Briefing: Online Safety Act 2023

Parliamentary Debate 15 December 2025

December 2025

Internet Society

Summary

The "Repeal the Online Safety Act" petition[1] received over 500,000 signatures and is scheduled to be debated on 15 December 2025. This briefing document provides MPs with key pieces of evidence and example questions for use in this debate.

Suggested Questions and Evidence

Age Verification

The roll-out of age verification under the Online Safety Act has been met with skepticism and alarm from many Internet users as to how their sensitive data may be processed, stored, and shared.

Why has age verification under the Online Safety Act been implemented through third parties without sufficient guarantees for user security and without clear communication to the public?

- Internet users lack clear assurances as to how their sensitive data would be stored, protected, shared, and processed. VPN use has increased up to 1,400% since the introduction of the Online Safety Act, likely due to privacy concerns,[2] with adults making up the majority of recent VPN users in the UK.[3] The use of VPNs has historically been encouraged as a tool for protection against cyberattacks, online scams, and for applying parental filters.[4]

- Any age check system under the Online Safety Act should independently evaluate providers to ensure that they do not identify or track people online. It should be accessible to all people regardless of their computer skills, protected characteristics, or socioeconomic status. Finally, it should be globally interoperable regardless of where users connect from, meaning that travelers and refugees are not excluded. Failure to uphold these principles risks driving users to less reputable online services which put them at risk.[5] Following Australia's social media ban, an Australian teenager is suing the government on the grounds that the ban would make the Internet less safe for children.[6]

- A patchwork of different age check approaches from different countries would also fragment the Internet and decrease its value. Independent review of the Government's 2021 Safety Tech Challenge[7] by REPHRAIN[8] showed the challenges of quickly deploying age checks and the importance of evaluating each provider against a robust framework. The Online Safety Act should not leave implementation to providers and should instead coordinate a rights-respecting approach with other global stakeholders.
- Age checks under the Online Safety Act are meant to be used to prevent children from accessing age inappropriate content. However, this same technology is now being rolled out to estimate the age of migrants that arrive to the UK, using artificial intelligence.[9] This example of scope creep illustrates how the inappropriate application of age verification technologies can exacerbate harm.

Content Detection in End-to-end Encrypted Environments

One of the most controversial aspects of the Online Safety Act is yet to be implemented, with Ofcom currently setting criteria for the deployment of detection technologies in end-to-end encrypted environments.

Why does the Online Safety Act require access to the public's encrypted, private messaging despite the repeated concerns raised by national security professionals, cybersecurity experts, and civil society?

- The Online Safety Act requires platforms to scan for certain types of illegal content, with no exception for encrypted communications. The only way for platforms to comply with this requirement would be to either remove strong encryption from their products or deploy on-device scanning,[10] where files shared via messaging services would be scanned preemptively and suspect material reported. Larger providers would be better able to afford the expensive creation and maintenance of scanning infrastructure than smaller providers, cementing the existing market dominance.
- Cybersecurity and rights experts have emphasized that on-device scanning violates encryption's privacy guarantees and creates new entry points that criminals and hostile state actors would gladly exploit for surveillance purposes.[11] In countries like the Netherlands[12] and Sweden,[13] intelligence and military agencies have opposed scanning on the grounds that it puts national security at risk. The Online Safety Act should clearly rule out on-device scanning as a detection technology on these privacy and security grounds.
- Alternative investigative methods exist that do not undermine encryption and may be less dangerous, although each come with their own challenges and considerations. Examples include the use of targeted metadata, enhanced voluntary cooperation with service providers, and user reporting.

Why does the Online Safety Act insist on mass scanning the public's encrypted, private messages while other countries have abandoned this approach due to security and rights concerns? What is the strategic benefit of turning the UK into a global cybersecurity weak link and an outcast among established democracies?

- EU debates on similar proposed approaches under the "chat control" file have sparked fierce public criticism and have resulted in the Parliament[14] and the Council of the EU[15] abandoning this approach on rights and security grounds.
- The United States' FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) and CISA (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency) have encouraged citizens to use more end-to-end encryption to protect against foreign cyberattack.[16] Countries like Chile have enshrined a "right to encryption" within their cybersecurity legislation.[17] The UK should likewise encourage the use of more encryption, not less.

About the Internet Society and Further Resources

The Internet Society[18] is a global charity working to close the digital divide and advocate for a secure and open Internet that people can trust. Our work is supported by over 155,000 individual members and 131 Chapters and special interest groups around the world.

The Internet Society UK Chapter[19] was founded in 1999 and includes over 2,000 supporters who advocate for an Internet that is open and a user-centric medium for everyone.

The Internet Society and Internet Society UK Chapter have regularly participated in public consultations related to the Online Safety Act and subsequent implementation by Ofcom.

- Pre-emptive Monitoring in E2EE Services, July 2024[20]
- Response to Ofcom Consultation: Technology Notices, March 2024[21]
- Response to Ofcom Consultation: "Protecting people from illegal harms online", February 2024[22]
- Global Encryption Coalition Steering Committee Statement on Online Safety Bill, September 2023[23]
- Internet Impact Brief: End-to-end Encryption under the UK's Draft Online Safety Bill, January 2022[24]

Please contact Callum Voge voge@isoc.org or Olivier MJ Crépin-Leblond contact@internetsociety.uk with any questions.

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