Putting algorithmic audits into practice

JOHN ALBERT | EU DISINFOLAB CONFERENCE | 26 OCTOBER 2022

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How do we audit platforms for systemic risks?

1. Using data donations to audit recommender systems:  
   *AlgorithmWatch’s Instagram Monitoring Project*

2. A new transparency & accountability framework:  
   *The EU's Digital Services Act & Code of Practice on Disinformation*

3. Putting algorithmic audits into practice:  
   *Next steps and open questions*
AlgorithmWatch’s Instagram Monitoring Project

- **Questions:** Does Instagram’s newsfeed...
  - Prioritize content from certain political groups?
AlgorithmWatch’s Instagram Monitoring Project

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  - Prioritize content showing partial nudity?
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- **Methodology**: Data donations and analysis
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- **Our findings**:
  - AFD higher up in users’ feeds;
AlgorithmWatch’s Instagram Monitoring Project

- **Questions**: Does Instagram’s newsfeed...
  - Prioritize content from certain political groups?
  - Prioritize content showing partial nudity?

- **Methodology**: Data donations and analysis

- **Our findings**:
  - AFD higher up in users’ feeds;
  - Influencer posts showing more skin higher up
Under Facebook’s Thumb

- Facebook’s response;
Under Facebook’s Thumb

- Facebook’s response;
  - The threat of “more formal engagement”
Under Facebook’s Thumb

- **Facebook’s response:**
  - The threat of “more formal engagement”
  - Shutting down the project
Under Facebook’s Thumb

Facebook’s response:
- The threat of “more formal engagement”
- Shutting down the project

Our position:
- No real transparency without legally-mandated data access
A new transparency & accountability framework

- The Digital Services Act (DSA):
DSA | New obligations for *VLOPs & **VLOSEs

Potential **Systemic risks** stemming from the design and use of digital services

*VLOP*: Very Large Online Platform  
**VLOSE**: Very Large Online Search Engine
VLOPs & VLOSEs must conduct regular risk assessments and must take appropriate measures to mitigate those risks.

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Potential **Systemic risks** stemming from the design and use of digital services

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A new transparency & accountability framework

- The Digital Services Act (DSA):
  - VLOPs & VLOSEs must assess and mitigate systemic risks
    - Data access for regulators, independent auditors and vetted researchers
A new transparency & accountability framework

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    - Data access for regulators, independent auditors and vetted researchers
    - Regulators (not platforms) vetting researchers
Researchers / DSA | Data Access Procedure

Platform X

Platform Data

Researchers
DSA | Data Access Procedure

Platform X

Platform Data

(Irish) DSC

Research application

Researchers

Vetting process
DSA | Data Access Procedure

Platform X

Platform Data

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National DSC

Research application

Researchers

Opinion

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DSA | Data Access Procedure

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Data access request

Amendment request

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- The EU Code of Practice on Disinformation
  - Major platforms (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, etc.) have signed
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  - Major platforms (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, etc.) have signed
    - Co-regulatory instrument linked with the DSA
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- **The EU Code of Practice on Disinformation**
  - Major platforms (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, etc.) have signed
    - Co-regulatory instrument linked with the DSA
    - Semi-voluntary commitments incl. supporting public interest research
EU Code of Practice on Disinformation

- “Cheap” compliance with the DSA for platforms; not a free pass
EU Code of Practice on Disinformation

▪ “Cheap“ compliance with the DSA for platforms; not a free pass

▪ Commitments include:
  ▪ Not taking adversarial action against good-faith research
EU Code of Practice on Disinformation

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▪ Commitments include:
  ▪ Not taking adversarial action against good-faith research
  ▪ Developing, funding, & working with an independent, third-party body
Researchers

Research application

National DSC

Vetting process

Opinion

(Irish) DSC

Vetting process

Amendment request

Data access request

Platform Data

Data sharing

Platform X

Researchers
Researchers
Research application
Vetting process
National DSC
Vetting process
Research
Application
Independent, third-party intermediary body
Data sharing
Data access request
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(Irish) DSC
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  - The “CrowdTangle provision”:
    - Providing tools for researchers to more easily access publicly available data (e.g. CrowdTangle)
A “CrowdTangle“ provision?

- Journalists and watchdogs rely on CT to monitor and report on disinformation...
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- ... so why is Meta gutting CrowdTangle now?
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- ... so why is Meta gutting CrowdTangle now?
- Reiterates need for legal & procedural clarity
Next Steps & Open Questions

- Commission’s Delegated Acts
  - How to protect both user privacy and research interests?
Next Steps & Open Questions

▪ Commission’s Delegated Acts
  ▪ How to protect both user privacy and research interests?
    ▪ Procedures for vetting researchers & providing access to data
    ▪ Role of independent advisory mechanism
    ▪ “CrowdTangle“ provision
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- Designating national Digital Services Coordinators
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- Designating national Digital Services Coordinators

- Capacity building & enforcement
  - E.g. “trade secrets” exemption; protecting good-faith research
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- Advocating for effective implementation + enforcement of the DSA
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- Conducting algorithmic audits via available methods like data donations
- Advocating for effective implementation + enforcement of the DSA
- Holding platforms accountable for their promises under the Code of Practice on Disinformation