

Europe imposes "major cultural change" on Tech Giants

La Libre BELGIQUE

European Union: Platforms have until Friday to comply with the Digital Services Act.

Interview with Maria Udrescu

That's it. European legislation on digital services (known by its English acronym DSA, Digital Services Act) will be enforced this Friday on the 19 major platforms, including Google, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, or Amazon. These web giants have until August 25th to comply with the unprecedented rules of the European Union to tackle the lawless area that the internet used to be and combat illicit content (as defined by national or European laws).

The objective is to make online what is already illegal offline.

"It's a major cultural change because these platforms were previously operating in a largely unregulated world," says Alexandre de Streel, academic director at the Centre on Regulation in Europe and professor at the University of Namur. Moreover, the DSA provides for heavy fines in case of rule violations.

What obligations will apply to social networks?

They must better detect illegal content.

And if they detect it, they must remove it. They also need to be more transparent about how they moderate content. One of the problems is precisely that we don't know very well how these platforms work (and their algorithms, Editor's note). The idea of the DSA is therefore to open this black box of Big Tech.

From now on, they must also conduct annual risk assessments of the systemic risks posed by their products to fundamental rights – this duty must be fulfilled by Friday – and take action on it.

How does this change the game?

It's true; platforms still practice self-regulation. Because a platform that only has illegal content won't be interesting. But here, we significantly strengthen the rules, make it easier for users to report illegal content, and create an obligation for major platforms to remove what has been reported to them. What was previously somewhat voluntary and soft is made mandatory and stringent.

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**- Alexandre de Streel,
Professor at the University of Namur**

Does this also address disinformation?

The DSA only deals with clearly illegal content, promoting terrorism, child pornography, racism, etc. Fake news is sometimes illegal content, but sometimes it's legal content, although harmful.



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Why is it more complicated to tackle illegal content on the Internet?

First, the proliferation of online content makes detection more complex. Secondly, these platforms are often American and therefore have a different culture regarding free speech. In the United States, there are several fundamental rights, but one is more fundamental than the others: freedom of expression. In Europe, we have more of a culture of balancing fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, but also respect for privacy and the prohibition of racist or xenophobic speech, and so on.

Are there risks to freedom of expression?

On one hand, there was a desire to reduce illegal content, but on the other, there was no desire to increase private censorship. The balance that has been struck is good. Platforms should not, and cannot, systematically screen content. However, if users inform them of illegal content, they must remove it promptly while notifying the author, who has the opportunity to contest it. In a way, a procedure is being organised.

Could the DSA have an economic impact on Big Tech companies (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft)?

We should not overstate the scope of this legislation. The DSA is not there to completely change the business model of platforms. Online advertising, targeting systems, and recommendations are not banned. The idea is to prevent excesses.

Should there have been a more direct approach to addressing the operation of these platforms?

It's true that advertising and profiling techniques can encourage platforms to seek your attention and promote content, not necessarily illegal, but certainly addictive. But with these risk analysis reports, we will better understand the impact of this business model on democracy and people's mental health. We may then be able to go further. The DSA should also be seen as a kind of first step.