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Addicted to the Algorithm

How Big Tech lobbies
to keep us hooked
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Addicted to the algorithm

How Big Tech lobbies to keep us hooked on social media

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TECH

As the EU prepares the Digital Fairness Act (DFA) to tackle the addictive nature of social media design, big tech companies are coming together to aggressively protect their business models. With Trumpists and far-right allies likely to join the chorus against the DFA, the Commission's own drive for deregulation at all costs is not helping the chances of strong legislation.

You've certainly experienced it: you grab your phone to do something specific, and end up getting lost in the maze of stimuli – sounds, colours, videos, notifications, urgent messages – so much so that you forget why

you picked up the phone in the first place and stay far longer on it than planned. We keep inventing new words to describe aspects of the experience, whether it's doomscrolling, internet rabbit holes, or brainrot. The good news is, this isn't just something that happens to you. There's a growing political consensus that this is a structural problem by design, that Big Tech has gone too far, and EU legislation is on the way to give you more control over addictive features in social media apps. The bad news is, Big Tech has begun a full scale lobbying battle against this legislation.

As the European Commission is preparing rules to rein in the addictive design of social media app – as part of the forthcoming Digital Fairness Act – the tech industry is drawing on its considerable lobbying firepower to oppose it. The legislation comes in response to growing concerns about the public health impacts of social media addiction, both for children, adolescents, and adults alike. But the Big Tech giants behind Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and other social media apps are pushing back. Keeping people on the apps for as long as possible is a central part of their business model and restrictions in addictive features would hurt their profits and power. In its lobbying, Big Tech aims to capitalize on the fact that EU decision-makers – with Commission President von der Leyen in the lead – are currently heavily prioritising industrial competitiveness via deregulation over other concerns. This means there are major new obstacles for legislation to pass.

Why legislation is needed to rein in addictive design

Social media addiction is reaching new peaks, with serious health impacts for large parts of the world's population, not the least for children and young people. The average teen in the US now spends 4.8 hours per day on social media. In Europe, 97 per cent of young people go online every day and 78 per cent of 13 to 17 year olds check their devices at least once per hour. One quarter of minors display 'problematic' or 'dysfunctional' smartphone use. Both for minors and grownups, excessive screen time and social media use has been shown to cause neurological harm (including reduced attention span and impulse control), psychological harm (anxiety, depression, self-harm, etc) and physical harm (reduced sleep and physical activity). Studies show they can also lead to premature cognitive decline in adults. As *The Economist* highlighted already a decade ago, "Silicon Valley's most successful tech companies use the insights of behaviour design to pump us with dopamine and keep us returning to their products".

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Social media platforms learned techniques from gambling companies to keep users hooked

Tech critic, journalist, and podcast host Paris Marx has pointed out that “social media platforms learned techniques from gambling companies to keep users hooked by using likes, notifications, and other methods to entice people to keep coming back, triggering dopamine responses that their brains craved even if the platforms made them feel worse at the same time.” Michelle Nie, at the time working at the Open Markets Institute, highlights that “one main strategy to capture user attention and encourage addiction are interaction-based recommender systems, in particular personalized systems that are designed to keep users on the platform as long as possible, consume more advertisements, and generate maximum profits for tech companies.” And things are getting worse, Nie points out, as “Big Tech has exponentially increased both the sophistication of their AI algorithms and the amount of proprietary data they collect on their users, which leads to exponential advances in the accuracy of recommender systems and their ability to hyper-personalize social media products”.

Public awareness about the dangers of social media addiction reached new levels in 2021 when whistleblower Frances Haugen leaked internal Facebook research and communications showing the company was aware of the serious problems caused by its platforms, including the grave risks of Instagram to the mental health of teenage girls. Facebook internal research leaked by Haugen showed that 13.5 per cent of teen girls said Instagram use worsens suicidal thoughts and 17 per cent of teen girls said Instagram contributes to their eating disorders.

In addition to serious public health problems, addictive design consolidates the economic and political power of, and our societal dependency on, US tech giants. Addiction increases time spent on platforms beyond what people would actually prefer, which boosts data collection and advertising income for Big Tech. By using addictive design to boost user attention, Big Tech crowds out alternative forms of communication and information, at the expense of potential new competitors in social media markets, traditional media, and others. Addictive design also accelerates the concentration of attention in – and dependency on – a few giant platforms with excessive levels of power and control over digital interaction and information flows.

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Addictive design consolidates the economic and political power of, and our societal dependency on, US tech giants

Anti-addictive design is possible

The solution is clear: we need legislation to rein in what social media platforms are allowed to do. “Countries should consider regulating digital devices like smartphones in a similar way to tobacco products, to combat social media's rising negative impact on young people's mental health”, the [World Health Organization's Natasha Azzopardi Muscat](#) told [Politico](#). “Anti-addictive design legislation”, Michelle Nie explains, “could include provisions requiring social media platforms to turn off attention-seeking features by default, to implement pagination instead of scrolling by default, demoting harmful or addictive content, and promoting and prioritizing alternative recommender systems based on chronological order or increased user control. These remedies, if implemented, would offer a healthier ‘content diet’ that is less likely to be addictive.” Political awareness is growing fast and last year several countries decided to ban social media for children under 16. Australia’s law took effect in December 2025, with Malaysia and France likely following soon, and Norway and other countries considering bans too. Such bans are clearly not the full solutions as they [leave other age groups unprotected](#) from the harms of addictive social media, but it shows the EU must act fast or risk lagging behind.

Existing EU digital legislation, such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) does not address addictive design directly. It’s on this basis that the European Commission in 2024 decided to prepare a Digital Fairness Act, with tackling addictive design as one of the priorities.

The Commission’s forthcoming proposal

The Commission’s decision to propose a DFA was based on a digital fitness check undertaken in 2024, which highlighted addictive design as a major concern. In her [political guidelines after reappointment for a second term in summer 2024](#), Commission President Von der Leyen promised that her Commission team would “tackle unethical techniques used by online platforms by taking action on the addictive design of online services, such as infinite scroll, default auto play or constant push.” A few months later, Justice Commissioner McGrath’s mission letter tasked him with developing a Digital Fairness Act to tackle, among other things, “the addictive design of digital products”.

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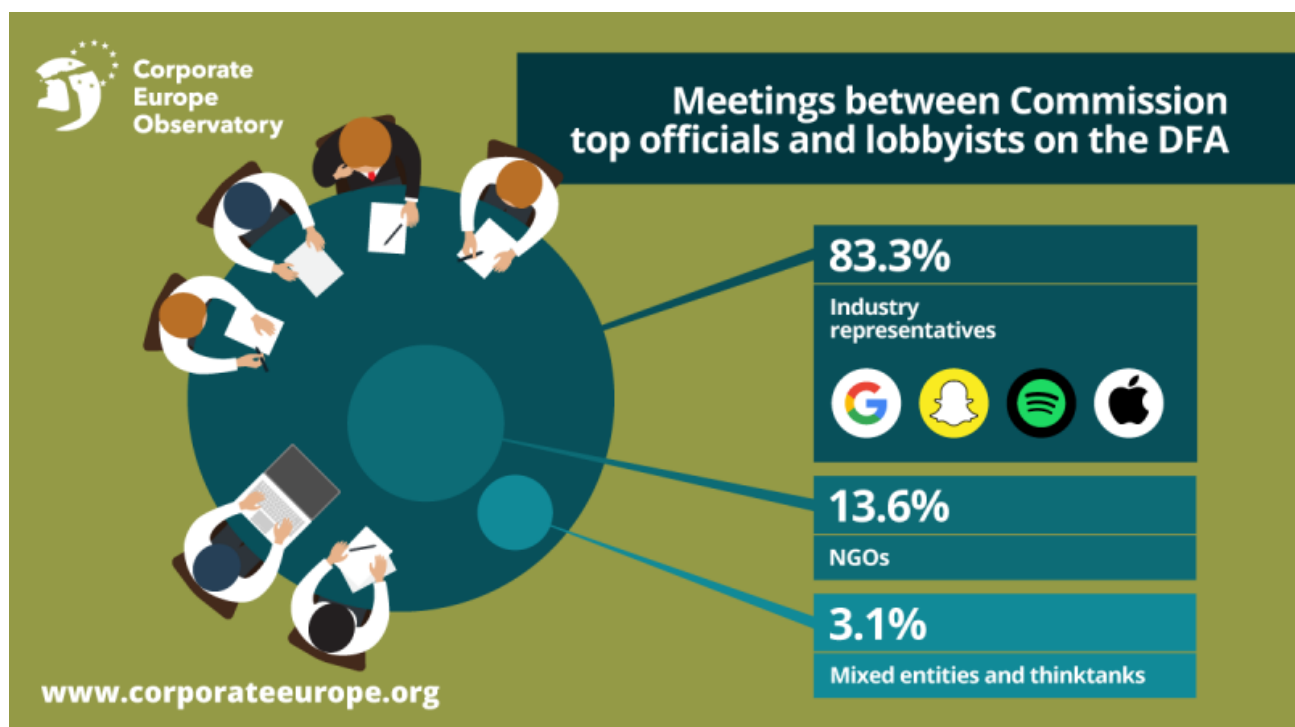
For the European Commission, “a real possibility [...] is to turn off such addictive design features”

The Commission’s DG JUST department seems to be moving ahead with ambition. “What we will be examining are options precisely to give users more effective control. So, a real possibility, for example, is to turn off such addictive design features,” Maria-Myrto Kanellopoulou, head of the consumer law unit at the DG JUST, said at a conference in early 2025. Measures under consideration to address addictive design, at that stage, included broadening the definition of a “transactional decision” to give consumers, especially minors, more control over engagement features. This included [disabling such features by default and enabling users to opt out of algorithm-driven recommendations](#). A

ban on particularly harmful features targeting children was also under consideration. After several delays, the Commission's proposal for a Digital Fairness Act is now expected in the fourth quarter of 2026.

Box 1: Excuses, excuses: Big Tech's three key arguments why addictive design doesn't need regulation

1. Big Tech argues the EU should focus on enforcement of existing laws, such as the DSA;
2. Big Tech claims regulation is not needed and voluntary initiatives will solve any problems;
3. Big Tech says new legislation is at odds with the Commission's commitment to prioritising industrial competitiveness through 'simplification' of legislation.



Big Tech's lobbying against the DFA



In early 2025 several major Big Tech lobby groups spoke out even more strongly against the DFA, likely sensing favourable political opportunities

Big Tech corporations and their lobby groups, as well as European tech companies, have wasted no time in attacking the proposed DFA. In autumn 2024 the European Tech Alliance (EUTA) immediately criticised the Commission’s Digital Fairness Fitness Check, arguing it didn’t take into account the impact of the DSA, the Digital Markets Act, the AI Act, and the Data Act dealing with similar topics. EUTA represents European tech companies such as Spotify, Trivago, and Booking. In its meeting with DG JUST on 7 February 2025 the EUTA “expressed skepticism about the need for a DFA” and raised concern about the impact “of an additional layer of rules on competitiveness”. DigitalEurope – whose members include Meta and TikTok – also weighed in, claiming that the challenges identified in the Commission’s analysis of existing law “stem not from gaps in the law, but from inconsistent and insufficient enforcement”.

In early 2025 several major Big Tech lobby groups spoke out even more strongly against the DFA, likely sensing favourable political opportunities, given the Commission had by then clearly embarked on a deregulation agenda, and President Trump had entered the White House with strong backing from US Big Tech companies. Both DigitalEurope, in its May 2025 position paper, and a June 2025 joint statement by 10 tech lobby groups, (including Big Tech lobby groups DOT Europe, CClA, and Allied for Startups) argued that existing legislation was sufficient and claimed that the plans for new legislation were at odds with the Commission’s stated priorities of ‘competitiveness’ and ‘simplification’.



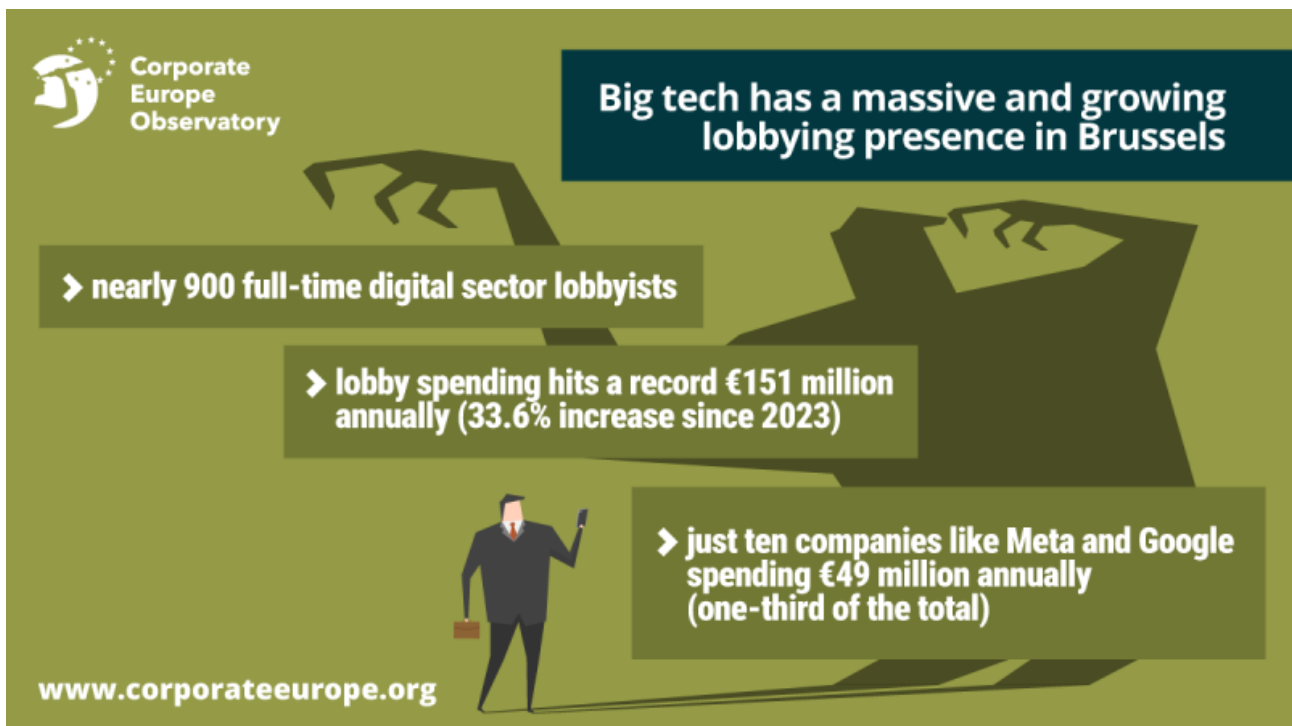
Commission top officials have had at least 96 meetings with lobbyists on the DFA since December 2024

It’s clear the lobbying battle gathered steam throughout 2025: according the EU Transparency Register, Commission top officials have had at least 96 meetings with lobbyists on the DFA since December 2024 (meetings with Digital Fairness Act mentioned as subject). A whopping 83 per cent of these meetings were with industry representatives (47 meetings were with companies, 28 with business lobby groups), whereas less than 14 per cent of the meetings were with NGOs (all of which were in favour of the DFA). Tech giants Apple, Google, Snap Inc, and Spotify topped the list with three or more lobby meetings with top Commission officials each. It is more than likely that the DFA was also discussed during many other lobby meetings with a different listed subject. On top of that, mid-level Commission officials also held lobby meetings on the DFA. Via a freedom of information request, we received documents related to another 10 meetings of tech lobbyists with the specific unit inside DG JUST that is leading on preparing the legislative proposal (JUST.B.2), meetings that happened in the first half of 2025. Such lobby meetings with mid-level officials are not proactively disclosed on the Commission website. A follow-up request for access to documents related to more recent lobby meetings at DG JUST is still pending, following our complaint about the lengthy delays (see also Box 4 on ‘Transparency setback’).

Box 2: Big Tech's ever increasing lobby spending

The tech industry has a massive and growing lobbying presence in Brussels, with nearly **900 full-time digital sector lobbyists**, and of these hundreds hold European Parliament access badges. Tech lobby spending in Brussels has hit a record **€151 million annually**, a 33.6 per cent increase since 2023; just ten companies such as Meta and Google are responsible for one third of that total lobby spend to influence EU policy.

Of the corporations most actively lobbying against the DFA, Meta is the biggest spender with an EU lobbying budget of more than €10 million per year, with 30 lobbyists, 7 of which have a permanent access pass to the European Parliament. Notably, Meta's lobbying offices are situated next to the US embassy in the Brussels EU quarter. Google reports spending almost €5 million per year on lobbying, employing 23 lobbyists, 7 of which have parliamentary accreditation, and had 51 meetings with Commission high-level officials in 2025 – on average one meeting a week. TikTok spends up to €1.75 million euro per year on lobbying (11 lobbyists, 5 of which have parliament access passes). Snap Inc, without a Brussels office, spends €600-700,000 per year on EU lobbying and had a total of 16 meetings with Commission top officials in 2025.



The list of 96 lobby meetings shows that a wide range of companies and lobby groups are lobbying to influence the DFA, on a variety of different topics that might be covered in the new law. If we focus in on the lobbying around addictive design, it's clear that the companies owning the most popular social media apps (Snap Inc, TikTok, Meta, and

Google) have all been very actively pushing back against restrictions on their use of addictive methods.



Snap Inc, TikTok, Meta, and Google have all been very actively pushing back against restrictions on their use of addictive methods

In a June 2025 meeting with Commissioner McGrath on the DFA, **Google** (owner of YouTube, a platform with highly addictive features) “provided information about the economic value of targeted advertising”, which the company fears may be further restricted. In its response to the European Commission's public consultation in October 2025, Google stated its concerns “about proposals to ban or restrict popular digital features”, arguing that such features (autoplay, notifications, infinite scroll) can be beneficial or safety-critical depending on the context. Google argues that “policymakers should consider existing industry-led best practices”.

Snap Inc, the owner of Snapchat, had three meetings on the DFA with the cabinets of Commissioners McGrath and Virkkunen. In the context of one of these meetings, Evan Spiegel, Chief Executive Officer of Snap Inc wrote to Commissioner McGrath wrongly claiming that the issues the DFA seeks to address, such as addictive design, “are already comprehensively regulated under the existing EU DSA” (letter of 27 May 2025). Spiegel followed up a month later with a longer letter to McGrath claiming that “excessive regulatory burden” is one of the key root causes of the EU lagging behind in digital innovations (letter of 23 June 2025). Spiegel calls for “new mechanisms to allow EU policymakers to fully assess the impact of new laws at the end of the legislative process”, after the trilogue phase. He mentioned the example of the DSA and its ban on targeted advertising to minors for online platforms, calling it “an extreme measure”. This ban was included in the DSA on the proposal of the European Parliament. Spiegel also insisted the Commission should be “avoiding overly prescriptive rules” and instead define “regulatory goals that allow flexibility in how companies meet them”. As examples of what should be avoided, Spiegel mentioned “blanket feature bans or horizontal ‘off-by-default’ rules, as discussed in the context of the upcoming DFA”.

TikTok also had several meetings on the DFA with Commission top officials, including two meetings with DG JUST officials on May 6th and May 30th 2025. In its official response to the European Commission's public consultation in October 2025, TikTok argued that current regulations are sufficient. The company advocates for a “risk-based” approach to minors' safety and “persuasive design” (the euphemism it prefers over “addictive design”), rather than blanket bans on features. In a December 2024 letter to Commissioner McGrath, TikTok’s Chief Executive Officer Shou Chew claimed that “TikTok is still a relatively young player in Europe, but we have always taken our responsibilities very seriously”. A remarkable statement, considering that TikTok is under investigation by the European Commission in two formal proceedings under the DSA. The first proceeding

focuses on the protection of minors, advertising transparency, data access for researchers, as well as the risk management of addictive design and harmful content. The other was launched 10 days after the cancellation of Romania's presidential elections in November 2024, amid allegations of Russian interference, and focuses on TikTok's recommender systems and policies on disclosing political advertisements and paid-for political content.

Dear Commissioner McGrath,

I write to congratulate you on your recent appointment as European Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection.

As TikTok's CEO, I believe that digital technologies can have a profoundly positive impact on democracies, economies, societies, and that digital platforms play a unique role in that regard. TikTok is still a relatively young player in Europe but we have always taken our responsibilities very seriously. It is essential that our 150 million strong community across the EU has a positive, safe and secure experience on our platform.

Letter from TikTok's CEO to EU Commissioner McGrath - "we have always taken our responsibilities very serious".

Meta (the owner of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp) met with Commission officials in April 2025 to discuss the forthcoming DFA and seemed to use the meeting mainly to outline the company's child protection measures. The Meta lobbyists claimed to have introduced numerous measures on their platforms "to ensure age-appropriate experiences" and recommended device-level age verification and parental consent at the app store level, thereby passing the responsibility on to app stores and parents. According to the notes of the meeting, Meta lobbyists told the Commission that "Meta implemented 'Teen accounts' in Instagram, with default protective settings applied for users aged 13 to 16, which require parental approval for deactivation". However, an investigation by the Molly Rose Foundation and others published in September 2025, showed that Meta's claims are unreliable. The report 'Teen Accounts, Broken Promises', found that Instagram's 'Teen Accounts' and its algorithms systematically fail to protect children from harmful content, such as material promoting self-harm, suicide, and eating disorders. A key finding is that "two-thirds (64%) of the safety tools we tested were ineffective, with just 17% working as Meta described — leaving children at risk of harmful content and abuse". The report concludes that Meta "appears to be fundamentally unwilling to tackle the child safety risks that blight its products". Based on these findings, the Meta lobbyists appear to have misinformed the European Commission.

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The report 'Teen Accounts, Broken Promises', found that Instagram's 'Teen Accounts' and its algorithms systematically fail to protect

children from harmful content

Meta's PR claims suffered another blow in November 2025 when documents released in the context of US court proceedings showed that the company had quietly shut down an internal research initiative, Project Mercury, when early findings showed that quitting Facebook had reduced anxiety and depression among users. Even a one-week break resulted in noticeable improvements in mental wellbeing. Meta decided to end the project and bury the findings, which contradicted the company's claims about the safety of its platforms. An unnamed Meta staff researcher compared Meta's actions with the tobacco industry's record, in previous decades, of suppressing research showing how harmful their products are. The documents surfaced in the context of a lawsuit by US school districts against Meta and other social media platforms.

Moreover, a recent study shows that half of all scientific studies on the impact of social media on society have ties to industry. According to the study, academic authors with ties to Meta were the most common at 14 per cent, followed by Google (8 per cent) and Microsoft (6 per cent). As the study acutely notes, industries producing harmful products have often successfully redirected scientific research to spread doubt.

Last December, Meta implemented "Teen accounts" in Instagram, with default protective settings applied for users aged 13 to 16, which require parental approval for deactivation. Default settings include privacy and strict messaging controls, allowing interactions only with approved contacts.

Currently, as regards the users of other services between 13 and 16 years and users of all services aged between 16 to 18, the user settings are established via the parent account and later be changed only with parental consent.

In a meeting with EU Commission officials about the DFA, Meta lobbyists promoted the company's Teen Accounts in Instagram as a safe space for teenagers.

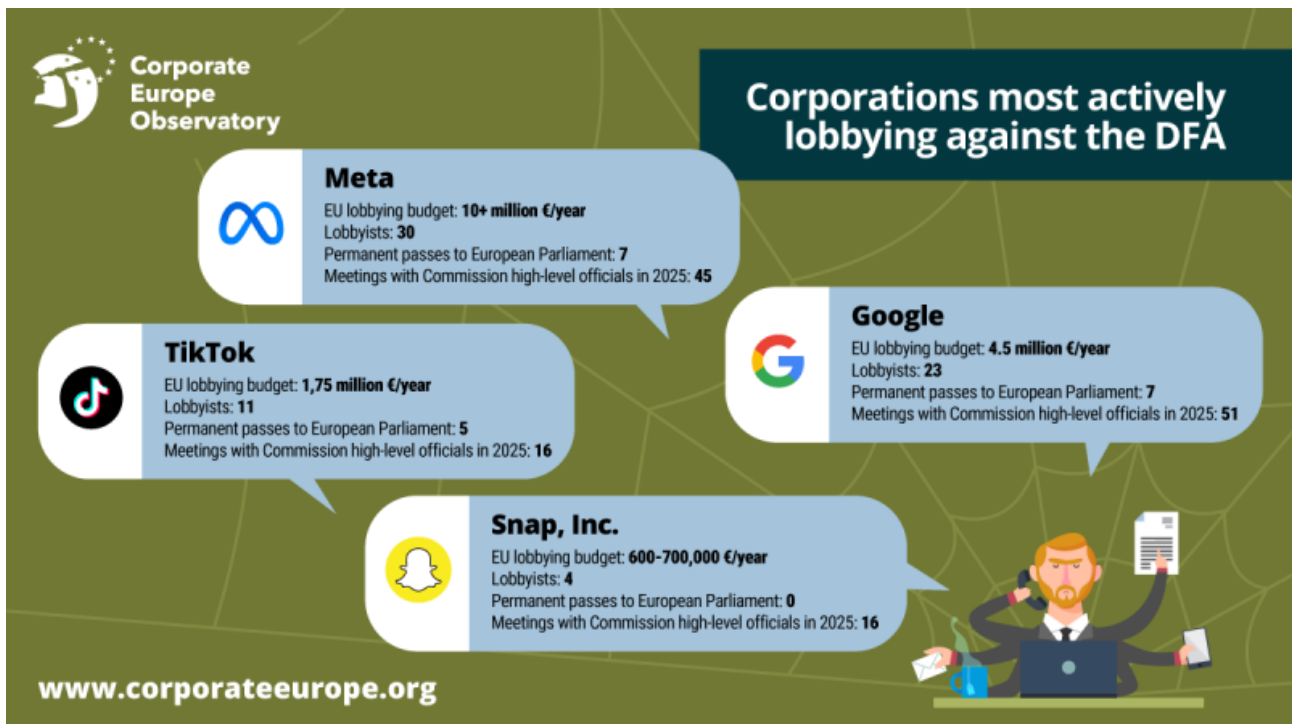
Meta appears to have only had one meeting with DG Just about the Digital Fairness Act during 2025 (but the DFA may have been discussed in the company's other meetings on other subjects), and it looks like they did not submit feedback to the Commission's public consultation. This seems surprising for the company that perhaps has most at stake, and also has the highest lobbying budget of any individual company in Brussels. Meta might have chosen to keep a low profile in this stage of decision-making, ensuring its lobbying demands were promoted by others. Meta's Transparency Register entry lists the company's affiliations to no less than 70 organisations, ranging from the American Chamber of Commerce EU, Business Europe, DigitalEurope, IAB Europe, the Transatlantic Policy Network, over the Lisbon Council, Center for European Policy Studies (CEPS), to the Consumer Choice Center Europe (or CCC Europe).

Big Tech funded 'consumer' lobbyists



Consumer Choice Center Europe is currently fully financed by Meta and Google, which means it should be seen as part of the lobbying by US Big Tech

The role of CCC Europe is worth highlighting. In autumn 2025 Euronews' TechNews section published several articles on EU digital policy issues "as part of an agreement with EU Tech Loop", including two on the forthcoming Digital Fairness Act. EU Tech Loop is run by the CCC Europe, a controversial organisation that claims to represent consumers but lobbies against consumer protection. CCC Europe is currently fully financed by Meta and Google, which means it should be seen as part of the lobbying by US Big Tech against the EU's digital rulebook, including the forthcoming Digital Fairness Act. CCC Europe has had seven meetings with centre-right MEPs on digital policy since December 2024 and lists the DFA as a policy focus in its entry in the EU lobby transparency register. CCC Europe's mother organisation (the Consumer Choice Center, with which it shares an address in the US) has a long history of being funded by the tobacco industry and lobbying for nicotine and tobacco products. We wrote to Euronews to ask for clarification, but haven't received a response, despite several reminders. The EU Tech Loop content published on the Euronews website doesn't mention that it's funded by Big tech corporations. This means Euronews is allowing a Big Tech front group to covertly influence public opinion, without enabling readers to take into account the origins of the content.



Box 3: Other key lobbying players

Other players in the lobbying offensive against reining in addictive design of social media include:

→ **BusinessEurope**, one of Europe's most powerful corporate lobby groups, included the DFA in its December 2025 hitlist of 44 existing or forthcoming laws that it considers to be an unacceptable 'regulatory burden'. "We do not see the need for new rules to be adapted", BusinessEurope states, without offering any substantive arguments.

→ **The Federation of European Data and Marketing (FEDMA)**, a coalition of postal and ad tech companies, in a 19 February meeting told the Commission that "legislation is not needed but instead better enforcement" of existing legislation.

→ **The Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB)**, which lobbies for the online advertising industry and has representatives from Google and Microsoft on its board, opposes enabling consumers to opt out of personalised advertising. Such opt-outs are being considered to protect privacy and avoid manipulation of consumer behaviour. In an email following a meeting with Commission McGrath, the IAB told the Commission that competing "means being able to sell *personalised ads*" as advertisers are willing to pay more for this. In a November 2025 op-ed, the IAB claims that the DFA will lead to "a de facto ban on personalised advertising" and insists that problems around influencer marketing should be left to "industry-led initiatives". The IAB plays the deregulation card and warns that "the future Digital Fairness Act risk departing from the simplification principle guiding the second von der Leyen Commission". The DFA "will serve as an early indicator of whether the Commission's commitment to regulatory self-constraint is genuine."

→ **The Epicenter**, a coalition of hardline neoliberal thinktanks linked to the Atlas Network (a global network with a long record of pro-corporate agenda, undermining climate science, and pushing neoliberal policies) warns that "the DFA risks undermining innovation, competitiveness and legal clarity".

→ **The Chamber of Progress**, a controversial Google-funded lobby group headquartered in the US but also actively lobbying Brussels, claims that the DFA is "seeking solutions for poorly-evidenced problems that existing regulations already address".

→ **the army of lobby consultancy firms** working for Big Tech, including FTI Consulting (clients include Meta and Google), APCO (clients include TikTok), Teneo (lobbies for Snap Inc), FIPRA, and many more.

→ **law firms** that provide lobbying services, such as Hogan Lovells and White & Case (both of lobbied for Meta), Alber & Geiger and many others.

Public consultation shows support for strong DFA

The public consultation on the DFA in autumn 2025 attracted over 3300 responses, with a large majority favouring new binding rules to tackle addictive design. The [Commission summary report](#) (December 2025) shows that a large share of respondents think that new binding rules are needed concerning addictive design features (70 per cent). Of those supporting new rules, 78 per cent think such features should be switched off by default for minors, and 58 per cent want these features to be switched off by default for everyone, allowing consumers to opt in if they wish. Interestingly, SMEs are far more supportive of such measures than large enterprises and business associations.

After the public consultation ended in mid-October 2025, the [Consumer Policy Advisory Group](#) (an advisory group consisting of consumer organisations and industry lobby groups) is now reviewing the findings to help shape the Commission's proposal.

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Box 4: Transparency setback

Monitoring Big Tech lobbying around the DFA has been complicated by a recent setback to EU transparency. In December 2024 the Commission increased the number of officials whose meetings with lobbyists are published online to around 1,500, and announced that [the minutes of these meetings would also be made public](#). However, what initially seemed like a significant advance in transparency has now been revealed to be of limited value, if not a step backwards. The notes from lobby meetings published on the Commission's website are often extremely brief and lack meaningful substance (see for instance [this meeting on the DFA](#)). Freedom of information (FOI) requests for minutes of meetings of top Commission officials did not deliver any more comprehensive notes. The European Ombudsman is [investigating the Commission's new, less transparent approach](#). Ironically, notes released for Big Tech lobby meetings with lower-level officials were far more detailed than those for high-level officials.

Will the DFA survive the deregulation agenda?

In addition to Big Tech's lobbying power, the DFA is facing at least four other serious obstacles: the current obsession among European decision-makers with promoting 'industry competitiveness' via deregulation; the aggressive pressure from the US Government against any policies disliked by its Big Tech firms; the growing power of the MAGA-inspired far-right in EU politics; and the tendency to limit the debate about social media addiction to rules for minors only.

Ursula Von Der Leyen has, in her second term embraced a radical deregulation agenda, which has already resulted in a proposed Digital Omnibus that would reopen and weaken existing data privacy and Artificial Intelligence laws. As part of the deregulation agenda, the Commission is hosting a large number of events to gather stakeholder input on how to 'simplify' legislation, events where industry representatives typically massively outnumber other interests. Some of the events on digital policy were less biased. McGrath told participants at 'Implementation Dialogue on consumer law' that DFA will include simplification, but only of "unjustified burdens". "Simplification and burden reduction will be important elements", a DG Just official told the Information Technology Council, a US based lobby group, during a meeting in March 2025.

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Ursula Von Der Leyen has, in her second term embraced a radical deregulation agenda

As part of the deregulation agenda, the Commission has also introduced several new impact assessments for new draft laws. The draft legislative proposal for a DFA will need to go through a competitiveness check, a Single Market Check, and a SME Check, all of which could lead to weakening of the draft law. Also the Regulatory Scrutiny Board (RSB) will assess the proposal and – with new instructions from the second Von der Leyen Commission – the RSB is likely to be more radically 'competitiveness'-focused than ever; a yellow or a red card is likely. This would require the Commission to revise its draft law. As mentioned earlier, industry lobby groups are heavily referring to the Commission's 'competitiveness' and 'simplification' agenda in their lobbying against the DFA. They will undoubtedly seek to use the impact assessment phase later this year to weaken the draft law.

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Industry lobby groups are heavily referring to the Commission's 'competitiveness' and 'simplification' agenda in their lobbying against the DFA

Ever since Trump retook the White House, the US Government has launched

unprecedented attacks on EU digital regulations, describing the Digital Services Act and other tech laws as discriminatory "overseas extortion" and "regulatory suffocation", making repeated threats of punishing the EU with tariffs and fees. The US Government's February 2025 aggressive 'Overseas Extortion' Memorandum claimed that EU fines and regulations are discriminating against US Big Tech corporations and "violate US sovereignty". The US Trade Representative (USTR) has warned that it would use "every tool at its disposal," if the EU goes ahead with enforcing digital legislation. In November 2025, US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick demanded that the EU should weaken its digital regulations in order to get a deal to lower steel and aluminum tariffs. "We are talking to them about" rolling back EU tech rules, Lutnick said in an interview.

DFA and the European Parliament - more hurdles ahead?

When the Commission's legislative proposal is launched later this year, it will go to the European Parliament and member state governments. Already before the Parliament gets formally involved, MEPs have had at least 41 meetings with lobbyists on the subject of the Digital Fairness Act since October 2024, virtually all with tech lobbyists. This included MEP Aura Salla, a former Facebook lobbyist, who met Big Tech lobby group CCIA on the DFA in September 2025, and recently also met Snap, Digital Europe, Google, Amazon, Microsoft, France Digital, and numerous other tech lobbies in meetings on digital issues. Whereas the Parliament passed a strong resolution in 2023 calling for legislation to tackle addictive design, there are several reasons to be worried about whether this level of ambition is still there. The conservative EPP group of MEPs has a strong focus on minors – there is a risk that protections will only be introduced for children / youth, whereas there should be measures taken for everyone.



Inspired by Trump's MAGA movement, the European far right is intensifying its attacks on the Digital Services Act

The far right political groups came out stronger from the June 2024 European Parliament elections and are increasingly hostile to strict regulation of social media, which could also become a hurdle for the forthcoming Digital Fairness Act. Inspired by Trump's MAGA movement, the European far right is intensifying its attacks on the Digital Services Act (DSA) which obliges social media giants to identify and mitigate risks stemming from their algorithmic systems, such as the amplification of illegal content and manipulation of elections. The provisions regarding illegal content concern content that is *already illegal* under EU or national laws, such as child sexual abuse material, hate speech, or terrorist content. Despite this fact, groups like the Alliance for Defending Freedom (ADF) and the Orbán-linked MCC Brussels are making sweeping statements against the DSA. The ADF, actually a US organisation challenging abortion access, LGBTQ+ rights, and transgender

rights, claims that the DSA's mandated risk assessments of algorithms could lead to censorship. MCC Brussels launched its attack on the DSA in a report last autumn, claiming the law results in 'digital censorship' and 'stifles free speech'.

At the end of November 2025 the European Parliament passed a resolution on "Protection of minors online", calling for age restrictions on use of social media. The resolution suggests children should be 16 before accessing social media, with the option of parents allowing access from the age of 13. The resolution also calls for legislation to "ban the most harmful addictive practices and disable addictive design features by default for minors". The resolution was approved with a large majority of 483 MEPs, with 92 opposing and 86 abstentions. Numerous far right MEPs from the ECR, PFE, and ESN groups abstained or voted against the resolution, with an MEP from the Polish PiS claiming such decisions should be made by member state governments, not on the EU level.

Box 5: Addictive design, extreme content, and the far right

The addictive and manipulative design of social media platforms is also a key factor in the drive for more extreme content. The effect is to push society towards more political extremes. That's because, when platforms are designed to maximise engagement, their algorithms are more likely to favour and push content that triggers strong emotional responses such as fear, anger, hate, outrage, and titillation in order to keep our attention. As neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux notes, triggering these emotions has a similar effect on the brain's reward system as addictive substances. Thus there is a structural incentive for content to be more exaggerated, polarising, fearmongering, conspiracy-laden, hate-speech adjacent, or rage-bait. Misinformation proliferates in these environments. While algorithms are not solely responsible for these becoming more prevalent in society, the profit motives of Big Tech are surely not an insignificant factor. Algorithms often feed users extreme content and once they've clicked on this, they can feed them more and more of this type of content. This is often how people become both hooked and radicalised online.

Social media companies are often reluctant to reveal the inner workings of their algorithms. But they are designed by choice, and could be designed differently. For example, Taiwan's former digital minister, Audrey Tang, has developed and promoted algorithms that helped generate consensus and democratic discussion (referred to as 'bridging-based algorithms').

MAGA (and many in far right European parties) oppose regulating the addictive nature of social media. Not coincidentally their allies' social media investments are handing over vast political influence and control over our information environments. Elon Musk lost money but gained influence when he bought X, and tech billionaire and MAGA-ally Larry Ellison's recent deal with TikTok includes control of its US algorithm. We shouldn't underestimate how fundamentally threatening these moves

are to democracy.

Big Tech versus civil society, youth, and parents

There's a massive and very unequal lobbying battle ahead, between the tech industry with its 900 Brussels-based lobbyists and €150 million-plus lobby spending versus civil society groups like [EDRi](#) and [BEUC](#) with far, far less resources. But civil society has public opinion on its side and citizens, increasingly fed up with Big Tech and its outsized power, are getting organised.

Last year, a [YouGov survey](#) showed that large majorities of French, Spanish, and German citizens want stricter EU enforcements of digital regulations and consider Big Tech to be too powerful. A recent poll in Denmark showed "42% of Danes want to try new alternatives to Big Tech and 68% would like to reduce their screen time". Denmark is one of the countries that has seen new citizens' groups emerge to take on the power of Big Tech. [Danmark Skifter](#) (Denmark Shifts) is a national campaign "where thousands of Danes take back control of their digital lives – not alone, but together". Another sign of the growing demand for reining in Big Tech's power abuse is the petition "Make TikTok safer for children and young people", signed by over 170,000 people and delivered to TikTok's European headquarters in Dublin in November 2025. It calls on TikTok to "address its toxic and addictive design", which "risks sending them down rabbit holes of triggering depressive and self-harm-related content".

Another important development is the launch of [ctrl+alt+reclaim](#), Europe's first youth-led tech justice movement. The youth activists demand that their wellbeing "be prioritized over Big Tech's \$11 billion in profits from minors alone". [The group's demands](#) includes "a safer, healthier, more equitable social media environment" and "an end to the stranglehold a handful of US-based corporations have over social media and online spaces". [ctrl+alt+reclaim](#) is also considering campaigning for "an EU-funded social media platform, an alternative to the big tech oligopoly, created by and for the public". Other important civil society initiatives against Big Tech's addiction machine bring together teachers, healthcare professionals, and parents with organizations such as [Smartphone Free Childhood](#), [Parents for Safe Online Spaces \(ParentsSOS\)](#), and [klicksafe](#) in Europe, and [Mothers Against Media Addiction \(MAMA\)](#) in the US.

The burning question for 2026 and the coming years is: will EU decision-makers stand up for the public interest and rein in the addictive design of social media, or will they back down due to Big Tech lobbying pressure? Will the Digital Fairness Act survive the current harsh political climate, with the top of the European Commission now prioritising corporate competitiveness via deregulation, and the Trump administration and the far right in Europe siding with Big Tech in opposing regulation? What's at stake is nothing less than the future of democracy in Europe.

Take action! Sign to stop social media addiction: Avaaz has launched an online petition calling upon EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Commissioners McGrath and Virkkunen to prohibit the addictive techniques used by social media platforms. *Sign the initiative [here](#).*

Methodology: *this report analysed the publicly-disclosed lobby meetings (as of 29 January 2026) of European Commissioners, high-level Commission officials and Members of the European Parliament. This included using the search and ranking functions of LobbyFacts.eu and IntegrityWatch.eu. The analysis also builds on more than 70 documents released by the European Commission following six different access to documents requests, focusing on top officials from DG JUST ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), DG JUST B.2 ([here](#) and [here](#)) as well as DG Connect ([here](#)).*

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