

Campaign for #DataAccess in the Online Safety Bill

Dear Members of the House of Lords,

Ahead of next week's committee stage on the Online Safety Bill, we wanted to bring to your attention an **amendment** relating to **data access**.

We are writing in support of an amendment to the Online Safety Bill which would **increase** and **accelerate data access** for accredited researchers and civil society organisations under provisions in the Online Safety Bill. This will enable better study and examination of the societal consequences of social media companies in the UK.

As signatories, we all have first-hand experience of platforms obfuscating and **failing to provide accredited researcher access to data**. Without this amendment the Online Safety Bill will leave UK researchers and civil society organisations at a *disadvantage* compared to our European counterparts, who will be granted similar access rights to the proposed amendment, under the Digital Services Act. In order to prevent a "brain drain" of research excellence we are strongly calling on the government to adopt this amendment.

In February, Twitter announced that it will "no longer support free access to the Twitter API, both v2 and v1. A basic tier will be available instead." This move demonstrated how a platform which had previously been amongst the most transparent, could **revoke access** for trusted research organisations like ours, **severely limiting the type of research we can conduct**. Without mandatory and accelerated data access in the OSB,

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researchers and civil society could instead see **further erosion to data access** over the coming years.

All of our organisations work to highlight the harmful effects of social media on our respective specialisations: online anti-semitism, violence against women and girls, Islamophobia, racism, harm to children and vulnerable people and the negative consequences for mental health. In order for us to do this work most effectively, we need this amendment to the Bill.

The amendment has been laid by Lord Bethell and Lord Clement-Jones, and includes a series of changes to the Online Safety Bill which collectively improve transparency.

There are many areas of the Bill that this amendment would enhance. Child safety, illegal content, VAWG, the proliferation of racism, anti-semitism and Islamophobia, and the radicalisation journey of online users are all issues which will benefit first and foremost from greater transparency. Without more clarity about the scale and nature of these harms, we - civil society, academics, regulators and the government - are tackling unknowns. This amendment would shine light onto the social media ecosystem, tackling many other priority areas the Bill seeks to address.

Why is Data Access important for researchers and civil society?

- The status quo renders researchers beholden to the whims of Big Tech companies who have a vested interest in **opacity**. Without being able to look under the bonnet of Big Tech, we will never truly understand the **systems** and **processes** which **promote harmful content** online or which **deprioritise trusted information sources**.
- For too long users, policymakers, regulators and researchers have been in the dark about the externalities of social media—relying

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on data hand-picked by the platforms, whistleblowers or research sponsored by platforms.

- **Independent scrutiny** is a cornerstone of every other trillion pound industry (ie pharmaceuticals, automobiles, oil, gas and finance). Given the outsized role that Big Tech plays in our **democracy, elections, childrens' lives, mental health and public discourse**, this scrutiny could not be more critical.
- By accelerating data access the Bill would be providing an important **regulatory backstop** for Ofcom. Through increasing the diversity and capacity of research on potential harm, it will be easier to horizon-scan for new risks to users and regulate platforms effectively.

Will Data Access expose trade secrets?

- No. The proposed amendment details a process whereby Ofcom would issue a **code of practice for researchers** which would “ensure the protections of the rights of service users and protection of confidential information.”
- The code of practice would provide a vetting mechanism for prospective researchers that places “the protection of personal data, the protection of confidential information, and the security of the services” at its heart.
- The proposed amendment would require inter-regulatory cooperation between Ofcom, the Information Commissioner and other bodies such as the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation and UK Research and Innovation.

Last May more than 40 charities, online safety campaigners and academics signed a [letter to the Prime Minister and Culture Secretary](#), calling for verified researchers and civil society to be empowered to request data access under the Online Safety Bill.

This amendment is crucial for independent research, democratic oversight and accountability.

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