

LETTER TO THE GOVERNMENT: DATA ACCESS IN ONLINE SAFETY BILL

19 June 2023

Dear Secretary of State,

As a coalition of researchers and campaigners whose expertise spans a range of online harms and their real world consequences, we urge you to adopt a much needed amendment to the Online Safety Bill to compel greater transparency from social media companies.

The Online Safety Bill, as it exists, is in serious peril of passing into law with no powers to compel platforms to give independent researchers access to data about what is taking place on regulated platforms in real time.

This will consolidate the information asymmetry which has allowed tech companies to frustrate researchers' attempts to conduct timely research and, where necessary, sound the alarm before catastrophic harms take place and spill into the offline world.

The government is at dire risk of failing to protect the British public and our communities from the harmful impact of racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-LGBTQ+ hate, industrial-scale misinformation, child abuse, illegal content, violence against women and girls, and radicalisation. By maintaining the status quo, online platforms can restrict knowledge of the extent of these harms on their services.

The Data Access Amendments, tabled by Lord Bethell, enable Ofcom to give researchers access to internal platform data, so long as they meet tough standards on independence and privacy.

It would also force platforms to follow a "code of practice" on data access for independent researchers that will help prevent them from distorting or withholding data.



These additional powers – which have not yet been added to the Bill despite recommendation by Ofcom, civil society, academia and peers from across the House – are needed more than ever as platforms pull down the shutters and restrict data access.

Under the stewardship of Elon Musk, Twitter now charges researchers £33,000 (\$42,000) a month to access data that was previously free – all but shutting down free access to its API. It has also ordered academics and public interest researchers to delete data obtained previously.

Recent research revealed that TikTok withholds data about online harms from its discovery centre, suppressing information about the proliferation of content relating to eating disorders, suicide and self-harm with billions of user views.

These actions show that the Online Safety Bill must provide data access for researchers. With amendments due to be debated in the House of Lords on Thursday 22 June, the Government has little time to ensure the Bill delivers meaningful transparency.

We ask the Government to support the Data Access amendments, supporting the researchers, academics and experts who work in real-time to empower and inform the British public about the online harms that affect their lives.

Sincerely,

Center for Countering Digital Hate, CCDH
5Rights
Alcohol Focus Scotland
Alliance for Countering Crime Online, ACCO
Antisemitism Policy Trust
Carnegie UK
Clean Up The Internet
Demos
Full Fact
Glitch
Institute for Strategic Dialogue, ISD
Molly Rose Foundation
National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
Reset.tech

