

Digital Platforms Open Letter

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Zach Bastick
European University Institute (EUI), Florence
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An Open Letter to Major Digital Platforms

Democracy Requires an Infrastructure of Observability

For much of American and European public life, accountability has rested on a simple principle: institutions that exercise significant power must be open to scrutiny. We rely on public records, independent audits, disclosure rules, and a free press precisely because they make such democratic judgment possible. A self-governing society is predicated on the ability to see how power is being exercised.

That principle now confronts a fractured digital reality. We no longer encounter public life through a single, shared, and open public sphere. Political debate, news, crisis information, and civic argument now move through privately owned platforms that organize visibility in ways few outsiders can fully see. These companies can observe social behavior at extraordinary scale. Society, by contrast, can observe the platforms only partially, intermittently, and often on terms the platforms themselves set.

When those terms change abruptly and unilaterally - through pricing decisions, eligibility rules, technical redesigns, or the disappearance of monitoring tools - public visibility narrows. Researchers are often the first to feel the effects, but they are not the only ones. Journalists, civil society organizations, election observers, and the wider public also lose part of their ability to understand what content circulating, what content being amplified, and whether announced safeguards are working as intended.

As a researcher, I encountered this problem firsthand through an EU-funded project to observe platform dynamics. As the project progressed, platforms began to limit data access to researchers and users, leading to virtual protests in some online communities. It became clear that these changing conditions reflect a core vulnerability of the way we govern and protect our information ecosystem. The central lesson of the project was not that platform research is no longer possible with direct data. It was that the observability of platform power remains fragile when access depends on channels that are privately governed and unilaterally alterable. This is a democratic problem.

In the United States as in the European Union, we do not ordinarily accept that powerful institutions should operate in partial darkness and then ask the public to trust them on that basis. Transferred to platforms, this is not an argument for exposing personal data in exchange for public scrutiny, nor for weakening security or disclosing proprietary source code or trade secrets. Platforms have legitimate obligations to protect users and secure their systems. But those obligations are not arguments against accountability. They are arguments for designing accountability more carefully and more durably.

What is needed is a modest but meaningful commitment: a public-interest observability compact for major digital platforms. If platforms want the benefits of public trust, they should make a standing commitment to support independent scrutiny in ways that are stable, intelligible, and responsible. In turn, the public and their representatives should co-create this compact; but I suggest some points:

First, continuity. Oversight cannot be rebuilt from scratch every time a company restructures access or retires a tool. Public-interest observability requires sufficient stability to support long-term scrutiny rather than occasional snapshots – especially when snapshots cannot be compared due to discontinuity.

Second, meaningfulness. If what is offered is too narrow, too inconsistent, or too impractical to use, platforms will engage only in what has recently been termed ‘transparency theater’ – and the public must pay the costs of this, both immediate in research efforts, and long-term, in liability.

Third, clarity. Platforms should be far more transparent about what forms of oversight they support, what the limits of those arrangements are, and how those conditions change over time. In any other domain of consequential institutional activity, this would be regarded as basic accountability practice.

Fourth, independent review. The public should not have to rely only on direct interactions with platforms alone to understand systems that now play such a large role in civic life. A healthier model is one in

which qualified public-interest actors can conduct structured, privacy-conscious scrutiny on a more durable basis, and interface (and, ultimately, support) researchers and civil society organizations in obtaining data for public interest studies.

Platforms should also recognize the incentive to move towards such a compact. More durable observability can strengthen legitimacy, improve the credibility of public claims about safety and integrity, and provide a more stable foundation for trust than ad hoc access or reactive transparency during moments of controversy. More generally, platforms should recognize that the pressure for greater platform accountability is not going away. In Europe, the Digital Services Act has already established formal pathways for researcher access to platform data. While that does not provide a complete model for every jurisdiction, it does signal the broader direction of travel.

The numerous crises of the 2010s and 2020s – from Myanmar, to COVID, polemics over misinformation, election uncertainty, and AI training – have reinforced that, once private systems become central infrastructures for public speech, civic judgment, and democratic life, a durable basis for independent observability becomes a reasonable public expectation.