

# Power shift: Young voices reshaping the digital world

Youth Activists' Vision

2025

people  
vs BIG TECH

⌘ ctrl+alt+reclaim





# Power shift: Young voices reshaping the digital world

Across Europe, a generation is suffering through a silent crisis. A mental health crisis amongst young people has reached alarming levels, with rising rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicide. While a complex set of social and economic factors contributes to this, one major factor is emerging: the design and dominance of social media platforms.

These platforms are not neutral spaces. They are environments which are commonly engineered to generate profit by invading privacy and maximising engagement. Targeted advertising, and features like infinite scroll and algorithmic recommender systems, are intentionally built to capture data and monetise attention – often exploiting the developing brains, social insecurities, and emotional vulnerabilities of young users. The result is an epidemic of online addiction, body image distortion, exploitation, and radicalisation.

For too many young people, social media has become a place where their rights are systematically abused. Algorithms amplify hate and extremism, expose children to violence, and reward outrage and polarisation. These harms have contributed to a global crisis, where standards of mental health have declined alongside trust in democracy and social cohesion.

But a healthier online world is possible, and young people are the ones showing the way. Across Europe, youth activists are reframing the debate: demanding transparency, inclusion, and accountability, by design. They are calling for the creation of online spaces that are safe, equitable, intersectional and youth-centred.

To realise this vision, People vs Big Tech and ctrl+alt+reclaim put forward the following priority recommendations for regulators and policy makers.

## Guarantee the participation of young people in decision-making

- Adopt “nothing for us, without us” as a governance principle.
- Support youth-led movements.

## Ensure social media is safe for young people, instead of restricting access

- Don’t exclude young people from social media.
- Mandate safety-by-design and fairness-by-design standards across all social media platforms.
- Protect young people’s right to privacy online.

## Promote the long-term growth of a healthier digital ecosystem for young people

- Challenge Big Tech’s dominance over social media and online spaces.
- Enable the development of rights-based, European alternatives.
- Invest in digital wellbeing infrastructure.



This report sets out youth activists' vision, their testimonies, and their demands. It calls on policy-makers and regulators to act decisively to protect the mental wellbeing of Europe's young people, to hold tech companies to account, and to ensure that digital environments strengthen, rather than destroy, the foundations of democratic society.

## The report structure

1. The growing youth digital rights movement in Europe, and the stories and voices of four leading activists.
2. How the design of social media platforms harms young people, told through testimonies of young people themselves.
3. The real benefits that many young people derive from social media, and why they don't want their access to online spaces restricted.
4. Conclusion and detailed recommendations for regulators and policy-makers.
5. Glossary of terms.

**This report contains sensitive material that may be triggering to some audiences, including descriptions of suicide, violence, sexual assault, mental illness, and discrimination. Please read with caution and consider seeking support if needed.**

**Helplines and resources for young people: [mentalhealtheurope.org/library/youth-helplines/](https://mentalhealtheurope.org/library/youth-helplines/)**

## People vs Big Tech

People vs Big Tech is a movement of over 140 civil society organisations and concerned citizens fighting to overturn the predatory business model of giant tech corporations and change the internet for good.

Contact us at [info@peoplevsbig.tech](mailto:info@peoplevsbig.tech)



## ctrl+alt+reclaim

ctrl+alt+reclaim is Europe's first youth-led tech justice and digital rights movement. Formed in September 2024, ctrl+alt+reclaim aims to ensure young people's voices and participation are prioritised in EU digital policies and dialogues, and to build a new narrative on what ethical tech and democratic online spaces should look like.

Get in touch and join us at [info@ctrl-alt-reclaim.org](mailto:info@ctrl-alt-reclaim.org)



# “Nothing for us, without us”

## A growing youth activist movement

Across Europe and beyond, a new generation of digital rights activists is transforming grief and frustration into collective action. These activists are experts by experience, drawing from lived encounters with online abuse, addiction, and exploitation to advocate for design reform, accountability, and youth participation in policymaking.

They are not just passively accepting current technology as it is, but actively pursuing a vision for safer online spaces. Their message is clear: “Nothing for us, without us.”

This growing movement includes organisations built and led by young people, like Não Partilhes, #StopFisha, Gen Z for Change, Log Off Movement and Design It For Us.

Many of the youth activists who lead these organisations emphasise the importance of speaking out about online harms and encouraging other young people to share their lived online experiences with each other.

**This momentum has led to the creation of ctrl+alt+reclaim, Europe’s first youth-led tech justice and digital activist movement.**

The profiles below present the voices of some leading youth digital activists in Europe, while recognising that their stories are part of a wider youth-led push to reclaim digital space. Ultimately, challenging the power of Big Tech will take more than individual efforts, requiring the collective efforts of a broad-based youth movement.

### Hannah, Germany

*“I think young people’s voices are key...*

*Most young people really want the world to be OK, and want other people to be OK. And young people have changed the world, and started conversations, and convened things in a way that hasn’t really been done before...*

*So I think we really need to start a movement, because the stakes are high, we really care, and we do have power.”*

**“Most young people really want the world to be OK, and want other people to be OK.”**

Hannah, 25, Germany





**“User safety cannot be deemed by tech companies as a business cost.”**

Adele Zeynep Walton, United Kingdom

## Channeling grief into action – Adele Zeynep Walton, United Kingdom

Adele Zeynep Walton knows that social media is failing its most vulnerable users, and a lack of accountability for tech companies is leaving blind spots for preventable death.

In 2022, Adele lost her 21-year-old sister Aimee to online harm. Aimee long struggled with her mental health, and after her death, Adele discovered her sister had spent time on a global online forum that promoted suicide. Adele believes that harmful online content promoting and assisting with self-harm and suicide lured Aimee into dangerous online communities and drove Aimee deeper into online rabbit holes.

Adele recognises the importance of digital spaces. The internet and social media allowed Aimee to find the community she felt she could not find among her peers or at school. However, Adele also believes that the addictive nature of social media created the toxicity that led to Aimee’s death, and that platforms designed to maximise user engagement do not have young people’s best interests or wellbeing in mind.

Since then, Adele has channelled her grief into action. She works alongside Families and Survivors to Prevent Online Suicide Harms, a group of bereaved parents and families. Adele works with NGOs, schools and policy-makers to call for accountability from Big Tech, raise awareness of the true dangers young people face online, and equip young people

with the confidence and skills to fight back. Adele co-founded the Logging Off Club, a global community bringing people together at phone-free events, as well as being a founding member of ctrl+alt+reclaim.

*“User safety cannot be deemed by tech companies as a business cost”, she said. “Safety features that prevent harm are not an ambitious ask, but are a corporate and moral responsibility. Safety-by-design and tech accountability has never been more urgent, and the European Union must lead the way in being ambitious in holding Big Tech to account and empowering the next generation.”*

Adele recently published her first book, Logging Off: The Human Cost of Our Digital World, which looks at the emotional and psychological toll of addictive social media and shares her personal story of loss. Adele issues a call to action for a global tech justice movement to ensure that users can reclaim the digital world from the “barons” of Big Tech.

Resources:

Learn more about [Families and Survivors to Prevent Online Suicide Harms](#)

[Logging Off Club, and Logging Off: The Human Cost of Our Digital World.](#)



**“We need to push the principle of nothing for us, without us.”**

Yassine Chagh, Germany

## Nothing for us, without us – Yassine Chagh, Germany

Yassine Chagh brings a powerful, intersectional voice to the fight for digital rights, centered on the belief that digital justice is inseparable from social justice.

As Board Chair of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, and Intersex Youth & Student Organisation (IGLYO), Yassine navigates the complex terrain where race, queerness, migration, and technology intersect.

Their personal story is rooted in both struggle and resilience: as an Indigenous, migrant, and Black/person of colour, Yassine's lived experience shapes their activism. As a migrant in Europe, they have first hand experience of how migration policies position people like them as potential risks, subjecting them to intrusive and harmful processes like biometric data extraction, automated suspicion, and surveillance technologies. As a non-binary person, they have had their identity erased through strict male/female binaries in gender surveys, a structural denial that then leads to flawed policies.

When Yassine has gone online to speak about these issues, they have experienced shadow-banning, content deprioritisation and harassment, with their harassment reports often going unaddressed by platforms. What drives them to keep campaigning in the face of all of this is a fierce commitment to anti-

racism and decolonisation. They have called out tokenistic structures, advocating instead for meaningful representation and systemic change in how organisations are run.

Under Yassine's leadership, IGLYO has amplified its digital rights advocacy. They have centred AI governance and online safety in IGLYO's work, highlighting how emerging technologies can perpetuate hate, discrimination, and exclusion, especially for marginalised queer youth.

Yassine also pushes for youth participation in high-level policy spaces, ensuring that the voices of LGBTQIA+ young people, with a focus on underserved and racialised communities, inform global conversations about AI, migration, and digital governance.

*“We need to push the principle of nothing for us, without us. We cannot allow the same predominant demographics to continue coding algorithms, granting policies and governing our data. It's non-negotiable that the decision-making process and the creation of inclusive digital spaces, includes LGBTQIA+ people, marginalised communities and individuals with diverse experiences. We need community-led, free, open and secure services. And to achieve this, these communities must be actively involved in shaping these spaces.”*

Resources: [International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, and Intersex Youth & Student Organisation \(IGLYO\)](https://www.iglyo.org/)



**“We know that these tech companies won’t ever regulate themselves properly, so we need European states to remain powerful.”**

Shanley Clemot McLaren, France

## Fighting online and technology-facilitated abuse – Shanley Clemot McLaren, France

It started with a cry for help. Shanley Clemot McLaren sat alone in her bedroom during the COVID-19 pandemic and felt overwhelmed by the surge of abuse she was seeing appear on her 16-year-old sister’s mobile phone screen. She could see that women and girls were being left to battle a violent onslaught alone. In response, Shanley, at the age of 21, launched #StopFisha,<sup>1</sup> which became a digital social movement of hundreds of young people, supporting victims and survivors of online gendered harms.

Through her organisation, Shanley has provided women and girls with the support and tools they need to effectively counter online misogyny – fighting against not only the perpetrators of online violence, but the systems that perpetuate it.

Shanley has used her voice to call attention to cybersexism (the discriminatory architecture of digital misogyny that prioritises white, thin and able-bodied representation online). She is calling on European law-makers and regulators to protect users and hold tech companies accountable. As women, girls and minority groups are most at risk from new technologies, Shanley has worked alongside others to ensure that any new laws, such as the EU’s Artificial Intelligence Act and Digital Services Act, safeguard their rights.

*“As young people, we need to be able to rely on European states to act as our shield. They need to fight hard to safeguard our rights, even in the face of attacks from big tech companies and lobbying efforts from the United States. We know that these tech companies won’t ever regulate themselves properly, so we need European states to remain powerful.”*

In her home country of France, Shanley works alongside women and girls to take the voices of lived experience and stories of struggles from the ground into France’s most powerful policy-making spaces. She advocates for public debates on technology that include the perspectives of young people, women and girls from diverse intersectional backgrounds, and for law-makers, regulators and the press to meaningfully engage with them from the outset.

Shanley has been recognised by the United Nations’ Young Activists Summit for her work, and received the Simone de Beauvoir International Prize. She served as Gender and Digital Policy Advisor at the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, before taking on the role of the Youth Mobilisation Lead for ctrl+alt+reclaim.

Resources: #StopFisha: [Association féministe de lutte contre le cybersexisme et les cyberviolences sexistes et sexuelles.](https://ctrl-alt-reclaim.org/stopfisha)



**“They know these alternatives exist, and have the resources to make it happen, but these alternatives are just slightly less profitable.”**

Alycia Colijn, The Netherlands

## Demanding action from decision-makers – Alycia Colijn, The Netherlands

Alycia Colijn was only 23 when she started her first online organisation. Suffering from burnout in her fourth year of university, she realised that sharing her personal story with her fellow students, and learning from their own struggles, could help them as a collective cope better with the pressures of university life. In response, she founded BeatUs, an online platform that shared resources and training to help young people manage stress. The fire ignited by her deep feelings of social justice brought her to the stage of TEDxAmsterdamWomen and secured her a spot on the 2022 Young Talents-list of the Dutch Financial Times, giving her a global profile.

From there, she took her passion for social justice and her background in data science and applied it to her professional life. Her experience with digital activism showed her how much of our lives can be dictated by algorithms we barely have control over, and her knowledge about statistics and AI made her realise how much impact modern technology has, and increasingly will have over the coming decade, on our society. The power of these technologies is in just a few hands, while the results will affect our entire society. Alarmed by those risks, she

started a PhD-program in AI Ethics and co-founded Encode Europe, part of a global youth-led movement advocating for fairness, transparency, and ethics in AI. Colijn now serves as co-founder, European co-lead for Policy & Advocacy and leads the Dutch Policy & Advocacy team.

What drives her is the conviction that often, those developing the most powerful technologies are exploiting young people for their own profit, despite knowing exactly what the harms are:

*“The job of the policy-maker is to point out what is not fair and regulate it. It is the job of the platform to come up with an alternative. They know these alternatives exist, and have the resources to make it happen, but these alternatives are just slightly less profitable... But what is more costly for society is exploiting younger generations.”*

In her current role at Encode Europe, Alycia bridges the gap between youth activism and high-stakes global policymaking. She represents her organisation at international bodies, like the United Nations' Group of Governmental Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems. Through reports, advocacy, and dialogue, she pushes for regulations that force governments and tech companies to reckon with ethical risks.

Resources: [Encode Europe](#)

# “Your addiction is not your fault”: Testimonies of social media’s impacts on young people

Social media has become a pervasive and powerful force in young people’s lives. While social media undoubtedly has positive effects, it is increasingly linked to profound and widespread harms to young people’s mental health and wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> These impacts are intersectional, as women and girls and people from marginalised groups are more at risk of harm.<sup>3</sup>

**These harms are not inevitable, they stem directly from how the platforms are designed.<sup>4</sup>**

Social media companies rely on business models that prioritise profits over the safety and wellbeing of users. Their platforms are deliberately designed to addict users, perpetuate negative emotions, and maximise user engagement. Algorithms are used to create highly personalised experiences, which lead to users being exposed to harmful content. These companies also leverage dark patterns and integrated design features to capture and monetise users, reinforcing a system where the mental health of young people is sacrificed for corporate gain.

Despite growing concern among users and regulators about the impacts, social media platforms have refused to change their business models. Instead, they have offered tokenistic and superficial “safety features” aimed at young people that have repeatedly been shown to be ineffective.<sup>5</sup> Whistleblowers have testified that these companies know that their platforms harm young people, stoke division and weaken democracy,<sup>6</sup> and yet they deliberately choose to maximise growth, rather than implement effective safeguards.

Frances Haugen, who blew the whistle on Meta said: “the company’s leadership knows how to make Facebook and Instagram safer but won’t make the necessary changes because they have put their astronomical profits before people.”<sup>7</sup> Meta’s founder and chief executive Mark Zuckerberg has denied these allegations, claiming that Meta “care[s] deeply about issues like safety, wellbeing and mental health.”

The cumulative effect is a digital ecosystem that undermines wellbeing, opportunity, and democratic participation. In their own words, young people testify to the troubled relationship they have with social media, and their urgent demand for platforms that are safe-by-design.

*“I always try to tell other young people that ‘your addiction is not your fault.’ It is the fault of these million-dollar companies and these engineers and designers who create these products that keep you hooked. Our generation gets a lot of criticism for our digital usage...*

*But it’s really the youth advocates who have started to shift the narrative – we don’t want this. We want a fun digital experience. We don’t want to be addicted. We don’t want to be fed horrible videos. We demand better experiences.”*

Emma Lembke, Founder and Executive Director of the [LOG OFF Movement](#) and Co-Founder of [Design It For Us](#)

## Impacts on mental health and body image

Social media platforms designed to monetise attention are drawing young people into toxic rabbit holes of content, fuelling anxiety, depression, loneliness, and self-harm, in some cases even leading to death by suicide.<sup>8</sup>

While harmful and manipulative design impacts everyone, children and young people are especially susceptible, due to their ongoing brain development.<sup>9</sup> Techniques like infinite scrolling create frictionless experiences that encourage users to stay on the platform, while ephemeral content exploits users' fears of missing out. Platforms' decisions to leave harmful hashtags uncensored, provide insufficient and negligent content moderation resources, and promote inflammatory content via recommender systems, can lead to even more serious consequences.

Last year, seven French families of children who died by suicide or who attempted suicide filed a joint lawsuit against TikTok under the name of the collective Algos Victima, alleging that the platform's algorithm exposed them to harmful content related to suicide, self-harm, disordered eating, and other harmful topics.

<sup>10</sup> TikTok has denied these claims, arguing that searches for "suicide" are redirected to helplines and resources. Nevertheless, the case is the first of its kind, and could set an important precedent for the families of social media victims looking to hold large platforms accountable.

"I wouldn't say I enjoy using social media. However, I find myself spending too much time on it. It has succeeded in creating a form of dependence in me, even though I'm aware of its dangers. When I check my messages on Instagram, I often end up scrolling through the Reels section... I think that social media is harmful in so many ways, because things like push notifications and infinite scroll create dependence and addiction."

Noé, 18, France

The design of social media also has a significant impact on young people's body image and self-esteem, and increases disordered eating and insecurity for young people.<sup>11</sup> These harms are highly gendered: women and girls are more likely to experience negative body image and eating disorders linked to social media use, because the algorithms employed by platforms deliberately recommend disordered content to them. These same algorithms also promote young, thin, white, able-bodied beauty standards, which reduce diverse representation online. Meanwhile, young men and boys can also develop body image issues (like orthorexia) following exposure to fitness or pro-masculinity "mansphere" content.<sup>12</sup>

“I think we all know that these platforms have been specifically designed to addict us and show us harmful content. What is happening isn’t simply down to the users – it is a lack of safety-by-design. Social media is widely to blame for the mental health crisis affecting young people. Whether it is someone feeling crap every time they log on to social media, whether it is them struggling with depression, or whether engaging in the online space actually leads to their suicide in the long term, we know that social media is alienating us, it isolates us, and reduces our worth to numbers. If the content my sister was shown on social media had been properly moderated, she would potentially still be here today.”

Adele Zeynep-Walton, Co-founder of the Logging Off Club

“I still see pro-ana [promotion of anorexia] content online. I followed Eugenia Cooney online [a YouTube influencer with a reported eating disorder] as a kid, and I wondered: ‘why is this allowed? Why are we watching this girl die?’...And there aren’t laws to regulate this, or if there is, they aren’t enforced.”

Young person, 29, Serbia

“Overall, my relationship with social media has fluctuated, but it has been unhealthy at a number of times. I’ve had problems with anxiety and low self esteem – I don’t think I can justifiably say that social media caused this, as there are too many other relevant factors, but it definitely didn’t help... My mental health has been sliding recently, and I’d say that social media has been a really big factor in this.”

Young person, 23, UK

“White content creators can post the exact same content as black content creators, and the platforms’ algorithms will censor the black voices and promote the white ones. This is clear discrimination and it impacts our rights and our health, individually and collectively, in Europe and also beyond.”

Shanley Clemot McLaren, #StopFish, ctrl+alt+reclaim

# Promotion of hatred, misogyny and other harmful content

Despite platforms claiming to have implemented safety features, teenagers and young people are often exposed to dangerous content on social media, including hatred and violent content, as well as mis- and dis-information. The design of social media platforms fuels the normalisation and spread of online violence and hatred against groups such as women and girls, people of colour, migrants and asylum seekers, and LGBTQIA+ people. Social media is also a factor behind rising youth radicalisation in Europe.<sup>14</sup>

The platform's algorithmic recommender systems, which determine what is pushed into people's feeds, are optimised to maximise user engagement, meaning that they routinely promote sensitive content, hate speech, and extremist ideologies. Toxic influencers also play a significant role in impacting users' behaviours, attitudes and choices, especially among young people, which can be exploited by extremist groups.<sup>15</sup>

Recent polling found that an overwhelming 73% of Gen Z social media users have witnessed misogynistic content online, with half encountering it on a weekly basis.<sup>16</sup> These online attacks can have real-world impacts, with other polling finding that people who report being subjected to abuse online also report being attacked offline. These attacks include attacks on friends and family and physical violence.<sup>17</sup>

*"I joined social media because I was interested in online gaming communities. But since then, I feel that gaming content has become synonymous with incel culture, misogyny and neo-Nazi content. I find it all so disturbing, and question why this content continues to*

*be promoted. These spaces were initially very fun, but I have no idea what has happened to the community I was a part of. I feel like we want to fix the algorithms, but we don't know where to start. The people who know how they are made and who have the power to fix them are within the companies. It's frustrating – we are not fully aware of what is happening and why."*

Young person (22, Germany)

*"Engagement-driven algorithms demonstrably contribute to political polarisation, as some of the most likely content for someone to click is something slightly more extreme than the content they already engage with. This has the impact of dragging people into rabbit holes; many are innocuous, but this is a critical component of radicalisation. Pair this with the fact that people are more likely to comment on content that upsets them / they disagree with than content that is positive, and you have social media platforms driving individuals towards (A) more extreme political views and (B) having arguments with those that do not share their views... At a personal level, I see transphobic content pretty much every day I go on social media, and this has instilled in me the belief that I need to choose between hating myself and being hated by others. Neither of those feel nice. Social media isn't solely to blame for this, but it's a factor."*

Young person (23, UK)

**“Recently there has been a rise and mainstreaming of anti-immigrant sentiment, Islamophobia, and general racist narratives. Social media has played a specific role in this, because it helps to amplify racist messages, and at the same time escalates them to another level in which there’s this kind of impunity. People are spreading this kind of content, and they don’t even feel the need to be anonymised, because they say it is free speech... We also see how racist stereotypes are being used in social media and how this impacts the mental wellbeing of users.”**

Oyidiya Oja, Policy and Advocacy Advisor for Digital Rights at the European Network Against Racism

*“There’s a lack of youth perspective in the online safety public debate. A lot of digital activists and young influencers have experienced a lot of violence online, and we need to hear their voices in those debates.”*

Shanley Clemot McLaren, #StopFisha



## Child abuse and sextortion

Social media platforms structurally enable contact-based harms (including child abuse, sextortion and cyberbullying) by combining features that give strangers easy access to young people with design choices that make harmful exchanges hard to detect or remediate. Private messaging, friend/follower visibility, algorithmic connection suggestions and ephemeral content (such as disappearing messages) lower the barriers between predators and potential victims while increasing the likelihood that abusive material will be produced, shared and hidden before it can be removed or investigated.

These structural risks have predictable human consequences: sextortion and grooming incidents have increased sharply in recent years and are linked to severe psychological harm and, in some tragic cases, suicide. The European Parliament has documented a steep rise in grooming and online child sexual exploitation reports, while recent cross-border reporting highlights a surge in sextortion cases and coordinated campaigns that exploit platform mechanics to coerce young people into producing intimate images or performing sexual acts.<sup>18</sup>

**“When I was at school, my friend sent nudes to a guy she trusted, and he shared it with a bunch of other people. But we were all underage... so we didn’t understand whether anyone had done anything wrong, or who we should go to about it. Children, and people under 18, aren’t as aware of the law. I’m barely aware of the law, at my age, and I studied politics.”**

Young person 23, Germany

*“The harms that children and young people are facing on social media are not diminishing at all – they are stubbornly high. About two out of every three kids are experiencing harm online. One pattern we are seeing rise significantly is the amount of stranger contact with girls. Children are also telling us that they’re seeing more and more fake news, misinformation and disinformation online. And finally we are seeing a rise in the hate children are seeing online – racist, sexist, misogynistic, and homophobic kinds of content.”*

Katie Freeman-Tayler, Head of Research and Policy at Internet Matters.

*“Children and teenagers are very vulnerable to dangerous people online that are preying on them. There are settings that are preselected on certain apps. I found that when you go into the onboarding process, it already suggests a lot of friends for you, and pre-selects them. Even when you don’t share your contacts with the platform, it does this, and it’s not clear what it’s based on. So it could really be that there are people that you don’t know. So the discoverability of young people on platforms is really something we have to be careful about.”*

Chitra Mohanlal, Tech Researcher at Bits of Freedom

*“Instagram says it cares about teen safety, but they have just implemented a geolocation feature, one of the most dangerous design features for young people.<sup>19</sup> It’s literally a gamification technique that predators can use to find children. And children have no idea – they don’t see it that way... I talk to young people and have heard over and over again: ‘I’m 19 or 20 now, I get it. When Instagram tells me I know this person, I know they’re lying. I know not to accept them. But I didn’t know that when I was 12’... We teach our children, beware of strangers. That is how society has always worked. What parents don’t realise is these companies have undone all those years of parenting.”*

Laura Marquez-Garett, Attorney at the Social Media Victims Law Centre

## Impacts on privacy and freedom of expression

Young people deserve privacy, and they are increasingly worried about losing it.<sup>20</sup> The business model of social media platforms, which relies on large scale surveillance to sell targeted advertising, means the companies routinely collect vast amounts of users' personal and behavioural data, often without their meaningful consent or understanding.<sup>21</sup>

These invasive privacy-abusing practices undermine young people's autonomy and safety, exposing them to manipulation, profiling, and exploitation. Data is the fuel for hyper-personalised recommender systems (see above), while the normalisation of surveillance means young people may unknowingly share data that can be exploited

by cyber stalkers and predators.<sup>22</sup> EU regulators have previously levied major fines against social media companies for violating the privacy of children and adolescents, such as a €405m fine against Instagram in 2022, and a €345 million fine against TikTok in 2023.<sup>23</sup> The Digital Services Act bans targeted advertisement to minors on online platforms.

At the same time, Big Tech's content moderation practices often lead to the suppression of critical information for young people such as content related to sexual and reproductive health,<sup>24</sup> LGBTQIA+ issues,<sup>25</sup> and pro-Palestine voices.<sup>26</sup> This creates a chilling effect on free expression and underscores the need for a nuanced approach that prioritises young people's autonomy and access to information, rather than relying on blanket censorship.

*“Data privacy and surveillance concerns, and impacts on marginalised groups (including Black, Brown, Roma and undocumented individuals), are disproportionately affected by data exploitation, algorithm profiling and predictive policing.”*

Yassine Chagh, Board Chair of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, and Intersex (LGBTQI) Youth & Student Organisation (IGLYO)

“Since we were born, Big Tech companies have been gathering a gargantuan amount of data about us in order to train algorithms that will better manipulate our emotions and behaviours. Young people are aware of the lack of online privacy. While older generations may think we don’t care about it, we simply grew up with Big Tech internet and learned to live without online privacy.”

Marc Damie, ctrl+alt+reclaim

“For European individuals, privacy is a fundamental right. Currently, if we don’t want our ads to be personalised, we have to pay Meta. Or if we want Meta to allow us to send private messages, and not use them to train AI, we can do so only if we lose certain functionalities (which makes making the change annoying as a user). But actually, privacy is meant to be a fundamental right, which cannot be taken away from.”

Alycia Colijn, Co-Founder of Encode Europe

“Overblocking online is definitely an issue that concerns me. Although it’s not explicit, political content and also LGBTQ+ or decolonial content gets flagged as inappropriate to younger audiences, or people in general. This trend makes me concerned about the continued ability to connect and organise politically over the internet. I had the privilege of receiving a lot of free, high quality information through my internet access as a young person, that I would not have otherwise. Of course there were also negative aspects, including hate speech; I think we deserve active involvement in what is shown and not shown on our feeds. The internet shaped my political upbringing and identity by exposing me to a variety of identities, perspectives and beliefs. I want people and especially youth to continue to be able to exchange freely.”

Leandra Voss, ctrl+alt+reclaim



# “We deserve safe online spaces”: The benefits of social media

Despite these harms, social media remains an important and often empowering part of young people’s lives. It offers a platform for connection, creativity, and self-expression, allowing young people to find communities of support that may not exist offline. For marginalised groups, digital spaces can provide safety, solidarity, and visibility.

Social media helps young people learn, communicate, and engage in civic life. It has become a vital arena for activism, art, education, and mental health support, connecting users to information and peer communities that can help them navigate difficult circumstances.

**The goal, therefore, is not to erase social media, but to rebuild it, so that its benefits are accessible without sacrificing wellbeing and rights.**

However, instead of ensuring that young people have access to safer platforms, several European countries have begun implementing or proposing stricter age-gating restrictions for social media access. These “quick fix” measures in fact threaten children’s rights while raising major privacy concerns.<sup>27</sup> For instance, France enacted the 2023 Digital Majority Law, setting a minimum age of 15 for social media use and requiring parental consent, with further proposals to ban social media for users under this age.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Norway is planning new legislation to limit access for under-15s, and the Netherlands has expressed support for outright bans for this age group.<sup>29</sup> In November 2025, the EU Parliament called for an EU-wide minimum age of 16 for access to social media platforms.<sup>30</sup>

*“I got Instagram when I was 12. I initially got it to become visible at school – to try and prove that I was cool, or whatever. But actually I ended up using Instagram to connect with online communities and social justice pages, where I could discuss things I couldn’t relate to with people at my school. It helped me connect with people who were like me – a young person who is just figuring out that they’re LGBTQIA+, and there’s no one at school who understands or is part of that community.”*

Young person (23, Germany)

*“I do enjoy social media, as it exposes me to and lets me pursue interests, communities and activities that are meaningful to me, and voices I value. I would not have gotten as much representation of queer experiences, progressive politics, international arts scenes, etc. elsewhere in my upbringing. That said, I think it is definitely harmful for certain demographics – kids, and girls specifically. I think it changed how people conceptualise community, and has had an impact on most things, from activism to neighbour relations. But I do not think we’d be better off without it.”*

Ana (21, Romania)



**I enjoy seeing what friends are up to, I enjoy (re) connecting with people which social media can facilitate, it's exciting to find people who share your niche hobbies, and it's reassuring to find out that you're not 'alone'.**

Young person (23, UK)

*"Do I enjoy social media? Overall and in a word, no. But there are obviously benefits, and the real picture is nuanced. I enjoy seeing what friends are up to, I enjoy (re)connecting with people which social media can facilitate, it's exciting to find people who share your niche hobbies, and it's reassuring to find out that you're not 'alone'. I came out as trans relatively late, and it was (partly) through social media that I first found the words to voice it and the understanding that this wasn't something 'deficient' in me."*

Young person (23, UK)

*"Social media plays a role in bringing people together, connecting young people, and for queer individuals in particular, giving them the space to see themselves represented in either creators or online, and also to connect them with social causes... For queer communities, social media is critical. Sometimes, going to a bar and socialising with people can be of high risk for us. It is the same with social media. These platforms are important for our community, but we know they are harmful, too. For us, social media can be the safest option out there, but that does not mean we cannot fight to improve online spaces."*

Yassine Chagh, Board Chair of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, and Intersex (LGBTQI) Youth & Student Organisation (IGLYO)

*"It is really important to give people, especially young people, the space to experiment and try different things. Digital spaces are not just important in asking 'OK, who am I?,' but they are also important for helping users find ways to empathise and better understand other people's stories. It helps users learn about other people's perspectives and lived experiences... It also teaches you to adapt to different spaces, which is important for learning how to communicate."*

Amanda Curtis, a UX researcher focused on gaming and digital creativity.

*"Regulatory action is great, but it won't really solve the problem that if you have a load of kids, and they want to go somewhere, they need somewhere safe to go. You can't keep closing down the bad things, at some point you have to open a safe place for them to go."*

Antoin O'Lachtnain, Digital Rights Ireland

# Conclusion and recommendations

Young people across Europe are demanding a digital world that protects their right to thrive. This vision calls for a shift from regulation that restricts access to one that ensures young people can safely participate in digital spaces. Governments should not trade off privacy and other rights in the name of protecting children and young people online.

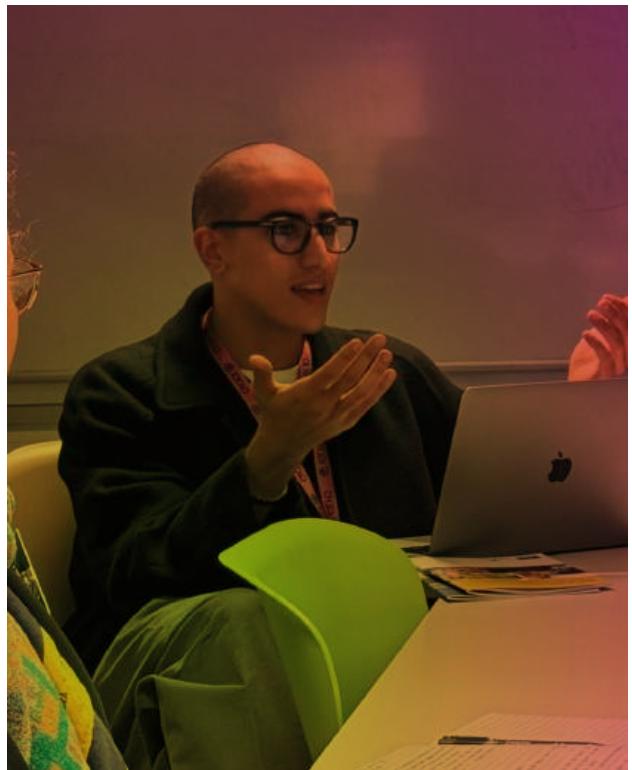
The path forward requires courage: from policy-makers willing to stand up to Big Tech, from regulators enforcing the spirit of European law, and from companies ready to design new platforms for people and the planet.

The mental health crisis that European youth are facing is not inevitable – it is the predictable outcome of a system designed for profit. We cannot allow future generations of young people to suffer the same harm.

People vs Big Tech and ctrl+alt+reclaim set out the following priority recommendations for regulators and policy-makers. These recommendations were endorsed by all<sup>31</sup> of the activists and experts cited in this report.

## 1. Guarantee the participation of young people in decision-making.

- **Adopt “nothing for us, without us” as a governance principle** for all youth-related technology policy and regulation. Intersectional youth participation must be recognised as a democratic right, not an optional, performative consultation exercise.
- **Support youth-led movements** and provide sustained funding and platforms for youth organisations to shape the digital rights agenda.





## 2. Ensure social media is safe for young people, instead of restricting access.

- **Don't exclude young people from social media** through blunt tools like age verification and social media bans. Young people want to be safe online, but they want to be online.
- **Mandate safety-by-design and fairness-by-design standards across all social media platforms** through the strict enforcement of existing laws such as the Digital Services Act, GDPR and the introduction of dedicated provisions in prospective legislative instruments such as the Digital Fairness Act. This includes prohibiting the use of addictive design and mandating non-personalised feeds as the default option for users.
- **Protect young people's right to privacy online**, including by maintaining and enforcing strong data protection laws, and comprehensively banning the use of behavioural advertising and dark patterns. Governments must also not use youth protection principles as an excuse to encroach on the right to privacy.

## 3. Promote the long-term growth of a healthier digital ecosystem for young people.

- **Challenge Big Tech's dominance over social media and online spaces**, including by holding the companies liable for inherently harmful design and business models.
- **Enable the development of rights-based, European alternatives** to social media that prioritise user wellbeing, accessibility, and inclusion.
- **Invest in digital wellbeing infrastructure**, including public-interest platforms, community-based digital literacy and mental health programs, and cross-border online safety hotlines and support.



ARE YOUNG LIVES  
SACRIFICE FOR BIG TECH'S PROFITS?

ctrl+alt+reclaim

# DEMOCRACY



# IN ACTION



European Parliament

# Glossary

**Addictive Design** in social media refers to features and techniques intentionally incorporated into platforms to encourage compulsive usage and prolonged engagement, often at the expense of users' well-being.

**Algorithms** are procedures, or sets of steps, used to solve a problem or perform a computation. On platforms, algorithms are often used to decide what content is shown, in what order and how often. They can analyse user behaviour to personalise content shown.

**Artificial Intelligence** (AI) is an umbrella term for the technology that enables computers and machines to simulate human comprehension, problem solving and decision-making through carrying out specific tasks and learning as it goes.

**Big Tech** refers to the collective industry of major multinational technology companies.

**Children** are defined in the European Union (EU) as individuals under 18 years old. However, the age at which an individual becomes an 'adult' and gains full legal capacity varies.

**Dark Patterns** refer to deceptive techniques used by online platforms to manipulate users' behaviour, often without their knowledge or consent. Dark patterns can manifest as deceptive user interfaces or experiences.

**Digital Fairness Act** (DFA) is a proposed regulation in the EU to tackle unethical techniques and commercial practices related to dark patterns, influencer marketing, addictive design of digital products and online

profiling. It aims to supplement the existing Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act.

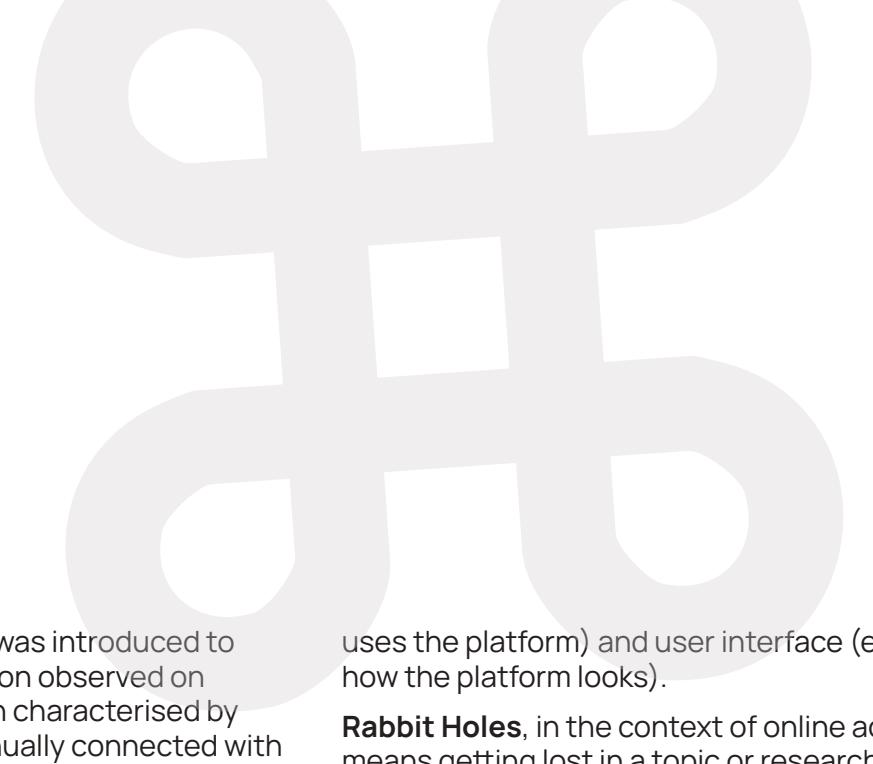
**Digital Markets Act** (DMA) is a regulation in the EU that establishes defined criteria to qualify certain large online platforms as designated "gatekeepers" and ensure fair and contestable digital markets. The DMA prohibits certain unfair business practices and mandates that these platforms allow users more choice and control over their digital environment.

**Digital Services Act** (DSA) is a regulation in the EU that establishes rules for digital services that act as intermediaries for consumers, goods, services and content. The DSA aims to create a safer and fairer online environment, taking aim at harmful content, illegal content, disinformation and targeted advertising. The DSA aims to ensure users' rights are protected, including the ability to report harmful content and access remedy and complaint mechanisms. The DSA also aims to hold platforms accountable for protecting younger users.

**Ephemeral content** is content that is only available for a limited time. These temporary posts typically 'disappear' after being displayed for 24 hours or after being viewed by a user.

Fairness by Design is a foundational principle in AI that aims to guarantee just and equitable outcomes for individuals or groups, irrespective of their diverse characteristics.

**Fear of Missing Out** (FOMO) is the feeling of anxiety or worry an individual may experience when they feel they are not being included or experiencing an activity that others are



experiencing. The term was introduced to describe the phenomenon observed on social media and is often characterised by the desire to stay continually connected with others online.

**Feed** is the central stream of content users see when they open social media. The feed is dynamic and constantly updating and is often curated and organised by the platform's algorithm.

**Incel** means a member of an online subculture of people, typically men, who consider themselves unable to attract women romantically or sexually, and who often express resentment and hostility toward those who are sexually active, particularly women.

**Influencers** are content creators who often advertise or sell products or services. They leverage their audience's trust and engagement and often use paid advertisements, affiliate marketing, brand partnerships, brand sponsorships and more. Social media influencers are also often used as an umbrella term to refer to content creators with large followings.

**Manosphere** refers to online spaces where men express opinions about issues concerning contemporary masculinity and male relationships with women, especially those associated with views that are hostile to feminism and women's rights.

**Platform Design** is the spectrum of design choices regarding the look, feel, experiences, capabilities and governance mechanisms offered by platforms. On social media, this includes user experience (e.g. how the user

uses the platform) and user interface (e.g. how the platform looks).

**Rabbit Holes**, in the context of online activity, means getting lost in a topic or researching one topic and ending up in another. "Falling into" a rabbit hole online can lead to social isolation, polarisation, and conspiracy theories.

**Safety by Design** does not have a singular definition, but it is generally explained as the process of designing an online platform to reduce the risk of harm to users. Safety by design approaches are preventative and they require consideration of users throughout their development, or throughout the entire lifecycle of a platform, from ideation and development to operation and maintenance.

**Social Media** refers to the wide range of digital communication forms (e.g. websites and apps) that enable users to participate in social networking and create and share content.

**Tokenism** is a symbolic, often superficial effort to include members of a minority group to give the appearance of diversity and equality, without making genuine changes to power structures.

**Young People** are defined in this report as people between 15 and 29 years of age, in line with the European Commission's EU Youth Report.

# Endnotes

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This report sets out youth activists' vision, their testimonies, and their demands. It calls on policy-makers and regulators to act decisively to protect the mental wellbeing of Europe's young people, to hold tech companies to account, and to ensure that digital environments strengthen, rather than destroy, the foundations of democratic society.