

Ideological Entrepreneurs and Disinformation: How Platforms Challenge the Vagueness of the *Digital Services Act*

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Abstract

The introduction of the *Digital Services Act* (DSA) by the European Union marks a fundamental step forward in the governance of social media platforms, by outlining content-moderation guidelines aimed at preventing disinformation and the systemic risks related to the *business of polarisation*. Taking a critical approach, this article discusses how the DSA regulatory framework addresses the issue of disinformation and the role of controversial influencers and, on the other side, how the content moderation measures provided by the DSA have recently been implemented by major social media platforms. Our analysis revealed multiple examples of vagueness in the legal text that neither address the role of political influencers (or the concept of *influence* as a whole), nor explicitly outline the concept of disinformation. Furthermore, a longitudinal analysis (18 months) of the content-moderation measures implemented in compliance with the DSA, and accessible through the DSA Transparency Database, shows that social media platforms tend to privilege temporary measures such as suspension of accounts rather than more effective actions such as deplatforming. In the medium term, however, temporary suspension measures – thanks to a combination of Streisand effect and influence – can produce an increase rather than a decrease in the popularity of the controversial profiles, which are ultimately even more ‘influential’ than before. As a result, the article highlights a double standard policy adopted by platforms: on one side, they moderate controversial profiles by complying with DSA guidelines, while in the long run restoring their social accounts to profit from their renewed popularity, thus reinforcing the *business of polarisation* typical of surveillance capitalism.

Keywords: *Digital Services Act*; disinformation; political influencers; ideological entrepreneurs; platform governance.

1. An Introduction to Controversial Profiles and Ideological Entrepreneurs

Various scholars have argued that Meta, X and Google cannot be considered mere media infrastructure or platforms, but rather should be viewed as moderators and gatekeepers of content,¹ emphasising their centrality in mitigating risks related to the spread of fake news, conspiracy theories and extremist propaganda.² Others have identified the role of platforms in the context of an articulated digital ecosystem where, in addition to Big Tech, different actors intervene: legacy media in their online assets, fringe platforms, prosumers,³ content creators and influencers of various kinds.⁴

An exemplary case of platform ambivalence is Donald Trump. Several commentators argue that the success of his 2016 election campaign, characterised by aggressive tones and fake news, is intertwined with the success and expansion of Twitter (now X),

¹ Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet*.

² Jeppesen, *The Capitol Riots*.

³ The term ‘prosumers’ refers to individuals who both consume and produce content, especially in digital environments, blurring the line between audience and creator.

⁴ Zuckerman, “Why Study Media Ecosystems?”



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which established itself as the world's leading platform for political debate.⁵ Following the events on Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021, Trump's social profile was removed from X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and Twitch⁶ due to charges of fomenting hatred and violence among the attackers. The deplatforming of the leader of the West's largest democracy turned out to be a global event that underscored the sovereign role of platforms in undertaking unprecedented measures. Until that event, they were no longer conceived as mere moderators of content but instead as the new guardians of free expression.⁷ Trump's social censorship, however, did not prevent thousands of other less popular profiles from fuelling the streams of viral disinformation through QAnon conspiracy theories⁸ and misogynist and xenophobic stances. Several studies have shown that while deplatforming (the temporary or permanent suspension of a social profile from a platform) had a significant effect on Facebook and Instagram, it had a limited impact on X and YouTube, which remained privileged channels for alt-right conspiracists.⁹ As a paradigmatic outcome of the parable of censorship invoked by many, Donald Trump's profile was rehabilitated by X in 2023. Its new owner, Elon Musk, declared that the former Twitter platform had positioned itself too far to the left in political debate, thus justifying the reinstatement of the former President responsible for provoking a coup d'état in which five people lost their lives.¹⁰

Alongside prominent public figures, several ideological entrepreneurs have been subject to moderation measures by platforms. The concept of ideological entrepreneurs refers to actors who strategically craft and disseminate ideological narratives to advance political, economic or cultural influence, particularly within unstable or contested informational environments. Originally introduced by Douglass C. North in the context of institutional change,¹¹ the term has been adapted to describe figures who leverage digital platforms to shape public discourse while often monetising their ideological positioning. These individuals often operate outside formal political or journalistic institutions, yet wield substantial power to frame narratives, mobilise audiences and undermine trust in mainstream media or democratic institutions. Their influence is magnified by platform infrastructures that prioritise emotionally resonant or divisive content.¹² As such, the ideological entrepreneur is not just a content producer but a skilled manipulator of the digital public sphere – positioned at the intersection of ideology, influence and platform capitalism.

Ideological entrepreneurs play a key role on the margins of institutional political debate, especially in times of rapid change at political and ideological levels, when individuals become more amenable to alternative interpretations to make sense of an increasingly complex present.¹³ Controversial public figures such as Alex Jones,¹⁴ Andrew Tate¹⁵ and Laura Loomer¹⁶ have emerged in recent years as active spokespeople for conspiracy theories in relation to, for example, COVID-19 or new representations of patriarchy. They do not elaborate new value systems or prejudices: they are entrepreneurs of existing ideologies to the extent that they are able to actualise them, reframe them and make them capable of explaining a complex social reality through plain and evocative means. As ideological entrepreneurs, they compete in a market where attention and popularity are of strategic value, while the cost to be sustained is a systematic and obsessive activity of interaction and reinforcement with respect to their followers through posts, live streaming and a pervasive cross-platform presence. Such assiduity makes them *ideological entrepreneurs of disinformation*, capable of feeding streams, interactions and ultimately valuable data for surveillance capitalism.¹⁷ What ideological entrepreneurs have in common is the dissemination of conspiracy theories, fake news or hyper-partisan views, such as those that favour the return of an ideology of "lost masculinity."¹⁸ They often position themselves at the conservative and populist alt-right side of the political spectrum,¹⁹ but in most cases they are entrepreneurs of strategically crafted positions capable of intercepting audience niches not yet occupied.²⁰

⁵ Courty, "Despite Being Permanently Banned."

⁶ Di Salvo, "Deplatforming," 449–458.

⁷ Macedo, "Lost in the Marketplace," 496–514.

⁸ QAnon conspiracy theories are a set of unfounded and far-reaching beliefs originating from online message boards, alleging a secret war waged by former US President Donald Trump against a global cabal of elites involved in criminal activity.

⁹ Gatta, "The Interconnected Nature."

¹⁰ Financial Times, "Ft interview with Elon Musk."

¹¹ North, *Structure and Change*.

¹² Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet*; Tucker, *Social Media*.

¹³ Van den Bulck, "Of Lizards," 42–59.

¹⁴ Wikipedia, "Alex Jones."

¹⁵ Wikipedia, "Andrew Tate."

¹⁶ Wikipedia, "Laura Loomer."

¹⁷ Surveillance capitalism is a term coined by Shoshana Zuboff to describe an economic system centred on the commodification of personal data, where user information is collected, analysed and monetized by digital platforms.

¹⁸ Haslop, "Mainstreaming the Manosphere's Misogyny."

¹⁹ Rogers, "Deplatforming."

²⁰ Siapera, "Alt Tech."

One such figure is Alex Jones, an agitator of the American conspiratorial right who, with his news profile Infowars, has three million followers on X. Another controversial influencer is Andrew Tate (Cobratate on X, with 9.1 million followers), who promotes his personal University of Life based on avowedly misogynistic values and principles inspired by the unscrupulous pursuit of wealth.²¹ The profile of Laura Loomer – a popular COVID-19 denier and former Republican congressional candidate – is also worth noting. Following the campaign against the alt-right waged by major social platforms between 2018 and 2019, the social profiles of Alex Jones and Laura Loomer were removed from Facebook and X on charges of spreading extremist, misogynistic, discriminatory disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic.²² Andrew Tate's profile did not overtly position himself in the alt-right camp but relied on topics and values related to male self-assertion, and to an idea of masculinity to be preserved and defended at all costs.²³ He escaped the first wave of content moderation measures implemented by the platforms due to the Capitol Hill attack, but his social media profile was removed in 2022 following his arrest in Romania on charges of rape, human trafficking and forming an organised criminal group for the sexual exploitation of women.

Despite the ban, these three “influencers” have established themselves as ideological entrepreneurs in just a few years: they cater to all kinds of niche political tastes at low cost, garnering potentially high rewards in terms of visibility and monetisation from their audience of loyal and proactive followers. For example, between 2022 and 2023, Andrew Tate ran a number of paid platforms – first Hustler's University and then Real World Order – offering users instructions and manuals for earning money without working in the traditional sense, through means such as cryptocurrencies and networked trading platforms. The initiatives were promoted through multilevel marketing campaigns, later deemed illegal, which used major social platforms as a sounding board.²⁴ In January 2024, an analysis by the Center for Countering Digital Hate reported that Real World Order had generated 450 million views and, through this traffic, YouTube had earned up to £2.4 million from advertising through Tate's content.²⁵ Another channel that shared content had earned nearly 300 million views after circumventing social media bans by using affiliate-marketing schemes.²⁶ In addition to the core platforms, the profiles analysed strategically articulated their presence in fringe environments, such as Rumble, Bitchute and Roku, where a more tolerant approach to free-speech allowed them to strengthen their hyper-partisan base of followers. Following the ban from the main platforms, marginal environments have become the more ideal context in which to maintain and strengthen ties with their audiences. In the case of Andrew Tate, it was precisely because of his popularity that Rumble became the most widely used application in the Apple store in 2022.²⁷ Recently, as in the case of Trump, the profiles of Infowars,²⁸ Alex Jones,²⁹ Andrew Tate³⁰ and Laura Loomer³¹ were rehabilitated by X. Similarly, Facebook rehabilitated those of Alex Jones and Andrew Tate, who currently has a private profile. Currently, Alex Jones' X profile and his InfoWars column are back in full operation, despite accusations of conspiracy and incitement to racial hatred levelled against the ideological entrepreneur from multiple parts of the world.

2. The *Digital Services Act*: A tool for the Governance of Digital Platforms

These actors variously contribute to disinformation, which on one hand pollutes public debate and on the other hand can represent a stream of content that is easily disseminated and monetised.³² Thus, disinformation may result in a specific dimension of the platformisation³³ process, as part of ‘the oxygen and carbon dioxide that feed the ecosystem of platforms’.³⁴ A more radical perspective is that of Shoshana Zuboff,³⁵ who has identified the sovereignty of dominant platforms as essential to understanding power relations in the current digital ecosystem. The legitimacy of sovereignty lies in the instrumentalising power and ability of platforms to exploit the accumulation of data as a knowledge base from which to extract predictive models of user behaviour. In relation to the governance of disinformation, the guiding principle of platform sovereignty is inspired by a radical indifference to the first text – social communication that also includes the business of viral disinformation – and tight

²¹ Sayogie, “Patriarchal Ideology.”

²² Rogers, “Deplatforming.”

²³ Haslop, “Mainstreaming the Manosphere's Misogyny.”

²⁴ Das, “Andrew Tate.”

²⁵ Lawson, “YouTube Rakes in Millions.”

²⁶ Oppenheim, “YouTube Earned up to £2.4m.”

²⁷ Wilson, “How Rumble Became.”

²⁸ Infowars, Posts.

²⁹ Jones, Posts.

³⁰ Tate, Posts.

³¹ Loomer, Posts.

³² Braun, “Fake News.”

³³ Platformisation describes the process by which digital platforms – such as social media or search engines – become dominant infrastructures for communication, commerce and governance.

³⁴ Van Dijck, “Seeing the Forest,” 2805.

³⁵ Zuboff, *The Surveillance Capitalism*.

control over the accumulation of data that represent the profit value to be preserved by all means. According to Zuboff, dominant platforms play a two-faced role in the governance of disinformation: on the one hand, they transpose – for example, through their own terms of service (ToS) – the regulations, codes of conduct and procedures capable of contain the systemic risks of the digital public sphere; on the other hand, they enable content moderation practices capable of balancing the risks of the dissemination of illegal or harmful content with the profit goals produced by the accumulation of data.

In response to Big Tech's ambivalence about the governance of the digital public sphere, in October 2022 the European Commission introduced the *Digital Services Act* (DSA),³⁶ an ambitious and complex regulatory framework that aims to determine how platforms should intervene in the moderation of content deemed illegal or harmful to the digital public sphere.³⁷ The DSA defines specific goals, procedures and actions to curb the dissemination of illegal content that can pose systemic risks to the digital public sphere. Furthermore, it outlines a governance structure articulated at the European and national levels, and it actively involves citizens and non-governmental organisations. The DSA's guidance also affects the ToS of individual platforms, which should incorporate European regulatory guidelines. Two years after coming into force, however, one finds in its implementation the basic doubts mentioned earlier, especially in relation to the management of problematic and influential profiles such as prominent public figures (e.g. Donald Trump) or *ideological entrepreneurs*: political influencers and 'deranged activists, rabid and paranoid haters, conspiracy theorists who operate refreshed by a self-segregated echo chamber of talk radio, television news and the Internet'.³⁸ In the popularity trajectory of controversial profiles related to the subsequent measures of deplatforming and replatforming – hitherto entirely the preserve of the ToS of dominant platforms – the introduction of DSA could mark a crucial step, although this will depend considerably on how the regulation is transposed into the practice of content moderation by platforms.

According to Geese, the DSA represents a fundamental regulatory breakthrough that challenges the inevitability of surveillance capitalism. If the size of platforms, their financial power and their ability to influence public opinion seemed to make attempts at regulation impossible or ineffective, today the DSA represents an end to this status quo: the time when platforms were 'too big to be regulated' is over. Geese also argues that the DSA will end the influence of those 'authoritarian regimes (e.g. Italy's) fuelled by the very business of polarisation' on X, Facebook and YouTube.³⁹ Other researchers have taken more cautious positions. According to Husovec, the DSA should be understood in an evolutionary sense – as an ambitious regulation with the potential to become an instrument that balances the three main stakeholders:

- the economic interests of big technological players
- the member state regulators oriented towards the protection of a safe and reliable digital public sphere, and
- the citizens who must be guaranteed the rights to freely express their opinions and to act in a digital environment safe from violence, discrimination and scams.⁴⁰

In light of the aim of this legislation and the significant impacts it will have on the digital public sphere in the years to come, this article questions its potential for managing disinformation and how much its implementation can obviate vagueness related to the governance of ideological entrepreneurs. The essay thus seeks to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1 and RQ2: *In what ways, and through which specific mechanisms, does the Digital Services Act address disinformation and regulate the activities of ideological entrepreneurs? In this context, what measures have digital platforms implemented in alignment with the provisions of the DSA?*
- RQ3: *Do the content moderation measures targeting ideological entrepreneurs reflect a departure from the previously indeterminate governance direction of the platform?*

While previous scholarship⁴¹ has explored platform governance, content moderation and the spread of disinformation, little attention has been paid to how 'influence' as a systemic and strategic factor – particularly in the case of ideological entrepreneurs – remains under-theorised and unregulated within the European Union's *Digital Services Act* (DSA). The reason for that approach lies in the fact that 'influence' is difficult to regulate, as it is intangible, diffuse and often culturally embedded. For the purpose of this research, influence can be defined as 'the capacity to produce effects or generate long-term change in

³⁶ *Digital Services Act 2022*.

³⁷ European Commission, *The Digital Services Act Package*.

³⁸ Avlon, "Wingnuts," 2.

³⁹ Geese, "Why the DSA Could Save Us," 63.

⁴⁰ Husovec, "Rising Above Liability," 883.

⁴¹ Gillespie, *Guardians of the Internet*; Ó Fathaigh, "The Perils."

the digital footprint within a platform where one does not operate directly'. This article seeks to fill this gap by arguing that the DSA's framework insufficiently addresses the infrastructural and behavioural mechanisms that enable controversial figures (ideological entrepreneurs) to grow their influence – even after moderation. Rather than focusing on content alone, we argue that 'influence' should be conceptualised as a structural dimension of platform power, deserving of its own regulatory scrutiny.

3. Methodology

Methodologically, this article adopts a theoretical and empirical approach. The remainder of the article is divided as follows. Section 4 describes – through an analysis of the text of the regulation – the main measures intended for content and profile moderation by platforms, with the aim of understanding whether and how the issue of influential profiles is covered by the text of the law. Section 5 focuses on the set of content-moderation measures undertaken by platforms since the enactment of the DSA up to 24 April 2024, with the aim of defining the extent to which these practices have involved profiles or contents considered at risk. Here, an analysis is conducted of the statements of reasons⁴² of the DSA – the reasons for content moderation actions declared by platforms – freely accessible in the DSA Transparency Database.⁴³ Finally, Section 6 adopts a computational approach to investigate whether and the extent to which the temporary *deplatforming* of ideological entrepreneurs has been an effective containment measure or whether this has contributed to their popularity. This investigation uses the CrowdTangle⁴⁴ dashboard to analyse the volume of content related to some controversial profiles (e.g. Alex Jones, Andrew Tate, and Laura Loomer) over a time period spanning from the removal of the social profiles to the following 12 months.⁴⁵

4. The DSA and the Risk-Mitigation Measures

Articles 34 and 35 of the DSA are the key references for understanding the kind of content around which platforms should take action and the corresponding measures in the governance of disinformation – although nowhere in the articles is mentioned the concept of *disinformation*, considered by some to be a legally misunderstanding concept,⁴⁶ with respect to illegal content. Recent studies highlight the legal challenges in defining disinformation,⁴⁷ as the nuances of such definitions raise complex ethical, philosophical and moral questions – such as 'What is truth?' and 'Who decides what is true?' – that resonate within broader debates about freedom of speech and censorship. Because of this challenging aspect, the DSA implicitly approaches disinformation not as 'illegal content' but rather as 'legal but harmful' content,⁴⁸ by adopting the concept of 'systemic risk' as the basis of Article 34, which describes the dissemination of illegal content⁴⁹ as:

- any real or foreseeable adverse effects on the exercise of fundamental rights that affect the dignity of individuals, respect for private and family life, protection of personal data, freedom of expression and information, media pluralism, non-discrimination and the rights of children and minors and consumers⁵⁰
- any current or foreseeable negative impacts on civic debate and electoral processes, as well as public safety⁵¹
- any current or foreseeable negative impacts in relation to gender-based violence, the protection of public health and minors, and serious adverse consequences for the physical and mental well-being of the person.⁵²

The term 'systemic' is used in reference to risks related to 'inauthentic coordinated behaviour' – that is, the use of automated systems to spread disinformation or illegal content.⁵³ The Commission (paras 103–106 of the general provisions) therefore encourages platforms to define the term from scratch or adhere to existing codes of conduct in line with the DSA – in particular, the strengthened version of the June 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation.⁵⁴ At the time of writing, almost all major social

⁴² SoRs, Art 17.

⁴³ European Commission, DSA Transparency Database.

⁴⁴ CrowdTangle is a public insights tool owned by Meta that helps researchers and journalists track how content spreads across social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.

⁴⁵ CrowdTangle Team, CrowdTangle.

⁴⁶ Husovec, "Rising Above Liability."

⁴⁷ Ó Fathaigh, "The Perils"; Zeng, "Misinformation."

⁴⁸ Matamoros-Fernández, "The Importance of Centering Harm."

⁴⁹ *Digital Services Act*, Art 34, para 1(a).

⁵⁰ *Digital Services Act*, Art 34(1)(b).

⁵¹ *Digital Services Act*, Art 34(1)(c).

⁵² *Digital Services Act*, Art 34(1)(d).

⁵³ *Digital Services Act*, Art 34(2).

⁵⁴ Code of Practice of Disinformation.

platforms were adherents to the 2022 code except for a few players, such as X. It is also noteworthy that, unlike the DSA, the code of conduct – signed by platforms on a voluntary basis – does not provide sanctions for non-compliance.

Regarding the risk mitigation measures that platforms should undertake in compliance with the DSA, the principle is that of ‘notice and action’. The actions regulated by Article 35 include content removal, visibility restriction (demotion or shadow banning), demonetisation and more radical measures, such as permanent suspension or termination of services or profiles (deplatforming). In connection with the handling of controversial profiles, in addition to the text of Article 35, it is interesting to recall the text of Article 23, ‘Measures and Protection against Misuse’:

Providers of online platforms shall suspend, for a reasonable period of time and after having issued a prior warning, the provision of their services to recipients of the service that frequently provide manifestly illegal content.

The article identifies profile suspension as the main action, if motivated by objective causes, to an extent and in a manner proportional to the quantity, systematicity and seriousness of the illegal content posted by the profile and after having verified the user’s intentions. Such sanctions must be incorporated into the ToS of platforms through clear examples of illegal use, and the duration of suspension must also be indicated. Thus, in reiterating the concept of temporary suspension or deplatforming, the DSA sanctions interim measures towards profiles guilty of wrongdoing. Here, the issue of influential profiles is not relevant: the ability to *influence public opinion* is referred to Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) such as X, TikTok and Facebook – or recommender systems, or to automated interfaces capable of autonomously generating content that is potentially risky; this prerogative is never referred to popular profiles or influencers active in the promotion of services and products. The regulations moderate profiles that objectively publish illicit content, but do not cover the dimension of *influence*. While this shields the DSA from accusations of interfering with and restricting citizens’ rights of free expression, it leaves ample room for the dynamics and drifts of influence culture. Such effects have been highlighted, for example, in the role of marketing influencers in allegedly promoting products and brands. In this case, while the content is not illegal, it involves promotional messages reframed in the form of daily storytelling, with millions of followers.⁵⁵ As the authors point out, however, there is a blurred distinction between an advertising message and a common post, and the DSA does not provide specific measures for profiles with a large following.

In the sphere of public debate, the difference between deliberate disinformation and personal opinion is even more problematic, as is the appropriateness of defining measures to limit its influence. So how do the DSA guidelines translate into objective implementation?

The next section analyses the measures taken by platforms through the DSA Transparency Database, a tool provided by Article 17 of the DSA, with the aim of making readable and transparent the moderation actions taken by social platforms in compliance with the DSA. The archive, freely accessible online, presents a detailed and systematically updated account of the actions provided for in Article 35 and the reasons (the SoRs) related to the measures initiated. The next section focuses on actions taken by VLOPs in moderating public debate and actions directed towards profiles, such as account suspension or permanent termination.

5. The Implementation of the *Digital Services Act*: Evidence from the DSA Transparency Database

In view of the purposes of this research, the analysis looked at content moderation actions taken over a 26-month period – from 20 February 2022, the date of publication of the Transparency Database, to 24 April 2024 – by major social platforms, specifically Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Snapchat, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube. The total number of initiated actions and the related SoRs amounted to 966,442,879 (Figure 1).

⁵⁵ Duivenvoorde, “The Regulation of Digital Advertising,” 105870.

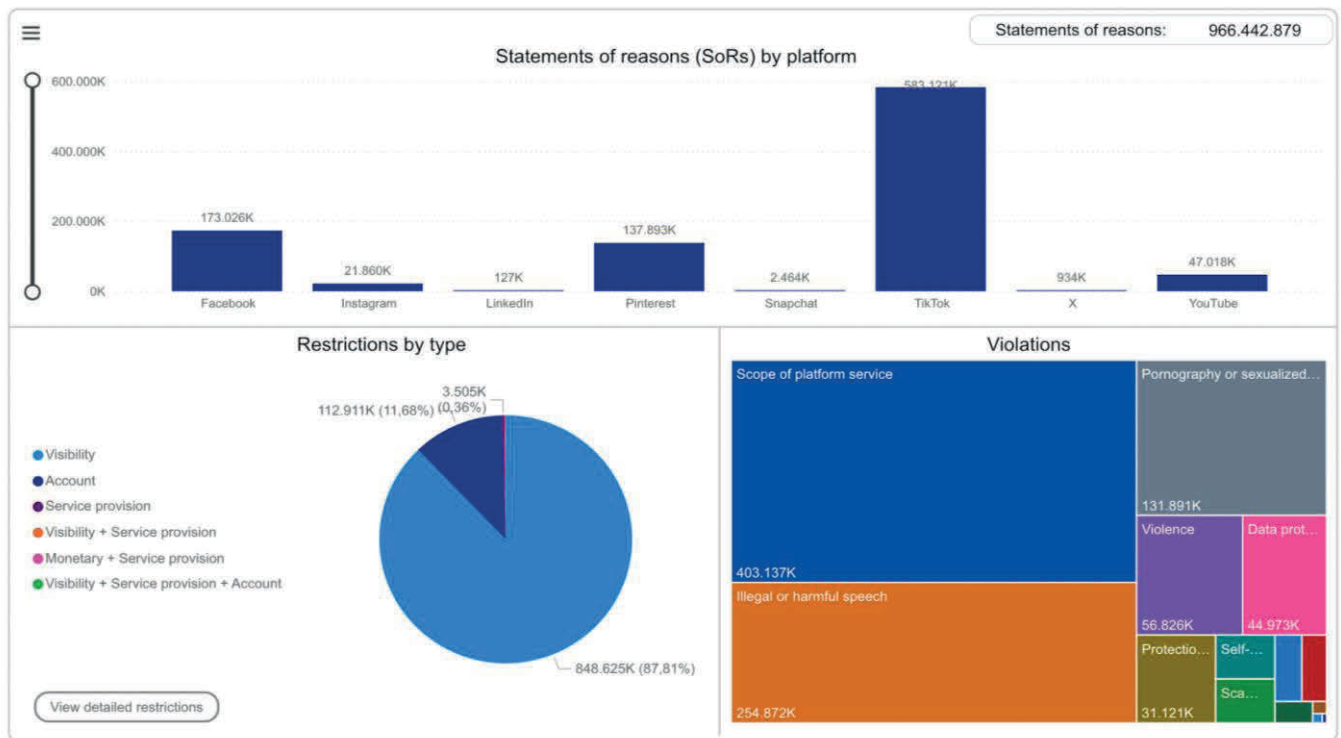


Figure 1. The total number of actions initiated and the related SoRs

From Figure 1, we note the prevalence of actions towards TikTok (580 million), followed by Facebook (173 million), then Pinterest, YouTube and X. Regarding the types of violations, those referring to *scope of platform service* prevailed over others, with more than 400 million items indicating violations to the ToS of platforms, independent of the DSA guidelines. Violations represented by harmful or illegal content stood at 254 million, with abuses for disseminating pornographic or sexually oriented content coming in third, with more than 131 million items.

Illegal or harmful speech occurred to varying degrees: on Facebook, for example, the volume of violations related to such content was only about 2 per cent of all motivated violations, but it was significantly higher on TikTok, Instagram, and LinkedIn (Figure 2). Note how this type of violation was irrelevant in relation to X, the most active platform from the perspective of political debate.

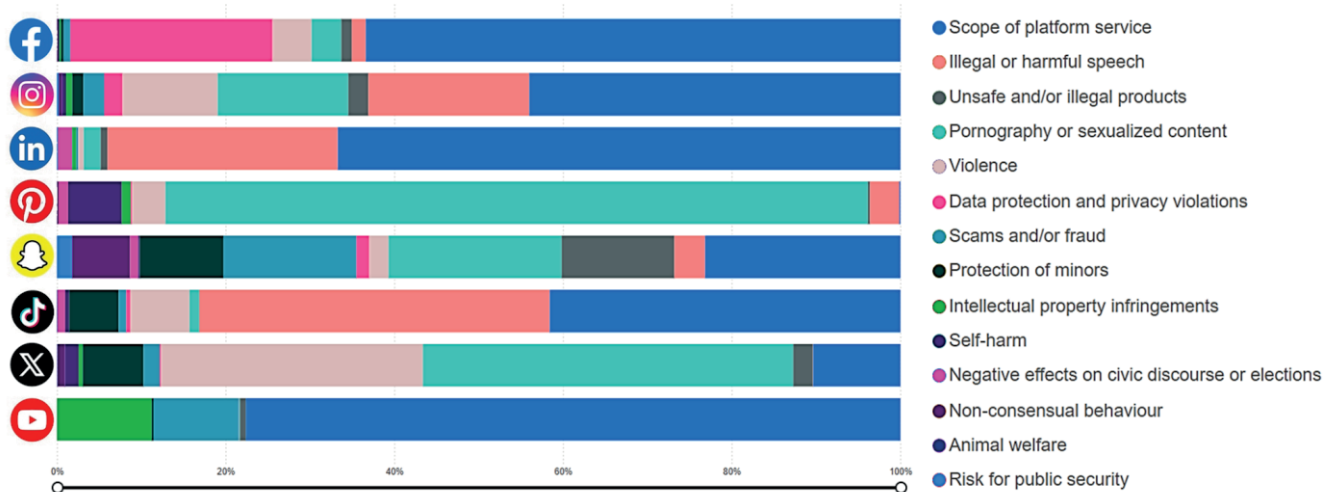


Figure 2. Violations sorted by platform and type

Figure 3 shows the sources of the reasons – that is, based on the type of reporting of the platforms that moderated the content.

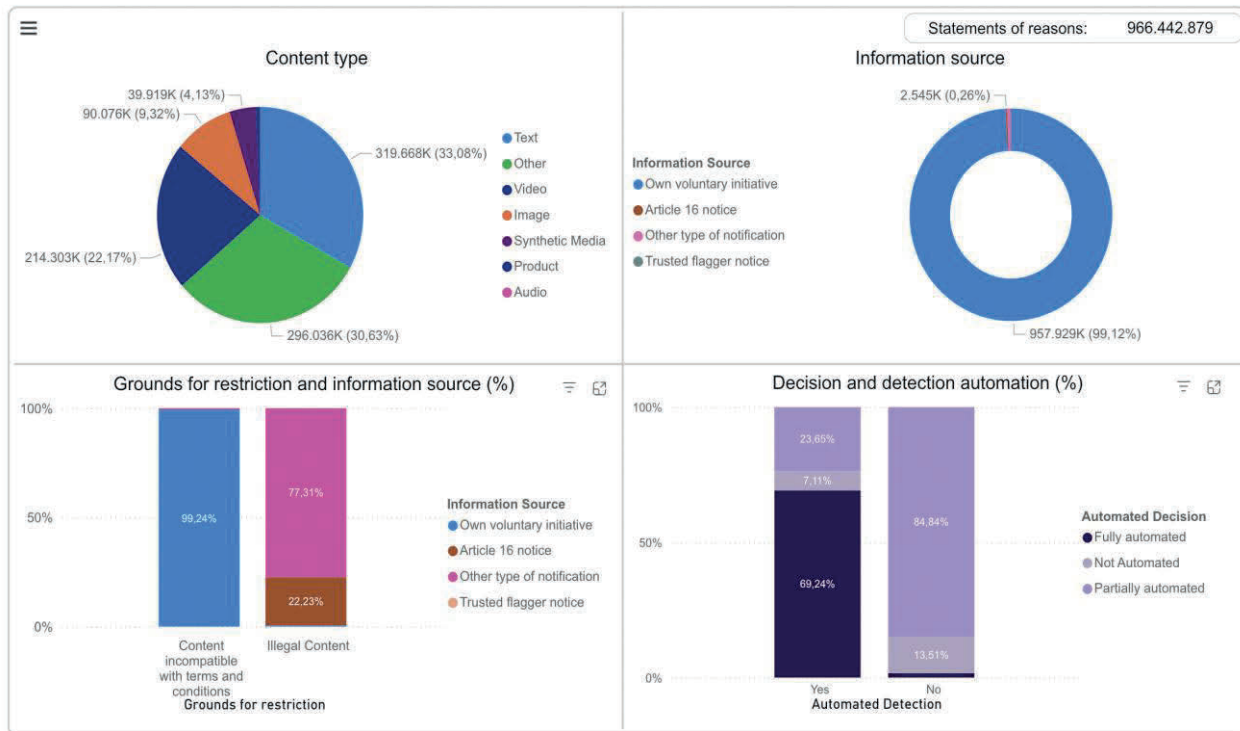


Figure 3. Sources of the moderation measures taken

Among those reported were the following:

- voluntary initiatives: platforms independently decide to adopt restrictive measures
- Article 16 of the DSA, which provides for a process of immediate notification and action by platforms following a report by those specified in the statutory text;
- other types of notifications, which could be initiated by parties outside the platforms (but acting as third parties on contract in content moderation), including third-party companies that performed moderation activities on behalf of the platforms
- trusted flaggers (or certified flaggers): figures envisaged by the DSA as competent in identifying and reporting illegal content.⁵⁶

In summary, the sources of the reasons for restrictions on illegal content refer minimally – in only 22 per cent of cases – to Article 16 of the DSA (i.e. the notification and action process) and not to reports from trusted flaggers. Most of the actions were taken because of ‘other types of notifications’, which may refer – albeit not explicitly – to the categories described above. Moreover, in many cases (see the picture of the percentage of automated versus non-automated decisions), moderation actions were determined by the platforms’ algorithms.

Figure 4 shows the type of measures taken and the considerations anticipated in the previous section. It reveals that in most cases, the moderation measures taken were not aimed at profiles but rather at removing specific content or restricting visibility – more than 552 and 256 million cases, respectively. We note that in third place is ‘account suspension’, which occurred 97 million times. This measure, involving ultimate deplatforming – that is, ‘Disabling access to content + total termination of the account’ – was undertaken by social platforms 267 times (from more than 900 million actions) in more than two years of activity.

⁵⁶ *Digital Services Act*, Art 22.

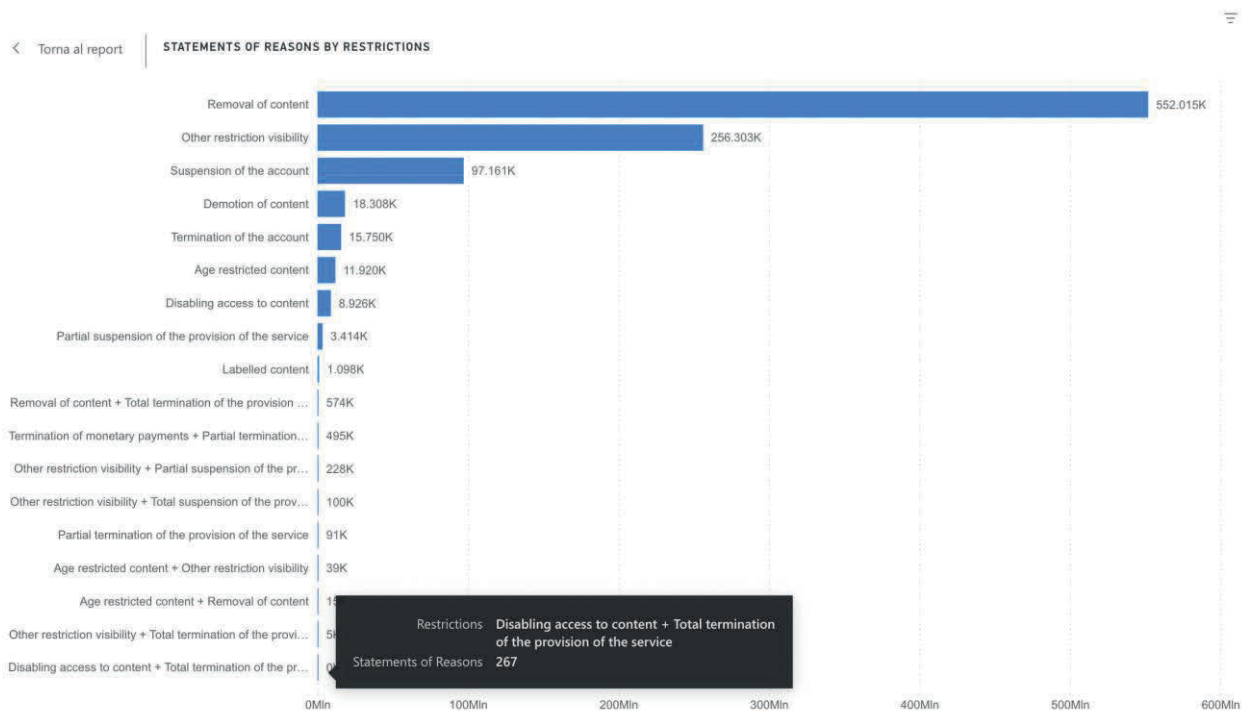


Figure 4. Types of measures taken by platforms

The analysis revealed that actions aimed at moderating profiles were concentrated in the area of temporary suspension. However, the expected duration or relationship regarding individual violations remained unknown. While the transparency database offers a detailed account of the actions taken by platforms, it does not specify the modalities of those measures. Additionally, the absence of a clear definition of disinformation within the DSA framework significantly limits both the reporting scope of the platform and the ability to assess the concrete measures taken to address it. As described above, account suspension is an action under platforms' ToS, aimed at mitigating the spread of disinformation by problematic profiles. The three profiles analysed (Alex Jones, Laura Loomer and Andrew Tate) were subject to suspension for a significant period between 2018 and 2023. What consequences has this suspension had for the popularity of ideological entrepreneurs? In view of these consequences, is it possible to say that the suspension measure was effective and could resolve the underlying vagueness in the governance of disinformation?

6. The Digital Footprint of Ideological Entrepreneurs

With the aim of analysing how and to what extent the suspension of influential accounts can contain the harmful effects of disinformation, the level of popularity of ideological entrepreneurs was taken into account with the aim of highlighting whether it had decreased or increased as a result of deplatforming. Using the CrowdTangle dashboard, we processed references to three main individuals (Andrew Tate, Alex Jones and Laura Loomer) using the profile names (and/or their podcasts) as search queries on CrowdTangle to identify mentions to them in public posts on Facebook. The data processed with CrowdTangle thus represent the digital footprint that the public profiles had, and continue to have, before and after their accounts were removed.⁵⁷

The term 'digital footprint' refers to the retrievable traces of online activity on a network, which can constitute information about a person or organisation.⁵⁸ In line with Rogers,⁵⁹ this is a vanity metric – that is, a measure of popularity. In other words, CrowdTangle allowed us to analyse whether the volume of subject-related posts had increased or decreased as a result of deplatforming by Facebook and X. The digital footprint calculation considered the number of interactions, posts and

⁵⁷ Innes, "De-platforming Disinformation."

⁵⁸ Weaver, "Constructing, Visualising."

⁵⁹ Rogers, "Digital Traces," 23.

overperformance scores; since the subjects had been removed from Facebook, none of the mentions following removal came from their social profiles. Interactions were calculated as the sum of comments, reactions and shares. However, CrowdTangle does not consider reach (number of distinct users to have seen the post), impressions (total number of views of the post) and clicks (number of times users clicked on the post). The number of posts quantitatively indicates content that possesses references to the subjects under analysis and was used as a metric to further investigate through the concept of overperformance. The overperformance index weighs the number of interactions with a particular post in relation to the average number of interactions with previous posts to it from the same page/group/profile. It indicates how well a post is exceeding expectations in terms of profile interaction. In order to understand the effect of profile suspension on popularity, Table 1 shows the metrics calculated for the three ideological entrepreneurs in two separate periods: the year before and the year after their suspension from the main platforms.

The main evidence uncovered in this study was the high increase in the percentage changes on all the metrics considered for Andrew Tate (interactions +1091.5%, posts +1681.2%, and overperformance +1430.5%). For Alex Jones, there was an increase in interactions (+62.2%) and a similar number of posts (−2.5%), which overperformed significantly better (+36.9%) in the post-ban period, suggesting that talking about Alex Jones following the ban ‘proved convenient’ for the purpose of eliciting interactions. Finally, regarding Laura Loomer, there was a sharp decline in all metrics, with fewer interactions (−78.4%), fewer posts (−34.7%), and a negative change in overperformance (−27.2%).

The analysis shows that for at least two of the profiles (Alex Jones and Andrew Tate), there was a significant increase in posts. From this, we can infer an increase in the visibility and popularity of the subjects despite their period of censorship on Facebook, Twitter and other platforms.

Table 1. Summary table of variation in interactions, posts and the overperformance score of ideological entrepreneurs

User	Ban date	Query	Interactions before	Interactions after	% variation	Post before	Post after	% variation	Overperformance before	Overperformance after	% variation
Andrew Tate (TateSpeech)	20 August 2022	Andrew Tate OR Tate Speech	1.189.105	14.168.380	1091	4.008	71.392	1681	619	9.474	1430
Alex Jones (InfoWars)	2 May 2019	Infowars OR (podcast Alex Jones)	2.515.480	4.080.544	62.2	25.157	24.538	-2.5	4.092	5.600	36.9
Laura Loomer	2 May 2019	Laura Loomer	1.168.200	252.359	-78.4	6.324	4.130	-34.7	1.214	884	-27.2

7. Discussion

In relation to the results emerging from the DSA Transparency Database, we noted that the prevalence of content moderation interventions was determined by the platforms' ToS, rather than Article 16 of the DSA, which specifically contains the guidelines based on the *notice and action* mechanism. This signals that, at least at the time of writing, platform-specific ToS are the main normative framework to the detriment of the DSA, which should instead become the general framework of reference. The analysis of the database also reveals a clear prevalence of actions aimed at moderating content rather than controversial profiles; the measures intended to suspend or remove social media profiles are used very little and, in the rare cases when they are, are always in temporary rather than permanent form. This empirical evidence, which certainly requires further analysis even over subsequent time periods, raises broader considerations regarding the general principles of the DSA and in particular critical issues related to possible limitations – real or perceived – to individuals' freedom of expression. As De Gregorio observed,⁶⁰ there is clearly a paradox in content moderation between the general objectives to contain the systemic risks posed by the dissemination of illegal content on the one hand and the priorities of dominant platforms aimed at maximising data accumulation and derived profits on the other. This kind of paradox reverberates also in the DSA regulatory framework: while the objectives are clear and shareable, the actions focus almost exclusively on content, circumventing specific – and often negative – dynamics of social media related to influential profiles spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories.

As the textual analysis of the law highlights, the concept of *influence* is not formally elaborated, nor are the related negative drifts such as virality phenomena with manipulative or propagandistic purposes: phenomena that nonetheless lie at the heart of the communication dynamics of social media platforms. The topic of influence is at most referred to the effects of inauthentic coordinated behaviour – that is, the outcomes of algorithmic manipulations or systems deliberately programmed to spread disinformation: bots, fake accounts and so on. There is an obvious limitation here that eludes the critical issues that are inscribed in the context of influence culture⁶¹ and its vicious outcomes, such as political manipulation, ideological entrepreneurship and disinformation propaganda – processes that refer to specific subjects and not only to algorithmic systems.

Drawing from existing literature in media studies, political communication and digital regulation,⁶² we notice that most of the proposals focus on regulating the infrastructures of influence (e.g. algorithmic amplification, monetisation systems, visibility engineering), rather than attempting to control influence as a personal attribute. Influence, defined as 'the capacity to produce effects or generate long-term change in the digital footprint within a platform where one does not operate directly', becomes particularly relevant when analysed in conjunction with the persistence of digital traces. Deleted tweets, for instance, often leave behind residual elements that outlast the user's intention to remove them. A large-scale empirical analysis of over 1.6 million deleted tweets found that many remained partially accessible through conversational threads, such as replies or retweets, which were not deleted in tandem.⁶³ Similarly, research in digital forensics has demonstrated that various forms of data – such as cached content, metadata and server logs – can persist across platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube even after the original posts are deleted.⁶⁴ These findings underscore the complexity of managing one's digital presence, as deplatforming does not guarantee complete removal. Instead, fragmented traces continue to exist, enabling indirect forms of influence and challenging the assumption that users can fully erase their digital footprints.

Recent research on deplatforming has demonstrated its varied effectiveness across platforms. Rogers,⁶⁵ for example, examined a number of censored alt-right profiles and identified migrations to an alternative network of platforms used as a replacement for YouTube, Facebook and Twitter: those new profiles revealed even more radical positions than those on mainstream platforms. Rauchfleisch and Kaiser⁶⁶ show that while deplatforming far-right actors from YouTube can reduce their visibility, it may simultaneously drive traffic to fringe platforms such as Bitchute, which serve as alternative outlets or backups. Similarly, Jhaver et al.⁶⁷ find that deplatforming is an effective moderation strategy on Twitter, limiting the spread of harmful content. However, Mekacher et al.⁶⁸ point to more complex cross-platform dynamics, noting that deplatformed users may increase their activity on mainstream platforms that allow for engagement with ideological opponents, thus reinforcing polarising dynamics. Zimdars⁶⁹ emphasises the necessity of coordinated deplatforming across multiple platforms, arguing that isolated actions risk

⁶⁰ De Gregorio, "Democratising Online Content Moderation," 178–80.

⁶¹ Arnesson, "Influencers as Ideological Intermediaries."

⁶² Helberger, "Governing Online Platforms"; Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet*.

⁶³ Almuhammedi, "Tweets are Forever."

⁶⁴ Femi-Adeyinka, "Digital Forensics Analysis"; Gupta, "A Comprehensive Survey."

⁶⁵ Rogers, "Deplatforming."

⁶⁶ Rauchfleisch, "The Impact of Deplatforming."

⁶⁷ Jhaver, "Evaluating the Effectiveness."

⁶⁸ Mekacher, "The Systemic Impact."

⁶⁹ Zimdars, "Alt-health Influencers."

pushing influencers into fringe spaces, where they may continue to shape public discourse unchallenged. In this context, multi-platform deplatforming emerges as a strategic approach to limit the broader societal influence of deplatformed individuals by curbing their ability to re-establish a presence elsewhere.

With regard to the digital footprint of ideological entrepreneurs, and while acknowledging the limitations of analysing activity on a single platform, our data reveal that deplatforming had an unexpected effect in at least two of the controversial cases examined. Specifically, the digital footprint metrics of Andrew Tate and Alex Jones – measured through public Facebook posts – increased rather than declined following their deplatforming. This phenomenon is often described as the ‘Streisand effect’: a counter-intuitive or opposite effect.⁷⁰ As Innes and Innes⁷¹ note, the ‘Streisand effect’ phenomenon indicates an increase in public posts on censored profiles because of platforms’ moderation efforts. This was observed in reaction to the deplatforming of two popular conspiracy theorists (David Icke and Kate Shemirani) during COVID-19.⁷² As other scholars have analysed, censorship can have a negative effect, aggravating the ideological beliefs of the recipients.

In our opinion, and in relation to the specific cases analysed, the increase in the digital footprint of the censored ideological entrepreneurs is not only related to a Streisand effect, but also to the *influence* of their social profiles. To investigate this hypothesis, we empirically examine whether the increase in engagement metrics occurs immediately after the deplatforming action (consistent with the Streisand effect) or instead at a later stage, in response to news coverage or renewed attention to the banned/deplatformed influencer. The latter scenario would suggest that the influencer maintains a capacity to shape the public discourse of the platforms where they are no longer active. Figures 5, 6 and 7 illustrate different dynamics in the relationship between deplatforming and digital footprint changes for three ideological entrepreneurs.

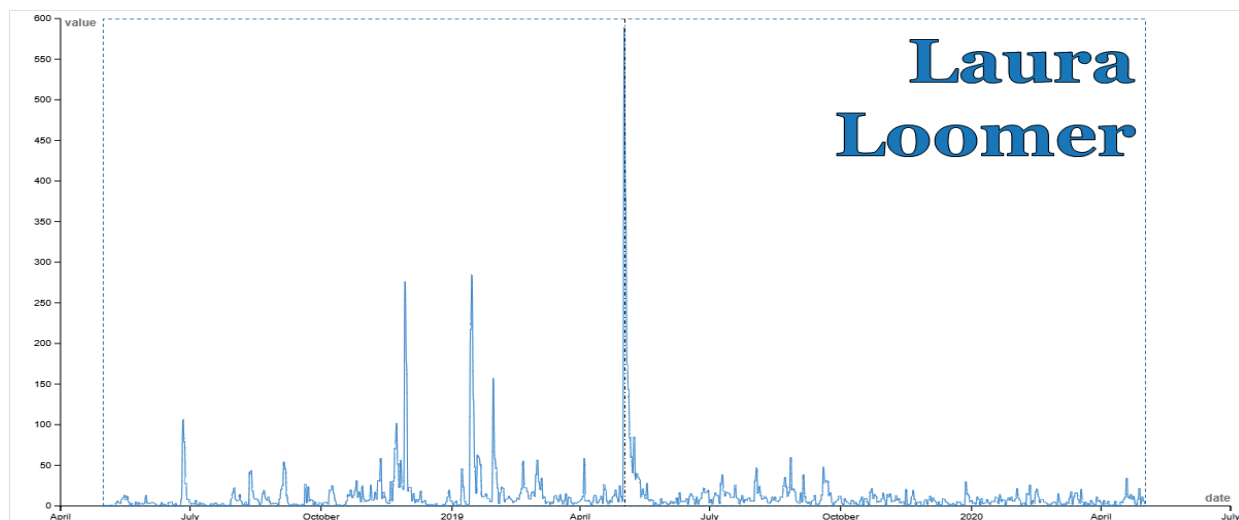


Figure 5. Line chart showing the trend of Laura Loomer's posts over time

⁷⁰ Ohlheiser, “Twitter’s ban almost doubled attention for Biden story.

⁷¹ Innes, “De-platforming Disinformation.”

⁷² Innes, “De-platforming Disinformation.”

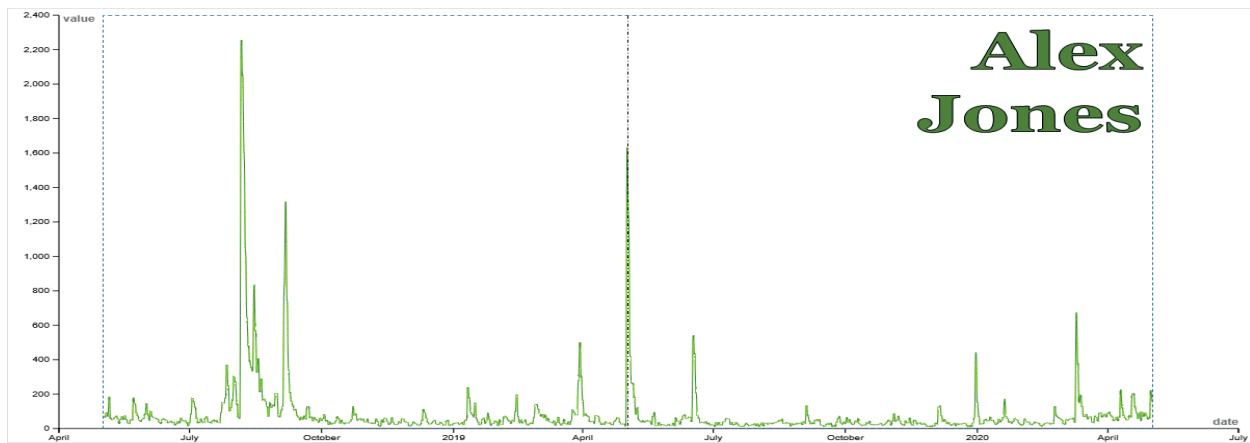


Figure 6. Line chart showing the trend of Alex Jones's posts over time



Figure 7. Line chart showing the trend of Andrew Tate's posts over time

- Figure 5, concerning Laura Loomer, demonstrates a clear Streisand effect immediately following her deplatforming, but no sustained influence thereafter – ultimately resulting in a significant decline in her overall digital footprint.
- Figure 6, focused on Alex Jones, also reveals evidence of a Streisand effect; however, this is accompanied by continued post-deplatforming influence, leading to a modest increase in his digital footprint over time.
- Finally, Figure 7, which analyses Andrew Tate, indicates a mild Streisand effect but a strong and sustained influence following deplatforming, culminating in a marked increase in his digital footprint.

Taken together, these cases suggest that the post-censorship growth in visibility and impact of ideological entrepreneurs cannot be explained solely by the Streisand effect. Instead, it appears to be significantly shaped by the enduring influence of their social media presence and engagement networks. The findings suggest that the Streisand effect alone is not sufficient to explain the observed increase in the digital footprint. Rather, the presence of influence appears to be a necessary condition for such growth to occur. In this context, the concept of influence seems to play a central role and warrants further attention within the regulatory scope of the *Digital Services Act* (DSA).

8. Conclusions

Deplatforming involves a series of complex dynamics that emerge from the interaction of various effects, both intended and unintended. One of these is the Streisand effect, in which efforts to suppress content paradoxically lead to increased public attention and dissemination. This highlights how content removal can backfire, amplifying rather than attenuating the visibility of certain actors or narratives. Moreover, influence in the digital environment should not be understood in a narrow sense as

limited to direct participation on a platform. Rather, it encompasses the ability to produce effects or catalyse long-term changes in a platform's information ecosystem, even in the absence of a direct presence. In this sense, deplatformed individuals or groups may continue to exert discursive or algorithmic influence through indirect means, such as the redistribution of their content by others, migrations from one platform to another, or through algorithmic traces that remain embedded in the platform's infrastructure. These layered dynamics complicate the supposed effectiveness of deplatforming as a direct content governance tool.

In response to RQ1 and RQ2 (In what ways, and through which specific mechanisms, does the *Digital Services Act* (DSA) address disinformation and regulate the activities of ideological entrepreneurs? And, in this context, what measures have digital platforms implemented in alignment with the provisions of the DSA?), the DSA retains basic vagueness in relation to the concept of disinformation itself, which does not find a clear definition in the text of the law, delegating the operationalisation of the concept to codes of practice – such as the Code of Practice of Disinformation – which are supposed to implement the pragmatic dimension of the concept.

Moreover, while the text of the law focuses on content moderation but, it does not provide for specific actions towards ideological entrepreneurs who play a central role in the dissemination of uninformative or illegal content, and can also benefit – in terms of popularity – from the temporary suspensions provided by the DSA. The European Commission⁷³ introduces risk assessment obligations for VLOPs, particularly regarding systemic risks such as amplification of disinformation or hate speech. The regulatory focus shifts from individual content to systemic amplification mechanisms. However, in the DSA, the dimension of influence, while so important for the dynamics of communicative flows in platforms remains an unregulated dimension and totally absent, even in the defining sections of the law text. Moreover, a regulation that wants to contain the risks of disinformation cannot elude the issue of influence, the role of controversial profiles and the digital footprint they are able to generate and nurture regardless of the content moderation measures implemented.

In light of the effects of deplatforming ideological entrepreneurs, to answer RQ3 (Do the content moderation measures targeting ideological entrepreneurs reflect a departure from the previously indeterminate governance direction of the platform?), we must acknowledge that the results of the CrowdTangle analysis, circumscribed to a limited number of profiles, cannot be generalised to a comprehensive assessment. However, there is evidence of an objective increase in the popularity of ideological entrepreneurs, and although it is not possible through a purely quantitative survey to identify the presence or absence of disinformation in the content related to them, it seems reasonable to infer that an increase in the visibility of hyper-shared profiles polarised on objectively controversial positions may also correspond to a greater dissemination of their ideas and opinions – that is, an increase in their influence in the informational disorder of the digital public sphere. Moreover, in relation to RQ3, the research highlighted several critical issues and advances the hypothesis – to be tested in future empirical investigations – that deplatforming is strategically used by platforms to respond to reports of wrongdoing in a timely manner, later reinstating the ideological entrepreneurs once their popularity has grown, also by virtue of the initial censorship. Once rehabilitated, they can continue to feed the social communication flows – and, ultimately, data capitalism – on the strength of renewed popularity and a newly recognised public status. As a result, it is possible to identify the vagueness of a double-standard policy adopted by platforms: on one side, they moderate controversial profiles by complying with DSA guidelines, but in the long run they restore their social accounts in order to profit from their renewed popularity, thus reinforcing the *business of polarisation* typical of surveillance capitalism.

⁷³ *Digital Services Act*, Arts 27 and 34.

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