH more transparent

Until now, private companies have decided the rules that govern online public debate and have been doing so without meaningful transparency. For example, overnight, they could decide to ban (or not to ban) politicians, presidents, or a specific post, without having to explain why. This was a considerable risk to freedom of expression, but the DSA should change that.

- **Civil society organisations like Avaaz now has rights to see Big tech's data¹:** For the first time in EU regulatory history, civil society - the early alarm system in so many online scandals - should be able to see Big Tech's data, which will facilitate detection of harms (Art 31). We will keep our eye on how the new rules develop to ensure sufficient access for civil society, academics and independent auditors.
- Regulators and researchers, including CSOs, will also be able to inspect advertisement placement and targeting to assess if these systems contribute to societal risks, i.e. promoting or funding disinformation (see [Avaaz reporting](#)).
- **Easier for us to understand:** platforms will have to explain their terms and conditions in a user-friendly manner, also intelligible to minors, and in their native language (Arts 12, 13 & 34).
- **Transparent content moderation:** The platform must explain to users why they take action on their content, e.g. removing their post (Art 15).
 - **Right to complain, appeal and get external redress:** If a user is dissatisfied with the internal complaint-handling process, they can take it up with an out-of-court dispute settlement body (Art 18) or the Digital Services Coordinator in the country they live in.

3) It will reduce the risk of manipulative practices

The cycle of data collection begins with your first click. Online services use this data to build a profile about you and your preferences. The purpose is to target you with advertising. Why is this a problem? Because such precise targeting can be exploited to sow division between communities over religion, race, and politics or manipulate the vulnerable into making choices that fool them or even harm them. The DSA does not ban all data targeting, but creates transparency about how Big Tech makes money out of us, for a fairer, more open system with:

- **Honesty about algorithms:** platforms must explain how their recommender systems decide what content we do and don't see in - like what they push into our our newsfeeds (Art 24a).
- **Greater control of our privacy:** We will be able to choose how content is recommended to us, including a right not to be recommended content based on our personal data (Art 29) **and for advertising** - we get better transparency about online advertising to make more informed decisions about how data is used for targeting.
- **New protections from exploitation include:**
 - **Protection for children:** platforms are prohibited from targeting minors with advertising based on data collected during their online activity ("profiling").
 - **Protection of sensitive data:** platforms are prohibited from targeting anyone based on sensitive personal data, e.g. religion, political views or sexuality, unless the user consents to this (Recital 52).

¹ See whistleblower Frances Haugen's [explanation](#) of how civil society oversight can save lives.

- **Deceptive design is tackled:** prohibition of the so-called “dark patterns” that trick a service user into an action they would not usually take, e.g. when it is more difficult to cancel a subscription than to sign up in the first place (Art 23a).

4) Real sanctions for non-compliance

The European Commission will monitor the biggest platforms to ensure they comply with the DSA.

- **Fines:** Platforms must provide annual reports that the Digital Service Coordinator will make publicly available. If these platforms fail to assess and control the harms they cause, they can be fined up to 6% of their global income (Art 42).
- **Regional bans:** In extreme cases, when platforms repeatedly fail to comply with the DSA and are found to be causing serious harm, they could even be temporarily banned from operating in the affected Member State (Art 41).

So, do we have a Paris Agreement for the Internet?

The 2015 Paris Agreement laid out a framework to tackle climate change - Avaaz believes that the DSA has the potential to be a similarly groundbreaking agreement: confronting the global issues of digital toxicity and creating a global gold standard for a better and safer internet for all.

But social media platforms will not change overnight. The DSA will take time to come into force and will require a profound cultural change in Silicon Valley. The Commission has spearheaded a new revised Code of Practice on Disinformation in which Avaaz has been a crucial expert voice. This and other codes must ensure that the Platforms follow the spirit of this new law, with sanctions to follow if they don't.