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Social media shutdowns? Don't you dare, activists warn EU

Human rights groups fear the bloc's content-moderation law could be used to stifle online dissent.



Large platforms will face new obligations to limit the spread of illegal and harmful content beginning August 25 | iStock

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BY CLOTHILDE GOUJARD

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Dozens of international digital and human rights NGOs want the European Commission to firmly reject the possibility of its new content-moderation law being used to compel social media shutdowns.

A coalition of 65 nonprofits — including Access Now, Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) and Article 19 — today called on Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton to clarify "incendiary statements" and confirm that online platforms like TikTok, Snapchat and Twitter would not be blocked during protests under the Digital Services Act (DSA).

In a letter seen exclusively by POLITICO and sent to Breton, the NGOs warned that the politician's comments could "reinforce the weaponization of Internet shutdowns" by authoritarian governments.

Breton said in early July that the Commission would be able to fine and ban social media networks that don't "immediately" remove hateful content from operating in the EU under the DSA. Breton was reacting to comments from French President Emmanuel Macron that floated closing down some social networks during riots that ensued after police killed a teenager.

"Making such a short-sighted statement that may suggest that arbitrary blocking of online platforms could be justified in the EU can really send a very dangerous message," said Eliška Pírková, Access Now's global freedom of expression lead. "We have plenty of data and evidence to show that internet shutdowns are mainly used as a tool to suppress dissent and opposition or human rights activism, especially in times of protests."

The groups also urged the Commission to ensure that EU countries like France don't implement and enforce the DSA in an "overly broad" way. They said France's draft law contained worrying measures for online free speech including a 24-hour deadline for platforms to take down content and a browser-based website blocking.



▲ Breton said that the Commission would be able to fine and ban social media networks that don't "immediately" remove hateful content from operating in the EU | Josh Edelson/AFP via Getty Images

In 2022, Access Now recorded over 60 internet shutdowns during protests in countries including India, Iran, Myanmar and Kazakhstan.

Large platforms like Facebook and YouTube will face new obligations in the DSA to limit the spread of illegal and harmful content, beginning August 25. Fines can go up to 6 percent of companies' revenues. The law allows regulators to ask courts to temporarily suspend "rogue platforms" if they refuse to comply with important obligations that could endanger people's lives and safety.

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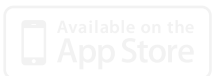
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