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ARTICLE

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Regulating Disinformation and Ideological Entrepreneurs: An Exploratory Research on the Digital Services Act Implementation

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Abstract

The introduction of the Digital Services Act (DSA) by the EU marks a fundamental step 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 polarization" for the digital public sphere (Geese, 2023). According to others (Husovec, 2023b), DSA is an ambitious legal framework that must be tamed in consideration of the priorities of different stakeholders: platforms, legislators at the European and national level, journalists responding to the challenges of fact-checking, and citizens entitled to participate in a safe and non-discriminatory public sphere. Thanks to a critical approach (Van Dijck, 2021; Zuboff, 2019), the article discusses how platforms manage controversial political influencers: the ideological entrepreneurs. From the point of view of the empirical analysis, the essay identifies ambiguities in the DSA text that neither clarify the role of ideological entrepreneurs 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 thanks to the DSA Transparency Database, shows that social media platforms tend to privilege temporary measures such as accounts suspension, rather than more effective actions such as deplatforming (Van Dijck et al., 2023). This reflects ongoing tensions in the regulation of digital services, especially when balancing innovation in governance with the protection of the democratic information environment. As a result, the article highlights a double-standard policy adopted by platforms towards the influencers: On one side they actively contribute to feeding the flow of disinformation and fake news, but on the other hand, they enable platforms to generate visibility and traffic, thus reinforcing the "business of polarization" typical of surveillance capitalism.

Keywords

content moderation; Digital Services Act; disinformation; ideological entrepreneurs; platform governance; social media

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1. Introduction

Various scholars have argued that Meta, X, and Google cannot be considered mere media infrastructure or platforms but, rather, moderators and gatekeepers of content, emphasizing their centrality in mitigating risks related to the spread of fake news, conspiracy theories, and extremist propaganda (Gillespie, 2018; Jeppesen et al., 2022). 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, content creators, and influencers of various kinds (Zuckerman, 2021). 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 monetized (Braun & Eklund, 2019). By disinformation we mean "intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals" (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 124). According to this definition, different actors play a crucial role, either through algorithmic means or deliberate actions, in fueling disinformation flows in the digital ecosystem. Thus, disinformation may result in a specific dimension of the platformization process as part of "the oxygen and carbon dioxide that feed the ecosystem of platforms" (Van Dijck, 2021, p. 2805). A more radical perspective is that of Shoshana Zuboff (2019), who identified the sovereignty of dominant platforms as essential to understanding power relations in the current digital ecosystem. The legitimacy of sovereignty lies in the instrumentalizing 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 control over the accumulation of data that represent the real capital to be defended in every way. According to Zuboff (2019), therefore, dominant platforms play an ambiguous role in the governance of disinformation: On the one hand, they transpose—eg., through their own term of service (ToS)—the regulations, codes of conduct, and procedures capable of contain the systemic risks of the digital public sphere; and 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 given by the accumulation of data.

Also in response to Big Tech ambivalence in the governance of the digital public sphere, the European Commission introduced in October 2022, the Digital Services Act (DSA; Regulation of the European Parliament and Council of 19 October 2022, 2022): 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 (European Commission, n.d.-b). The DSA's guidance also affects the ToS of individual platforms, which should incorporate European regulatory guidelines. Two years after its entry into force, however, one finds in its implementation the basic ambiguity mentioned earlier, especially in relation to the management of problematic and influential profiles such as prominent public figures (eg., 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" (Avlon, 2010, p. 2). According to Van den Bulck and Hyzen (2020), ideological entrepreneurs on the margins of institutional political debate, play a key role in times of rapid change at the political and ideological levels, that is, times in which individuals become more amenable to alternative interpretations to make sense of an increasingly complex present. Controversial public figures, such as Alex Jones, Andrew Tate, and Laura Loomer have emerged in recent years as active spokespersons for conspiracy

theories in relation to, for example, Covid-19 or to 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 actualize them, reframe them, and make them capable of explaining a complex social reality in a simple way. As ideological entrepreneurs, they compete in a market where attention and popularity are of strategic value, while the cost to be borne is a systematic and obsessive activity of interaction and reinforcement with respect to their followers through posts, live streaming, and a pervasive multi-platform presence. Such assiduity makes them ideological entrepreneurs of disinformation, capable of feeding streams, interactions, and ultimately valuable data for surveillance capitalism. What ideological entrepreneurs have in common is the dissemination of conspiracy theories, fake news, or hyper-partisan views, such as those in favour of the return of an ideology of "lost masculinity" (Haslop et al., 2024). They often position themselves at the conservative and populist alt-right side of the political spectrum, but in most cases, they are entrepreneurs of strategically crafted positions capable of intercepting niches of audiences not yet manned (Rogers, 2020; Siapera, 2023).

The next section explores how major platforms have handled influential and problematic profiles in the recent past and what critical issues and ambiguities can be inferred. Section 3 then focuses on the DSA guidelines related to content moderation, while the methodological Section 4 offers empirical evidence showing that both the text of the regulation and its practical implementation, present ambiguous aspects, especially regarding how platforms balance the costs and opportunities of disinformation.

2. The Governance of Controversial Profiles and Ideological Entrepreneurs

An exemplary case of platform ambivalence is that of Donald Trump. Some commentators believe that the success of his 2016 election campaign, characterized by aggressive tones and fake news, is intertwined with the success and expansion of X (previously Twitter), which established itself just then as the world's leading platform for political debate (Courty, 2024). Following the events on Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021, and based on charges of fomenting hatred and violence by the attackers, Trump's social profile was removed from X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitch (Di Salvo, 2021). The censorship of the leader of the West's largest democracy was a global event that underscored the sovereign role of platforms in undertaking unprecedented measures: They were no longer conceived as mere moderators of content but as the new guardians of free expression (Macedo, 2022). Trump's social censorship, however, did not prevent thousands of other less popular profiles from feeding the streams of viral disinformation through QAnon conspiracy theories and misogynist and xenophobic stances. In fact, several studies have shown that deplatforming (the temporary or permanent suspension of a social profile from a platform) had a significant effect, for example, on Facebook and Instagram but a limited impact on X and YouTube, which remained privileged channels for alt-right conspiracists (La Gatta et al., 2023). As a paradigmatic outcome of the parable of censorship invoked by many, Donald Trump's profile was rehabilitated by X in 2023. In fact, its new owner Elon Musk declared that the X platform positioned itself too far to the left in political debate, thus justifying the reinstatement of the former president responsible for provoking a coup d'etat in which five people lost their lives (Campbell, 2022).

Alongside eminent figures, several ideological entrepreneurs have been the subject of moderation measures by platforms. 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 (Sayogie et al., 2023). Also, Laura Loomer is worth noticing: a popular Covid-19 denier and former Republican congressional candidate. Following the campaign against the alt-right waged by major social platforms between 2018 and 2019 (Rogers, 2020), the social profiles of Alex Jones and Laura Loomer were removed (see "Deplatforming," 2024) from Facebook and X on charges of spreading extremist, misogynistic, discriminatory, and disinformative content about the Covid-19 pandemic. Andrew Tate's (https://x.com/Cobratate) profile did not overtly position himself in the alt-right camp but played on values related to self-manhood (Haslop et al., 2024) and an idea of masculinity to be preserved and defended at all costs. He escaped the first wave of moderation, but his social media profile was removed in 2022, following his arrest in Romania on charges of rape, human trafficking, and forming an organized criminal group for the sexual exploitation of women.

Despite the ban, the three profiles 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 monetization 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 (Das, 2022). In January 2024, an analysis by the Center for Countering Digital Hate reported that Real World Order had generated 450 million views and that through this traffic, YouTube had earned up to £2.4 million from advertising through Tate's content ("YouTube rakes in millions," 2022). Another channel that shared content earned nearly 300 million views after circumventing social media bans by using affiliate marketing schemes (Oppenheim, 2024). 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 governance of free expression 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 (Rogers, 2020). 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 (Wilson, 2022).

Recently, as in the case of Trump, the profiles of Infowars (https://x.com/infowars) and Alex Jones (https://x.com/RealAlexJones), Andrew Tate (https://x.com/Cobratate), and Laura Loomer (https://x.com/LauraLoomer) were rehabilitated by X. Similarly, Facebook rehabilitated those of Alex Jones (https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61558340987539) and Andrew Tate (https://www.facebook.com/OfficialHU4), who currently has a private profile. Currently, Alex Jones's 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.

In the parabola of deplatforming/replatforming profiles, hitherto entirely the preserve of the ToS of dominant platforms, the introduction of the DSA could mark a crucial step. This will depend a great deal on how the regulation is transposed into the practice of content moderation by platforms. The next section discusses the DSA and its possible implications.

3. The Tools of Governance: the DSA

After years of negotiation at the European level, the DSA was enacted in October 2022. It 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. According to Geese (2023), 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, 2023, pp. 66–67). The author has also argued that the DSA will end the influence of those "authoritarian regimes (e.g., Italy's) fuelled by the very business of polarization" on X, Facebook, and YouTube. Other researchers have expressed more cautious positions. According to Husovec (2023a), the DSA should be understood in an evolutionary sense; it is an ambitious regulation, with the potential to become an instrument that balances the economic interests of big technological players, the aims of member state regulators oriented towards the protection of a safe and reliable digital public sphere, and the priorities of 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. 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 essay questions its potential in managing disinformation and how its implementation can obviate ambiguities related to the governance of ideological entrepreneurs. The essay thus seeks to answer the following research questions:

> RQ1: How and by what measures does the DSA address the issue of disinformation and the governance of ideological entrepreneurs?
>
> RQ2: How are these measures implemented by the platforms in accordance with the DSA?
>
> RQ3: Do the steps taken mark a change from the ambiguities of the platforms?

4. Methodology

Methodologically, the article uses a theoretical and empirical approach and is divided into two sections. Section 4.1 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 4.2 examines two distinct dashboards employed for extracting information, which will be analyzed in the context of the preceding discussion. These dashboards are as follows:

- The DSA Transparency Database (European Commission, n.d.-a): An institutional platform providing access to information regarding the content moderation measures implemented by platforms following the enactment of the DSA.
- CrowdTangle (CrowdTangle Team, 2022): A dashboard owned by Meta that facilitates the analysis of various popularity metrics, including the volume of comments associated with controversial profiles.

The final goal of this approach is to investigate whether and the extent to which the temporary deplatforming (Van Dijck, 2021) of ideological entrepreneurs has been an effective containment measure or whether this has contributed to their popularity.

4.1. The DSA and Risk Mitigation Measures: Profiles or Content?

Articles 34 and 35 of the DSA (Regulation of the European Parliament and Council of 19 October 2022, 2022) 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. The concept of "systemic risk" is the basis of Art. 34 and describes the dissemination of illegal content (Art. 34(1a)): 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 consumers (Art. 34(1b)); any current or foreseeable negative impacts on civic debate and electoral processes as well as public safety (Art. 34(1c)); 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 (Art. 34(1d)).

Nowhere in the articles is the concept of disinformation mentioned. The term is used in reference to risks related to "inauthentic coordinated behavior" (Giglietto et al., 2019, p. 13), that is, the use of automated systems to spread disinformation or illegal content (Article 34(2)). The DSA does not consider disinformation per se, considered by some to be a legally ambiguous concept (Husovec, 2023a) with respect to illegal content, but focuses on "systemic risk" as a relevant dimension. The Commission (European Commission, 2022, 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. At the time of writing, almost all major social platforms were adherents to the 2022 code except for a few players, such as X. It is also noteworthy that the code of conduct, signed by platforms on a voluntary basis, unlike the DSA, does not provide for sanctions for non-compliance.

Regarding the risk mitigation measures that platforms should undertake in compliance with the DSA, the principle is one of "notice and action." The actions regulated by Article 35, include content removal, visibility restriction (demotion or shadow banning), demonetization, 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" (Regulation of the European Parliament and Council of 19 October 2022, 2022, p. x)

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 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 timing of the 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 (such as X, TikTok, Facebook, etc.), recommender systems, or automated interfaces capable of autonomously generating content 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 it does 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 pretextually 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 (Duivenvoorde & Goanta, 2023). As Duivenvoorde and Goanta 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?

4.2. DSA Transparency Database and Crowdtangle

The DSA Transparency Database is 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 statements of reasons (SoRs; Art. 17) related to the measures initiated.

In view of the purposes of this research, the analysis looked at content moderation actions taken over a 26-month period (from February 20, 2022, the date of publication of the Transparency Database, to April 24, 2024) by major social platforms, specifically Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Snapchat, TikTok, X, and YouTube. Here, an analysis is conducted of the SoRs of the DSA, the reasons for content moderation actions declared by platforms, with the aim of defining how and to what extent these practices have involved the profiles or content considered at risk. The total number of initiated actions and the related SoRs amounted to 966,442,879 (Figure 1).

Using the CrowdTangle dashboard, we processed references to three main individuals (Alex Jones, Andrew Tate, 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. We considered a period of time that takes into account the previous 12 months and the following 12 months from the removal date of social profiles. 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 (Innes & Innes, 2023).

The term digital footprint refers to the retrievable traces of online activity on a network, which can constitute information about a person or organization (Weaver & Gahegan, 2007). In line with Rogers (2018), 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 posts in

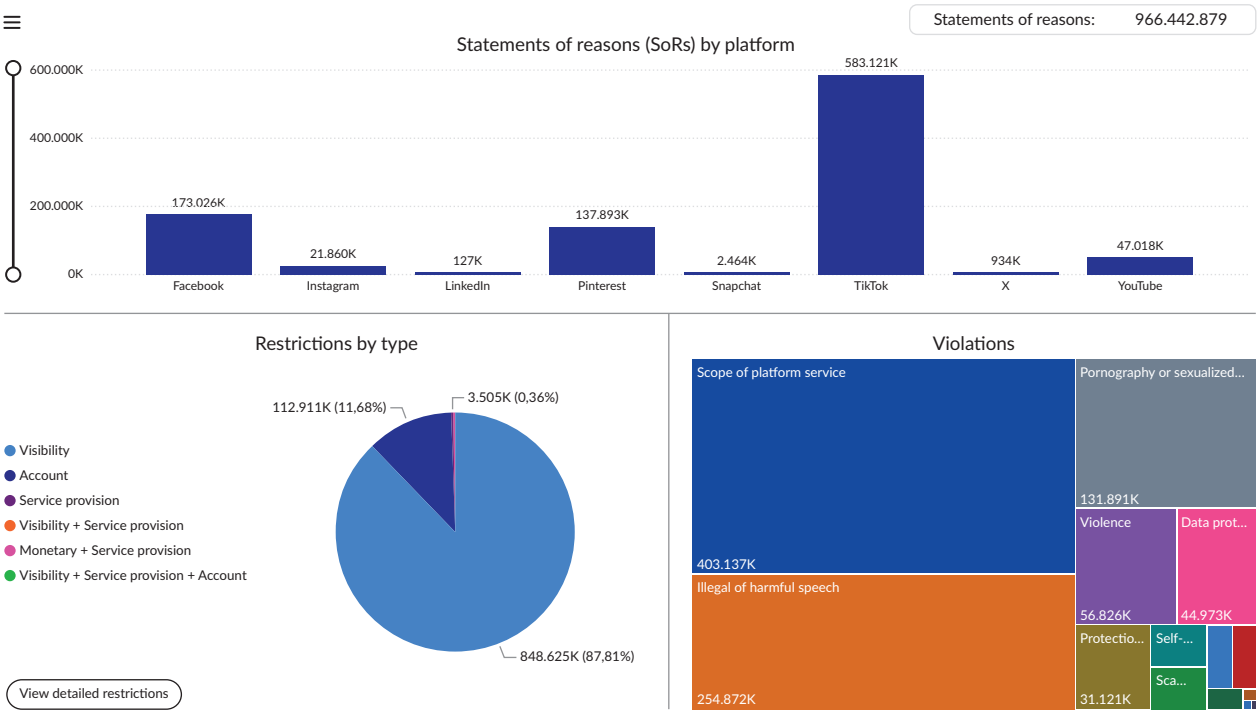

Figure 1. The total number of actions initiated and the related SoRs. Source: European Commission (n.d.-a).

overperforming; 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 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 from the same page/group/profile. It indicates how well a post is exceeding expectations in terms of profile interaction.

The two dashboards were used synergistically to develop the discourse articulated in Section 5.

5. Results and Discussion

Here we discuss the actions taken by very large online platforms in moderating public debate and actions directed towards profiles, such as account suspension or permanent termination. 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 the 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 content occurred to varying degrees: on Facebook, for example, the volume of violations related to such content was only about 10% of all motivated violations, but it was significantly higher on TikTok, Instagram, and LinkedIn (Figure 2).

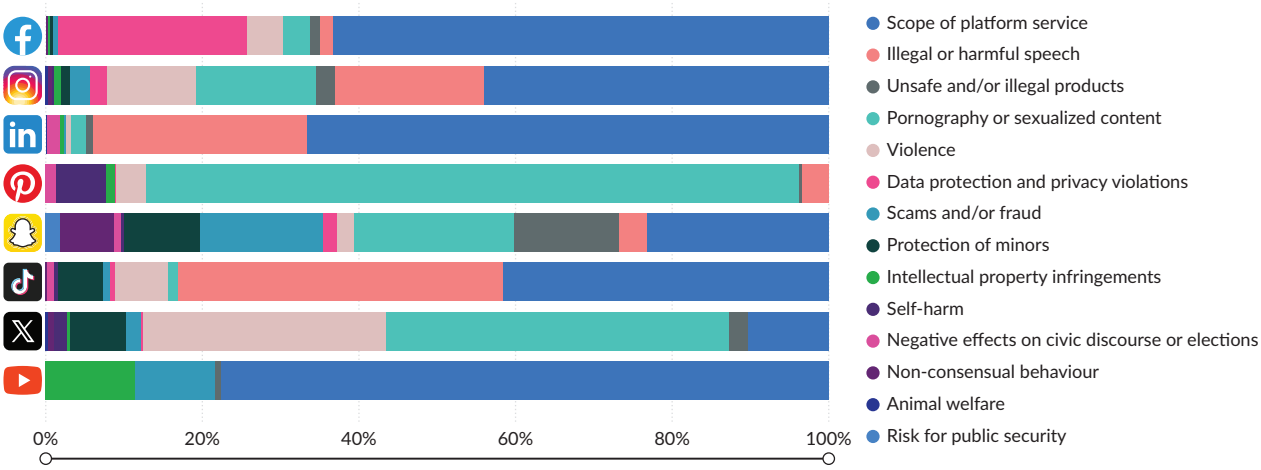

Figure 2. Violations sorted by platform and type. Source: European Commission (n.d.-a).

Note how this type of violation was irrelevant in relation to X, the most active platform from the perspective of political debate. In relation to violations related to pornographic content, Pinterest was the most represented social platform (Figure 3), with 83% of SoRs, followed by X (43%), Snapchat (20%), and Instagram (15%).

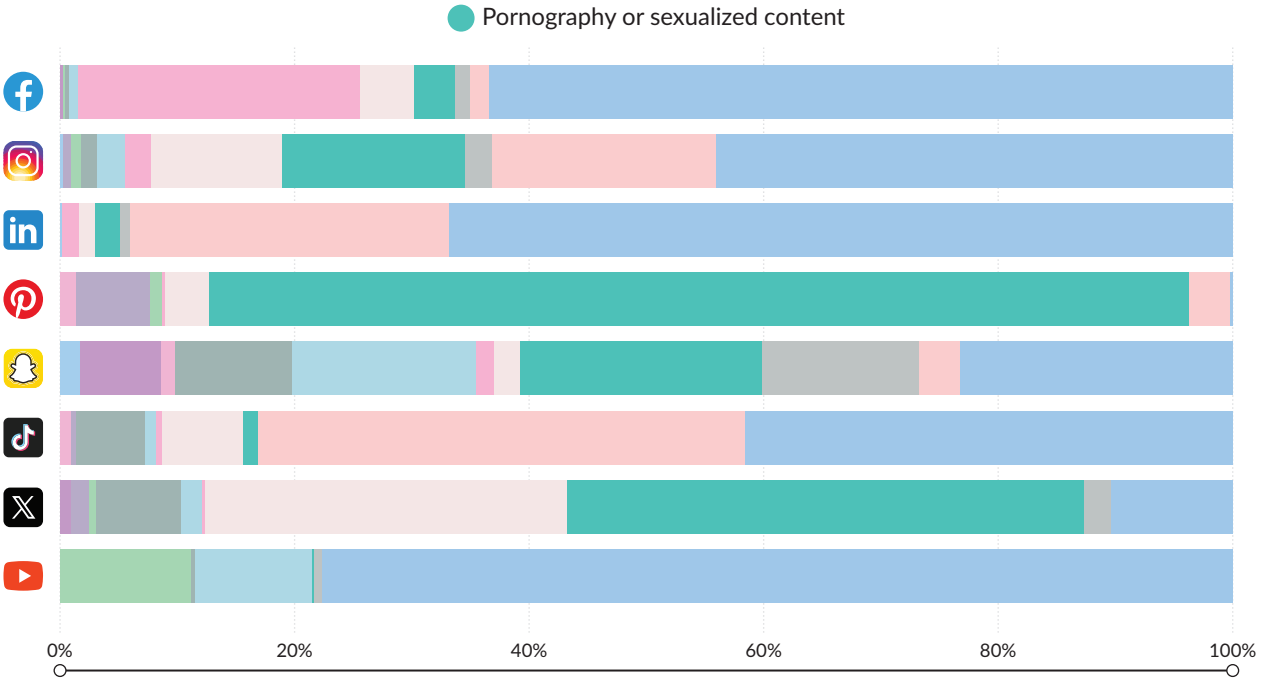

Figure 3. Focus on violations related to pornographic content. Source: European Commission (n.d.-a).

Figure 4 shows the sources of the reasons: i.e., based on what type of reporting the platforms moderated the content. Among those reported were as follows:

- Voluntary initiatives: platforms decide independently 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 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, that is, certified flaggers: figures provided by the DSA included these flaggers as competent in identifying and reporting illegal content (Art. 22 of the DSA).

In summary, the sources of the reasons for restrictions on illegal content refer minimally—in only 22% 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" that may refer, albeit not explicitly, to the categories described above. Moreover, in many cases (see Figure 4, bottom right section), moderation actions were determined by the platforms' algorithms.

The graph in Figure 5 shows the type of measures taken and the considerations anticipated in the previous section. It shows that in most cases, the moderation measures taken were not aimed at profiles but at removing specific content or restricting visibility—more than 552 and 256 million cases, respectively. We note in third place "account suspension," which occurred 97 million times. This measure, involving ultimate deplatforming (that consists in disabling access to content plus the 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.

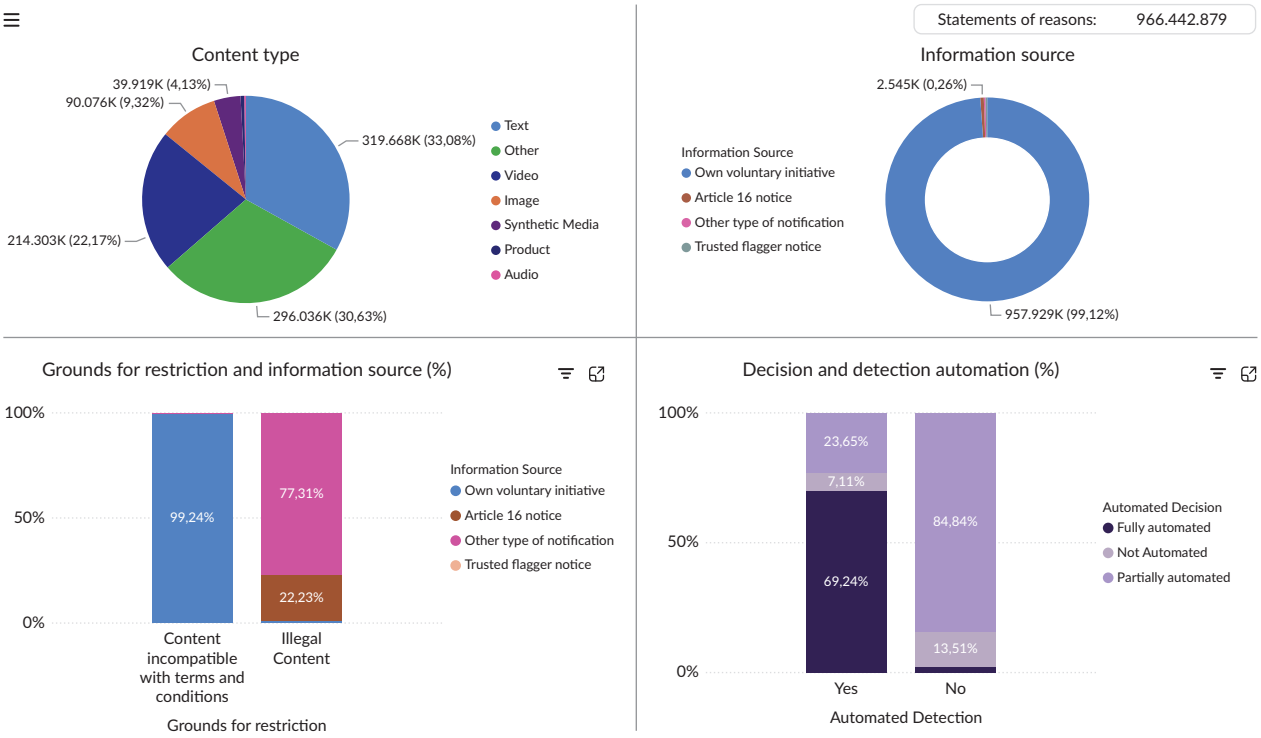

Figure 4. Dashboard which allows the exploration of information sources for the moderation measures taken. Source: European Commission (n.d.-a).

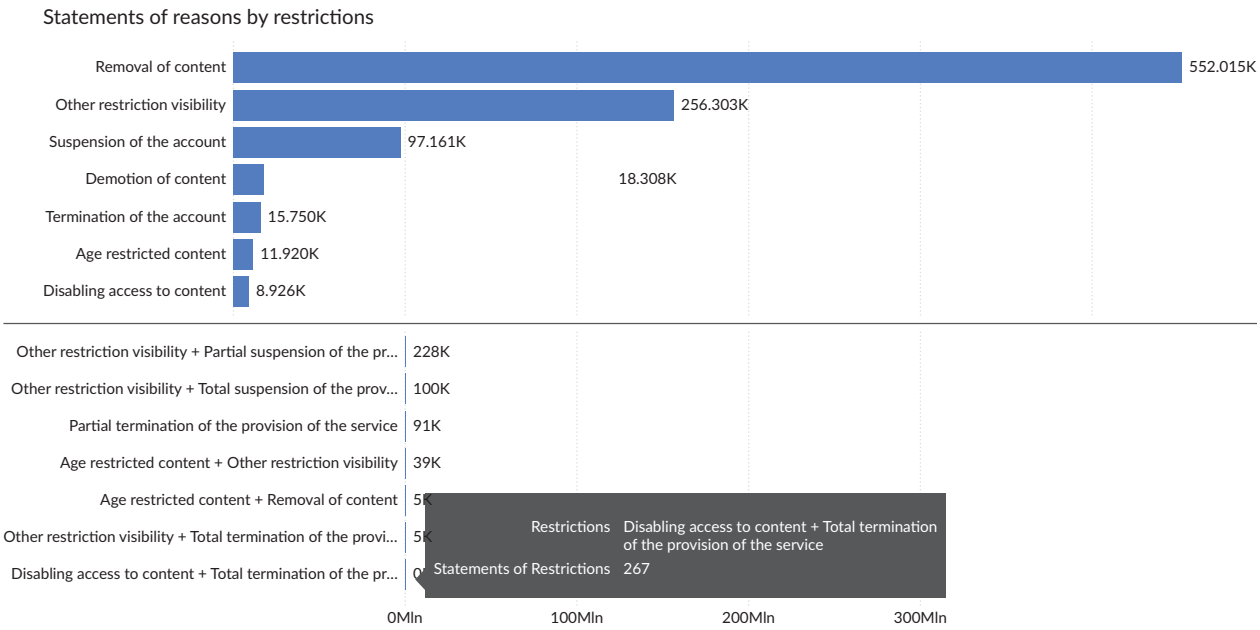

Figure 5. Difference between the most frequently performed actions (green) and the least frequently performed actions (orange). Source: European Commission, (n.d.-a).

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 report on the modalities of the measures. 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 on 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 ambiguity in the governance of disinformation?

With the aim of analyzing 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 to highlight whether their digital footprint had decreased or increased as a result of deplatforming.

In order to understand the effect of profile suspension on popularity, Table 1 shows the metrics calculated (using data from Crowdtangle) for the three ideological entrepreneurs in two separate periods, namely 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 +1,091.5%, posts +1,681.2%, and overperformance +1,430.5%). 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,

Table 1. Summary table of percentage variation (% VAR) in interactions (INT), posts, and the overperformance score (OvPer) of ideological entrepreneurs, before (<) and after (>) the ban date.

USER	BAN DATE	QUERY	INT <	INT >	% VAR	POST <	POST >	% VAR	OVPER <	OVPER >	% VAR
Andrew Tate (TateSpeech)	20 August 2022	Andrew Tate OR Tate Speech	1,189,105	14,168,380	1,091%	4,008	71,392	1,681%	619	9,474	1,430%
Alex Jones (Infowars)	6 August 2018	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%

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 (i.e., 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, X, etc. This phenomenon is known in the literature as the "Streisand effect": on one hand, censorship can have the opposite effect, aggravating the ideological beliefs of the recipients. Rogers (2020), for example, examined some censored alt-right profiles and identified migrations to an alternative network of platforms used as a replacement for YouTube, Facebook, and X, one characterized by even more radical positions. On the other hand, the phenomenon also indicates, as Innes and Innes (2023) note, an increase in public posts on censored profiles because of the platforms' moderation efforts. This was observed in reaction to the deplatforming of two popular conspiracy theorists (David Icke and Kate Shemirani) during Covid-19 (Innes & Innes, 2023, pp. 1269–1275). In both cases, as with the ideological entrepreneurs Andrew Tate and Alex Jones, their popularity in public Facebook posts increased rather than decreased as a result of censorship.

6. Conclusions

In light of the effects of deplatforming ideological entrepreneurs, is it possible to say that such a measure is not only ineffective but may even contribute to increasing the popularity of the subjects involved?

The results of the CrowdTangle analysis, circumscribed to a limited number of profiles, are difficult to generalize to an overall 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 polarized 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.

In response to RQ1 and RQ2, the DSA retains basic ambiguities: The text of the law focuses on content moderation but does not provide for specific actions towards influential and controversial actors 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.

There is clearly a paradox in content moderation (De Gregorio, 2020) between the generally stated objectives of the DSA to contain the systemic risks posed by the dissemination of illegal content on the one hand, and the pragmatic dimension of the law text on the other. While the objectives are clear and shareable, the actions in fact focus almost exclusively on content, circumventing some of the specific dynamics of social media that instead focus on profiles and influential individuals. As noted by the analysis of the text of the law, the concept of influence is not formally spelt out in any of the articles, nor are the related drifts such as virality phenomena with manipulative or propagandistic purposes: phenomena that are nevertheless at the heart of the communication dynamics of the 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, etc). There

is an obvious limitation here that circumvents serious problems that are inscribed in the context of influence culture (Arnesson, 2023; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) and its negative drifts related to political manipulation, ideological entrepreneurship, and propaganda: processes that refer to determined subjects and not algorithmic systems.

Finally, in response to RQ3—whether the measures taken contributed to a substantial change—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, the data capitalism—on the strength of renewed popularity and a newly recognized public status. The latter point in particular highlights the present limits of the new regulatory environment inaugurated by the DSA: particularly the ambiguity of the concept of disinformation itself, which does not find a clear and agreed definition in the text of the law, the scope of the implementation of its measures, which proves to be a contested terrain between the text of the law and the priorities of the ToS of the individual platforms, and finally the overall opacity surrounding the ideological entrepreneurs' governance, whose role is, on the other side, at the core of the data capitalism pursued by dominant platforms.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Sara Monaci, upon reasonable request.

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