

**Social  
Democrats**

## **Digital & Online Safety**

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**Regulating Risk, Harnessing Opportunities**

**For the Future  
It Starts Here**

**#VoteSocDems**



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## Key Points

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Introduce a domestic framework for stronger regulation of the development of AI, with particular attention paid to the role of large technology companies, in line with recent European directives and regulations.
- Form a Joint Oireachtas Committee to develop a national strategy on AI, with a focus on Irish democracy, and individual and community rights.
- Ensure Ireland's national strategy on AI considers climate impacts and environmental sustainability.
- Establish a unit in the Department of the Taoiseach and appoint a Chief Information Security Officer to combat the proliferation of misinformation, disinformation and mal-information.
- Legislate to strengthen the legal framework around the publishing responsibilities and obligations of online platforms.
- Prohibit the 'digital only' provision of publicly funded services, including services that impose obstacles or disincentives to accessing offline options.
- Conduct a cross-government analysis of the potential labour displacement that automation will cause in the Irish economy, and explore policy frameworks and mechanisms to deal with it.
- Develop law and policy that addresses the risk areas of AI in relation to bias and discrimination, consulting with minority and marginalised groups.
- Ensure that the progress of automation and AI doesn't remove or distort access to, or negatively affect, administration of justice.
- Establish independent AI regulators with sufficient resources, and an advisory forum of representatives from civil society organisations with fundamental rights expertise.
- Develop law and policy that addresses the risk areas of AI in relation to intellectual property, copyright, and the climate crisis.
- Collaborate with global leaders to ensure a unified response to the development of AI in regulatory terms.

- Enact specific and effective legislation to protect children online, by regulating ‘preferences algorithms’ and ensuring that engagement-based recommendation algorithms are turned off by default.
- Expand the mandate of Coimisiún na Meán so they have authority to instruct for content to be taken down from online platforms on the basis that it represents misinformation or disinformation.
- Work to combat online gender-based violence, including intimate image abuse, and to address the harms of violent online pornography.
- Make technology platforms accountable for their content and business models, including for algorithms which push violent, extremist and pornographic material to young people.
- Adequately fund the Data Protection Commission to ensure that Ireland upholds its responsibilities as the supervisor of big tech firms across Europe, and conduct a review of how the Commission might be strengthened.

## Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) presents many opportunities, but also many policy challenges. AI has the power to make our lives more convenient, our work faster and more efficient, and to bring huge benefits.

But technological progress of this kind also brings with it huge challenges, including around labour displacement, which could sharply increase, and the danger of machine-led decision-making in state policy and practice.

AI also has much potential, both positive and negative, to impact the environment and play a role in the climate crisis, and to damage or strengthen our democracies. Misinformation, disinformation and mal-information are arguably the biggest contemporary threats to our democracy and to the rule of law, muddying our social media landscape.

We believe that social media and other internet platforms should be transparent about their content moderation decisions, and do what they can to prevent dangerous disinformation from going viral.

We must also do more to ensure the safety online of our citizens, particularly children and young people.

Meanwhile, access to digital services continues to deepen the social divide in our society. Crucial services are online in both public and private sector offerings. More must be done to enforce a 'digital first, not digital only' approach to the delivery of key services.

In Government, the Social Democrats will take action in each of these areas to mitigate societal harm and ensure that corporations and state bodies adhere to their responsibilities in these areas.

## Regulating Artificial Intelligence

The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become commonplace in both business and everyday life. AI presents many opportunities, but also policy challenges.

The opportunities are evident in our daily lives as, increasingly, more tasks are made easier or completely automated. AI has the power to make our lives more convenient, our work faster and more efficient, and to bring huge benefits.

But technological progress of this kind also brings with it huge challenges, including around labour displacement, which could sharply increase, and the danger of machine-led decision-making in state policy and practice. This could lead to bias and discrimination, infringements on civil liberties, and problems around access to justice.

Law and politics are playing catch up with AI and its consequences. Big tech firms are the only global actors with the data, staff, and computing capabilities to drive progress in this area. This creates an unhealthy dynamic between countries and the multinational corporations where much of the development of the technology that affects our lives is happening.

There are issues, too, around algorithmic decision-making, with increased potential for mistakes not to be captured, compared to when mistakes are made by human error. This can make it harder to access justice or appeal in the case of erroneous decisions, as questions arise over with whom responsibility lies (e.g. with a government department, the software company who made the product, or the coder who developed the algorithm); if it's no longer clear where ownership of the decision lies, how is accountability enforced?<sup>1</sup>

There is a critical need for global regulators to join forces in both harnessing and mitigating the societal impacts of AI.

Meanwhile, the potentially positive impacts of AI are being lost in the discussion, including technological advancements for the consumer, a fairer distribution of labour across the population, and improvements in work/life balance.

In Government, the Social Democrat will aim to provide the balanced leadership required to ensure we don't stifle innovation while also expanding the scope of influence on AI regulation beyond just industry, to include citizens' concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> An example is the so-called *toeslagenaffairein* case in the Netherlands.



In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Introduce a domestic framework for stronger regulation of the development of AI, with particular attention paid to the role of large technology companies, in line with recent European directives and regulations.
- Form a Joint Oireachtas Committee to develop a national strategy on AI, with a focus on Irish democracy, and individual and community rights. The Committee should consult with a range of experts and stakeholders, and assist elected representatives to understand AI and its implications.
- Conduct a cross-government analysis of the potential labour displacement that automation will cause in the Irish economy, and explore policy frameworks and mechanisms to deal with it, including largescale re-training, labour creation and redistribution, basic income, and shorter-working weeks.
- Develop law and policy that addresses the risk areas of AI in relation to bias and discrimination, consulting with minority and marginalised groups.
- Ensure that the progress of automation and AI doesn't remove or distort access to, or negatively affect, administration of justice.
- Postpone the use of Facial Recognition Technology by An Garda Síochána until civil liberty concerns have been addressed.
- Establish independent AI regulators with sufficient resources, and an advisory forum of representatives from civil society organisations with fundamental rights expertise.
- Develop law and policy that addresses the risk areas of AI in relation to intellectual property and copyright, and work to mitigate the danger AI poses to artistic sectors, ensuring that the opportunities state bodies have traditionally provided to our artists are not withdrawn in favour of using AI.
- Develop law and policy that addresses the risk areas of AI in relation to the climate crisis (see next page).
- Collaborate with global leaders to ensure a unified response to the development of AI in regulatory terms, and position Ireland as a legislative leader in this area.
- Investigate the broader societal existential risk posed by the development of AI that can ultimately threaten us as a species, and develop law and policy to mitigate.

## Artificial Intelligence and the Environment

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has much potential when it comes to environmental protection. AI can detect patterns in data and use them to accurately predict future outcomes. Such abilities may make AI invaluable for monitoring the environment, and helping people – including policymakers and corporations – make more planet-friendly choices. It can also enhance efficiencies.

These advances are fostering hope that AI could help the world tackle at least some aspects of climate change, pollution and waste, and biodiversity and nature loss.

However, AI is far from without its problems in this area.

Most large-scale AI deployments are housed in data centres, which take a heavy toll on the environment, both in terms of raw materials for their construction (including the technology within them) and the amount of electronic waste they produce (which contains hazardous substances like mercury and lead).

Data centres also use huge amounts of water – a problem when a quarter of the world’s population lacks access to clean water – and even more energy, which in most places is still generated by fossil fuels. Some predictions suggest that data centres could account for around a third of Ireland’s energy use in the next few years.

The worries are not limited to data centres; for example, there are concerns that AI-powered self-driving cars could cause more people to drive instead of cycling or taking public transit, pushing up greenhouse gas emissions.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Ensure Ireland’s national strategy on AI (see section on Regulating Artificial Intelligence) considers climate impacts and environmental sustainability.
- Enact a moratorium on the development of data centres and the issuing of planning decisions as an interim measure until an economic, environmental and energy impact risk analysis has been carried out.
- Enforce higher standards as set out in the European Union Code of Conduct for Energy Efficiency in Data Centres, removing the code’s voluntary nature and putting in place statutory obligations rather than self-regulation.

## Digital Rights

Digital access continues to deepen the social divide in our society. Crucial services are online in both public and private sector offerings. While ‘digital first’ is a fitting policy to modernise these services, ‘digital only’ is often deployed, cutting off portions of our population from much needed access; often those groups who most need these services.

This alienates citizens. Digital literacy, data, and, to a lesser extent, hardware are not resources that are equally available across society.

The Government’s *Roadmap for Digital Inclusion* recognises that many groups – including older persons, people on lower incomes, and those living in rural areas – are less engaged with digital technologies, and experience multiple barriers to digital inclusion, including access, affordability and ability.

Covid lockdowns accelerated the digitalisation of Irish society, which has worsened social exclusion for the many who are not using the internet or who lack basic digital skills.

Both private and public services are increasingly moving online, leaving many members of our society behind. To avoid digital exclusion, people must often take risks with their personal data, or rely on others who are more digitally literate. For many people, especially the elderly, this at best reduces their autonomy and at its most dangerous leaves them exposed to abuse and exploitation.

While the State declares that public services should be ‘digital first, not digital only’, examples of publicly funded services being exclusively available online, include local property tax payments, passport renewal, and bookings for national car tests, as well as various public consultations.

Work needs to be done to improve digital skills and access for many groups, as well as to protect high-quality offline services of which they can avail.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Prohibit the ‘digital only’ provision of publicly funded services, including services that impose obstacles or disincentives to accessing offline options.
- Ensure public services are designed to assist those who have literacy and/or numeracy difficulties, which often lie behind digital exclusion.

- This should also apply to essential services in the private sector like banking, and to private or voluntary bodies supported by state grants.
- Audit digital-only service offerings in the private and public sectors, which exclude individuals and communities who are yet to enjoy full online access, and develop sector-specific responses.
- Oblige all publicly funded services to deliver a minimum level of offline customer service.

## Misinformation and Disinformation

Misinformation, disinformation and mal-information are arguably the biggest contemporary threats to our democracy and to the rule of law, muddying our social (and to a lesser degree, our traditional) media landscape.

Social media and other internet platforms should be transparent about their content moderation decisions, and do what they can to prevent dangerous disinformation from going viral.

Strong State responses and collaboration are required to mitigate the damage this is doing to our democracy.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Establish a unit in the Department of the Taoiseach and appoint a Chief Information Security Officer to combat the proliferation of misinformation, disinformation and mal-information, working closely with Coimisiún na Meán, The Electoral Commission, and other relevant agencies.
- Legislate to strengthen the legal framework around the publishing responsibilities and obligations of online platforms.
- Develop and implement citizen information and awareness programmes to bridge the digital divide, increase digital literacy, and mitigate the rise of misinformation, disinformation and mal-information.
- Use the Joint Oireachtas Committee (see section on Regulating Artificial Intelligence) to examine the ways in which AI has the potential to further spread complicate mis/dis/mal information in new ways.

## Online Safety

The evidence of the detrimental impact on our children and young people of unregulated access to the internet and social media is overwhelming. It has resulted, among other things, in an evolving youth mental health crisis, and requires leadership and political will to address.

We have laws and structures to protect children from harm in our society; that principle must be extended and applied to the digital world. Internet service providers must be responsible for creating an online environment that is safe, and be held accountable where they fail.

Attempts to regulate access to online content according to age seem likely to fail. Instead, the Social Democrats believe that regulating how ‘preference algorithms’ – which direct content towards our children – work makes more sense. We would enact regulation of social media platforms, underpinned by legislation and enforced with significant penalties (rather than codes of conduct).

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Enact specific and effective legislation to protect children online, by regulating ‘preferences algorithms’ and ensuring that engagement-based recommendation algorithms are turned off by default.
- Expand the mandate of Coimisiún na Meán so they have authority to instruct for content to be taken down from online platforms on the basis that it represents misinformation or disinformation.
- Provide guidelines for best practice for smartphone use by children, including no smartphones for children while in primary/secondary school.
- Provide education on digital and media literacy in schools, including by having misinformation – and how to identify it – included in primary and secondary school curricula via SPHE.
- Provide resources to support public health awareness campaigns, wellbeing training, and support services for schools.
- Enact stricter rules on influencers, including around what they can promote, and guidance around how they promote it.

For example, promoting cosmetic surgery has been banned in France and promotional images for cosmetics must come with a disclaimer if they have been altered or a filter has been used.

## Sexual Harm Online

Online sexual and gender-based violence is an increasing problem. Online abuse within and outside of relationships is of great concern, especially for younger generations. Research suggests that nearly half of young women who experience intimate relationship abuse in Ireland experience online abuse by their partner and/or ex-partner.

This can include having images or videos taken of them without their consent, and the sharing or threatened sharing of sexually explicit or intimate photos and/or videos without their consent.

While the non-consensual sharing of intimate images has been criminalised, criminal prosecutions take time and often do not progress as far as the courts. For most victims, having the harmful content removed from the internet before it goes viral is the primary concern.

In Government the Social Democrats will continue the work being done to combat online DSGBV, including intimate image abuse, by preventing abuse, protecting and providing resources for victims/survivors, and holding online platforms accountable for the content.

Violent and misogynistic pornography can help shape unrealistic, unequal and disrespectful sexual expectations, particularly among boys and young men, and normalises or promotes sexual violence. Yet it is widely available to children and young people, and helps shape their understanding of sex and relationships. We need to address the harms of online pornography consumption by children.

In Government the Social Democrats will:

- Work to combat online gender-based violence, including intimate image abuse, and to address the harms of online pornography.
- Provide resources for victims/survivors.
- Make technology platforms accountable for their content and business models, including for algorithms which push violent, extremist and pornographic material to young people.
- Work to develop a fast, free, and enforceable mechanism to remove intimate image abuse and content promoting DSGBV from online platforms and social media.

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