

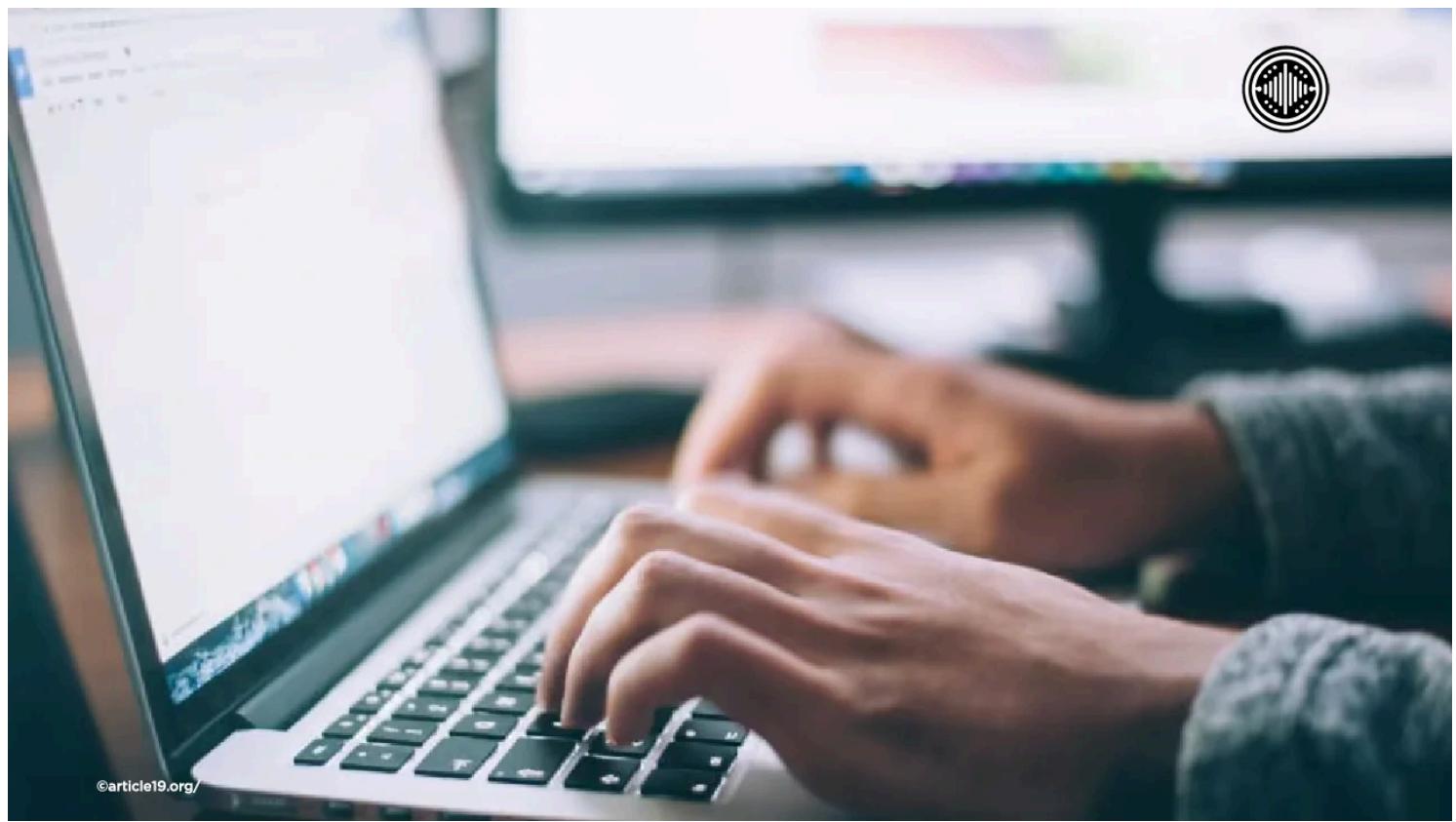
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UK's Online Safety Law Triggers Legal Challenge and Sparks Debate Over Digital Freedoms

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The United Kingdom's Online Safety Act (OSA), now in force, is drawing criticism from digital rights groups and legal experts over its broad implications for privacy, freedom of expression, and online access. A High Court challenge is underway, while privacy concerns and technical loopholes are already surfacing.

The Online Safety Act (OSA) introduces wide-ranging requirements for digital platforms operating in the UK. Overseen by Ofcom, the Office of Communications, the law mandates stricter protections for children on the internet. This includes compulsory age verification, rapid content removal mechanisms, and algorithmic safeguards designed to limit children's exposure to material involving pornography, self-harm, suicide, or eating disorders. Failure to comply could lead to fines of up to £18 million or 10% of a company's global revenue.

Major tech companies have been swift to adapt. X (formerly Twitter) now automatically restricts content visibility for users who cannot verify their age. Reddit has implemented third-party age verification for mature forums. OnlyFans has introduced artificial intelligence (AI)-based age estimation, which it claims does not retain biometric data.

However, critics argue that smaller websites lack the resources to implement such measures and may be forced offline or risk non-compliance. The law's broad enforcement powers have already raised questions about whether it can be applied proportionately across platforms of varying sizes and risk profiles.

Shortly after the law took effect on 25 July 2025, virtual private network (VPN) usage in the UK surged. Downloads of ProtonVPN and NordVPN rose sharply, with demand spiking by over 6,400%, suggesting that users are already seeking ways to bypass content restrictions or retain browsing anonymity.

Significant political opposition has also emerged. Reform UK has publicly committed to repealing the Act if elected, describing it as an overreach that does little to tackle the root causes of online harm. The party argues that while child protection is vital, the current approach risks undermining personal freedom and placing undue burden on lawful users and platforms.

Meanwhile, the Wikimedia Foundation, operator of Wikipedia, has launched a planned legal challenge in the High Court. The foundation is contesting the Act's categorisation system, which could place Wikipedia in "Category 1." This classification applies to platforms with over 34 million UK users or over 7 million users if they feature content recommendation systems and user-to-user communication.

If categorised under Category 1, Wikipedia would be required to implement identity verification for both editors and readers in the UK. Wikimedia's General Counsel, Stephen LaPorte, argues that such a mandate would undermine user anonymity and threaten the

open, collaborative nature of the platform. The foundation has warned it may restrict access for UK-based users if the regulations are enforced.

Concerns extend beyond Wikipedia. Critics point out that automated content moderation may inadvertently censor supportive communities, particularly online forums for individuals dealing with trauma, eating disorders, or mental health struggles. Overly broad filters could lead to the removal of well-intentioned discussions that play a positive role in users' lives.

While many parents and safeguarding groups have welcomed the law as a long-overdue measure, digital privacy advocates continue to call for a more balanced approach. They argue that the unintended consequences could establish a global precedent for increased surveillance and content regulation, especially if not carefully implemented.

Ofcom has stated it will apply the law proportionately and based on risk, though repeated breaches could carry criminal liability for senior executives of offending companies.

A public petition opposing the Act has gathered more than 350,000 signatures, with campaigners calling for a full repeal. The outcome of Wikimedia's legal case may set the tone for further litigation or amendments to the law in the future.