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UK Faces Backlash Over Sweeping Internet Law as 400,000 Demand Repeal

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A petition calling for the repeal of the United Kingdom's new Online Safety Act has gained over 400,000 signatures in just five days, as public concern grows over digital freedom and personal privacy. Critics argue the law grants excessive power to regulators and opens the door to government-led censorship, while ministers claim it is vital for child protection.

The Online Safety Act (OSA), passed in 2023, hands the Office of Communications (Ofcom), the UK's media and communications regulator, a wide-ranging authority to monitor user-generated content, impose content moderation standards, and enforce mandatory age verification across a variety of online platforms. These include search engines, gaming

services like Xbox, and social media websites, particularly those considered high-risk for underage access.

One of the most controversial provisions took effect last Friday, requiring pornographic websites and other adult platforms to implement ID-based age verification. Civil liberties organisations warn this could force adults to surrender sensitive personal or biometric data simply to access legal online content, raising profound concerns about digital surveillance and data security.

Reform UK leader Nigel Farage criticised the Act as “state suppression of genuine free speech,” while his adviser Zia Yusuf described it as “massive overreach” that risks transforming Britain into a “borderline dystopian state.” They argue the measures are based on overly broad and undefined notions of “harm” and could result in the arbitrary removal of lawful content under the pretence of safety.

In response, Technology Secretary Peter Kyle accused Farage of sympathising with child abusers by resisting the new rules – a remark that Farage condemned as “absolutely disgusting” and wholly inappropriate in civil discourse. He has since demanded a public apology, calling the accusation inflammatory and unfounded.

Despite reassurances from the government that enforcement will be “proportionate,” the Act allows for significant fines and penalties on platforms that fail to comply, even if the platform in question appears to be low-risk. This has led many privacy-conscious users to seek alternatives, with Virtual Private Network (VPN) usage skyrocketing. Swiss-based Proton VPN, for example, reported a staggering 1,800% spike in UK registrations following the Act’s implementation.

While supporters maintain the Act is necessary to protect minors from online harm, free speech campaigners, cybersecurity experts, and a growing number of UK citizens are urging lawmakers to rethink the scope and structure of the legislation. Already, the law has been used in court, resulting in a man’s imprisonment for cyber-flashing a new offence under the OSA, and others being prosecuted for allegedly false or harmful social media posts.

As more provisions come into effect ahead of the full 2026 rollout, the debate surrounding the balance between child safety, free expression, and digital privacy in the United Kingdom is only set to intensify.