Complaint against Alphabet Inc. regarding its compliance with Art 6(3) and 13(4) DMA

Submission of information pursuant to Art 27 DMA by ARTICLE 19, European Digital Rights (EDRi), Free Software Foundation Europe (FSFE), and Gesellschaft für Freiheitsrechte (GFF), Homo Digitalis, and Vrijschrift.org

July 2025

The undersigned complainants would like to thank the European Commission's DMA enforcement team for the second series of compliance workshops with gatekeepers organised in June and July 2025.

Following up on those workshops, we hereby submit a complaint with regard to Alphabet's open refusal to effectively comply with Art 6(3) DMA. This complaint contains additional technical context, legal arguments, and data for the Commission's consideration, and hope that this information can contribute to the ongoing investigation into the compliance of Alphabet with the DMA. Based on Alphabet's latest compliance report, our findings, and the conversation with Alphabet's representatives during the workshop of 1 July 2025, we prompt the Commission to open proceedings under Art 20 DMA in order to establish whether Alphabet complies with its obligations under Art 6(3) DMA and, if non-compliance is confirmed, adopt a non-compliance decision including detailed orders to change behaviour and the imposition of appropriate and deterrent fines.

1. Background

Article 6(3) DMA states that gatekeepers "shall allow and technically enable end users to easily uninstall any software applications on the operating system of the gatekeeper," except where software applications "are essential for the functioning of the operating system or of the device and which cannot technically be offered on a standalone basis by third parties." Instead of explicitly defining the term "un-install", the DMA relies on the widespread understanding that uninstalling an application means removing it from the device.

Yet, during the DMA workshop on 1 July, Alphabet attempted to redefine the verb "to uninstall" as meaning "to disable" a software application, as opposed to removing it. Alphabet separately also claimed that "disabling" and "removing" software applications was technically the same from a user perspective.

In this submission we demonstrate that both claims are false and that Alphabet misrepresented the facts, presumably in order to be able to continue discouraging users from removing pre-installed Google apps and switching to non-Google competitors. This would directly undermine the DMA's goal to ensure "contestable and fair markets in the digital sector across the Union."

2. Playing with words: Disabling is not uninstalling

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “to uninstall” as “to remove (data or an application)”, while Merriam-Webster describes it as “to remove (software) from a computer system especially by using a specially designed program.” No reputable dictionary we found referred to “uninstalling” as merely “disabling” or deactivating a software application.

What is more, a search through popular press outlets shows what most people, both laypeople and experts, mean when they speak about uninstalling an app. Here are a few publicly available examples of how the verb “to uninstall” is commonly used in the press:

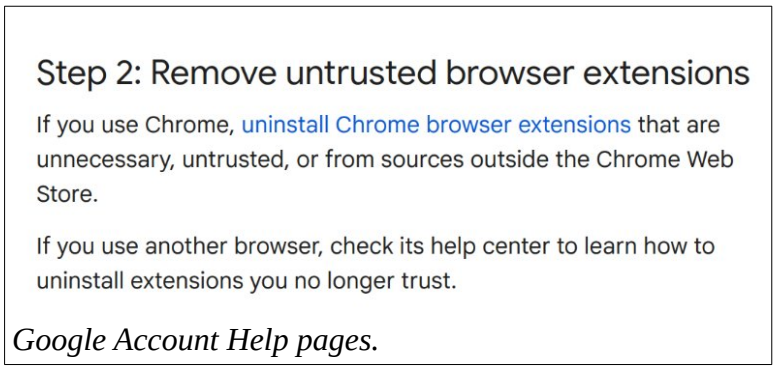
> Even after **uninstalling** the apps, the victims continue to be billed.
> — Alyssa Newcomb, *Fortune*, 16 Jan. 2020

> There’s also more bloatware on this device than ever before, but at least much of it is easy to **uninstall** or disable.
> — Julian Chokkattu, *WIRED*, 10 July 2024

> The solution is to **uninstall** Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, and recommend all your friends to do the same.
> — Enrique Dans, *Forbes*, 7 May 2021

> Google warned users Tuesday to **uninstall** any Pinduoduo app not downloaded from its own Play Store.
> — *CBS News*, 21 Mar. 2023

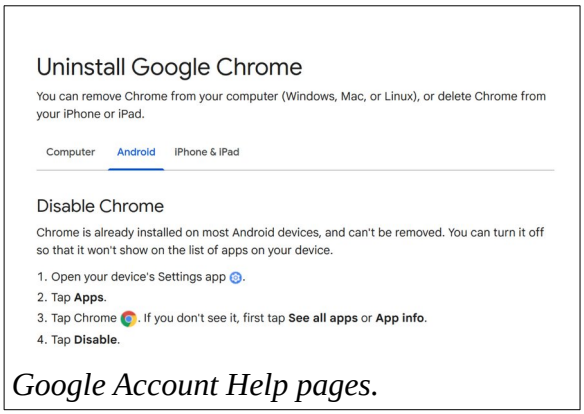
It is unlikely that reporters writing about bloatware, malware, and other unwanted apps, would recommend their readers to merely disable such apps. Of course, when they write “to uninstall”, they mean “to remove.” In fact, Google’s own support web pages make it clear that uninstalling means removing software applications from a device. On its help page entitled “Remove malware or unsafe software”, Google explicitly says that in order to “remove unwanted browser extensions”, users should “uninstall” those that are “unnecessary, untrusted, or from sources outside the Chrome Web Store.”[1]

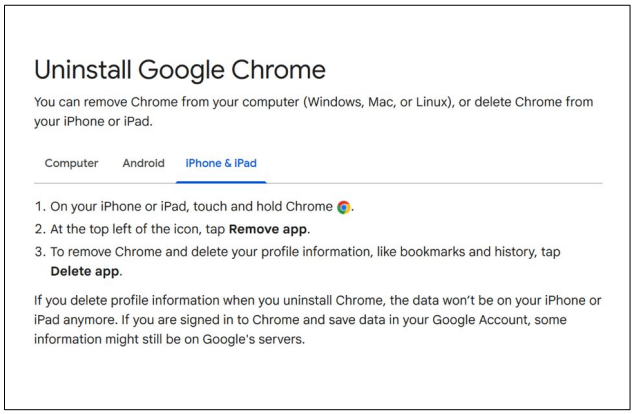


Google Account Help pages.

1 Google Account Help: “Remove malware or unsafe software”, last accessed on 10 July 2025, archived at https://archive.is/xwRBo.

The difference also becomes clear by looking at how Google's support web pages describe the uninstall process of Google Chrome on various operating systems. For "Computer" (Windows, Mac, and Linux), as well as iPhone and iPad, the support text explicitly and correctly states that "you can remove Chrome", and that uninstalling Chrome will in fact "delete" it. Only for Android the term "delete" or "remove" is nowhere to be seen. Instead, the support pages (again, correctly) state that Chrome can only be "disabled".





Google Account Help pages.

In a separate claim during the DMA workshop of 1 July, Alphabet repeatedly stated that when users disable Google apps, only "remnants of the code" would remain on the device. That is how the company representatives justified the fact that, despite the clear Art 6(3) DMA obligation to enable uninstallation, Android only allows users to disable pre-installed apps: that technically it makes hardly any difference.

Our own testing, however, revealed that this is false as well: Disabling an Android app allows us to observe the following:

1. The app icon is hidden from the user.
2. Some of the previously installed updates for the disabled app are removed.
3. The app itself remains on the device's system partition in its entirety.

This is also confirmed by the fact that in our tests it was possible to re-enable and run any previously disabled Google app without the device being connected to the internet, i.e. without any other code needing to be downloaded. The fully functioning app was still on the device throughout the disabling process.

In addition, Oliver Bethell, Legal Director at Google and one of Alphabet's key representatives at the DMA workshops, confirmed to complainants in an email that "In the system image APK state [*i.e. when pre-install apps are disabled, note by complainants*], Chrome, Gmail, Maps, Search, Play, and YouTube take up less than 570MB of storage space."[2]

2 Full email text can be made available on request.

In other words, the “remnants of code” that Alphabet claimed would remain on the device when end users disable Google’s gatekeeper apps, remain fully functional and keep occupying over half a gigabyte of valuable storage space on the device.[3]

Alphabet could argue that its own apps like Gmail, Google Maps, Youtube, Chrome, Google Docs, Drive, Calendar, Photos, or Search are somehow “essential for the functioning of the operating system or of the device,” in which case Article 6(3) DMA might grant an exception. But this provision only applies to applications that “cannot technically be offered on a standalone basis by third parties.” Not only does the market provide third-party competition to all of those gatekeeper products, which the Commission successfully used as an argument against Microsoft in *Commission v Microsoft;*[4] all of those apps are also available as standalone offers by Alphabet either as apps or browser-based services for operating systems other than Android.

Conclusion: Contrary to what Alphabet claimed during the DMA workshops, both in 2024 and 2025, removing and disabling a software application are two very different things, technically, legally and crucially*:* from a user perspective. Disabling does not, as Alphabet claims, only leave small bits of code on the device, but the fully functional app. The gatekeeper can also not rely on the exemption for apps “essential for the operating system.” The DMA requires gatekeepers to enable end users to “un-install” pre-installed gatekeeper apps, and that can legally only be understood as complete removal. Everything less can only be considered a breach of Art 6(3) DMA.

3. Playing with design: deceiving users to prevent switching to competing apps

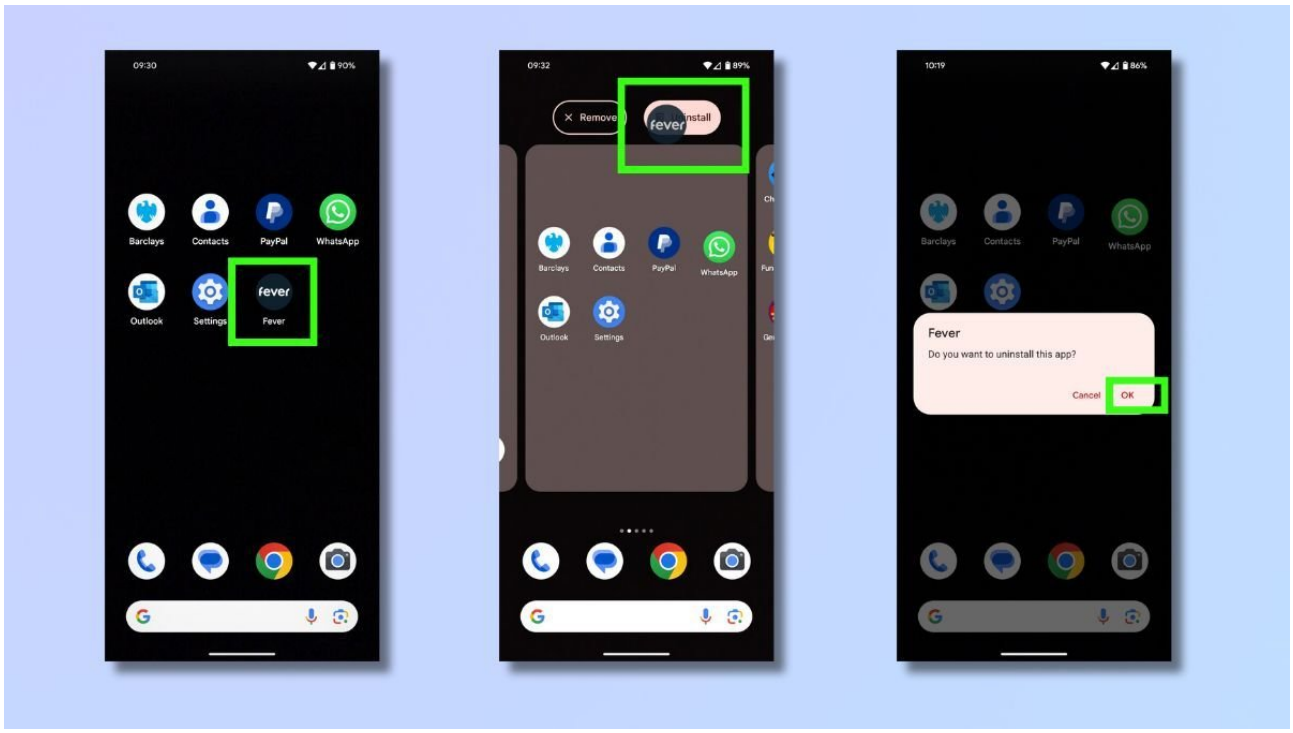
As a related argument, Alphabet claimed during the DMA workshop of 1 July and later in an email to complainants that “From a user's perspective, there is no difference between an uninstalled app in the system partition and fully deleted apps.” In other words, users would not notice a difference between when they are uninstalling or merely disabling an app.

In addition to the very real difference of the considerable use of storage space explained above, our testing has also shown that the user experience between disabling a pre-installed Google gatekeeper app and uninstalling any other app is vastly different.

As shown below, Android users typically uninstall apps by tapping long on the app icon and then moving it to the “Uninstall” field that appears at the top of the screen. They are then prompted with a neutral pop-up question “Do you want to uninstall this app?” to confirm the action.

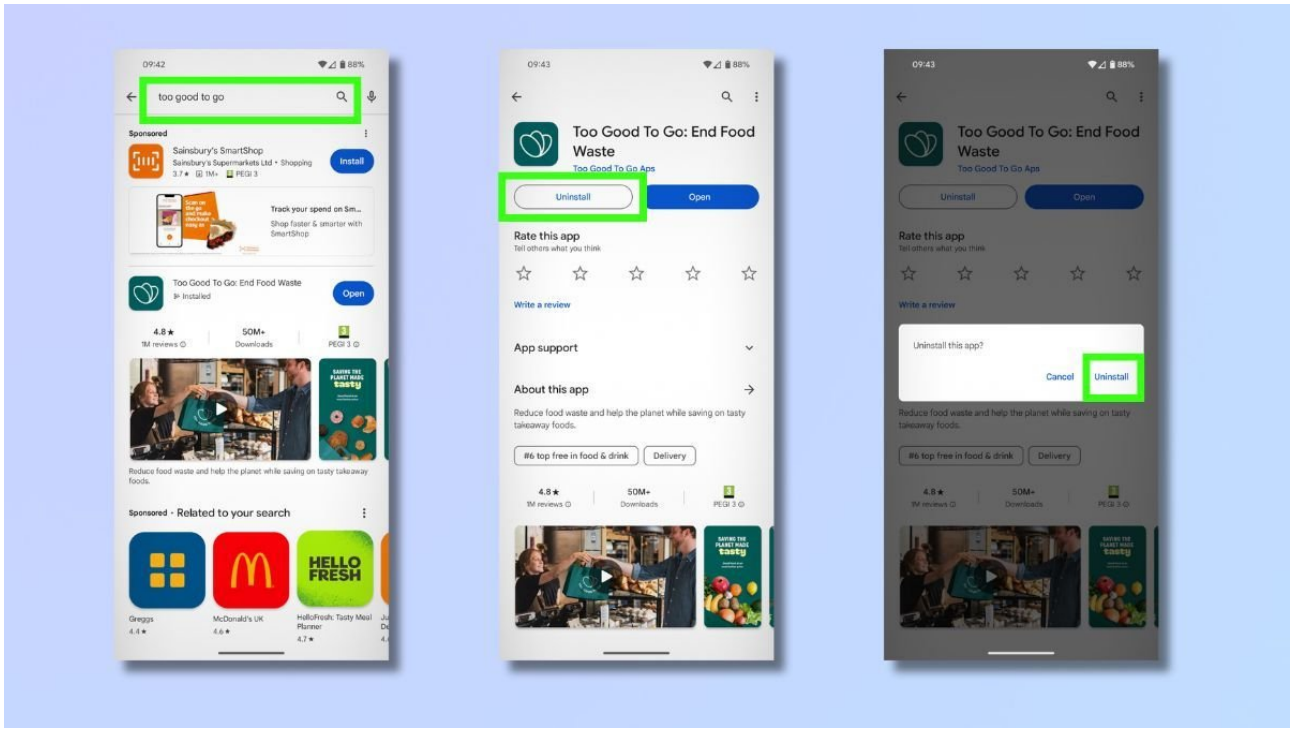
3 In its analysis in *Commission v Microsoft*, the European Commission, supported by the Court, argued correctly that OEMs are reluctant to add competing software packages for consumers, as they “use[s] hard-disk capacity on the client PC while offering functionality similar, in essence, to that of [the dominant firm].” While disk space on devices has considerably increased since that decision, so has the size of typical apps, photos, videos, offline maps, and other files. See Judgment of the Court of First Instance (Grand Chamber) of 17 September 2007. “Microsoft Corp. v Commission of the European Communities.”, Case T-201/04, paragraph 1044, available at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:62004TJ0201.

4 Ibid., paragraph 874.



User experience for uninstalling normal apps in Android. Screenshot borrowed from https://www.techradar.com/how-to/how-to-uninstall-apps-on-Android

Alternatively, Android users can go to the app store (in most cases Google Play), search the app they wish to uninstall there, and tap the “Uninstall” button. Again, a neutral pop-up will ask users to confirm if they really wish to remove the app.

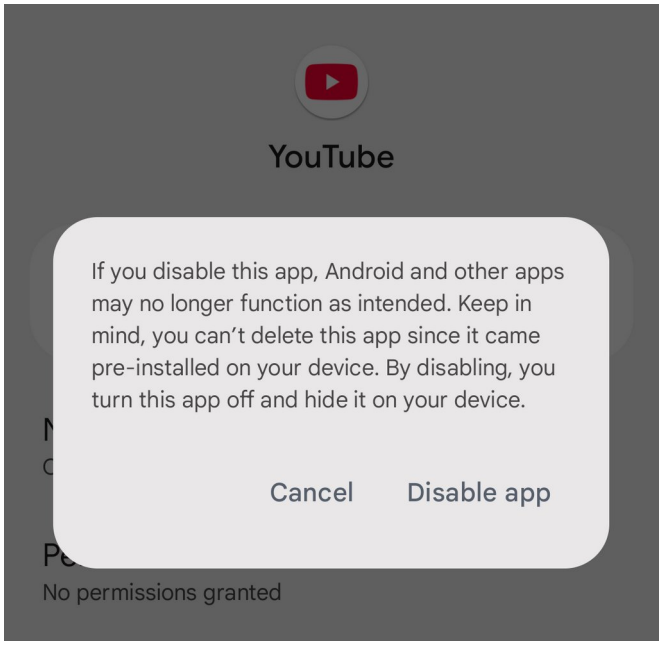


User experience for uninstalling apps in Android via Play Store. Screenshot borrowed from https://www.techradar.com/how-to/how-to-uninstall-apps-on-Android

None of this works if Android users wish to uninstall any of the pre-installed Google gatekeeper apps. Tapping long on the app icon only shows a “Cancel” button but no option to uninstall or even “disable” it. The same is true for the Play Store option, where users are presented only with an option to “Open” the app.

Instead, in order to disable a pre-installed Google gatekeeper app, end users need to know about that possibility before, then open Settings, go to the Apps section, pick the app they wish to disable and tap on “Disable”. Any end user knowledgeable and courageous enough to have gone that route is then presented with a deceptive scare screen that reads:

“If you disable this app [*not uninstall!, note by complainants*] Android and other apps may no longer function as intended. Keep in mind you can’t delete this app since it came pre-installed on your device. By disabling, you turn this app off and hide it on your device.”



User experience for disabling pre-installed Google apps in Android.

This scare screen not only is clearly deceptive interface design—it also constitutes an open attempt to circumvent the letter and spirit of Art 6(3) DMA by discouraging end users with false claims and deceptive interface design from making a free choice for a competing product. Both would constitute a breach of Art 13(4) DMA.

Lastly, if the scare screen’s wording was technically correct, it would also reveal and confirm that Alphabet made false claims during the DMA workshops about what “disabling” an app means (see above): Android itself says that disabling “only turns this app off and hides it from the device;” world’s away from what is commonly understood under the term “uninstallation” and what Alphabet claimed during the DMA workshop was happening (“only remnants of code remain”).

Under Art 8(1) DMA, gatekeepers are required to implement measures that are “effective in achieving the objectives of this Regulation and of the relevant obligation.” From the above it becomes clear that the measures taken by Alphabet with regard to pre-installed Google apps make it impossible for end users to uninstall them as required by Art 6(3) DMA. Even disabling them is made unnecessarily difficult by the gatekeeper; harder than uninstalling any other (non-gatekeeper) app on Android.

Conclusion: Contrary to what Alphabet claimed during the DMA workshops, removing and disabling a software application are two very different things, in particular from a user perspective. Al-

phabet has designed its Core Platform Service Android in a way to hide from end users the possibility to disable its own pre-installed gatekeeper apps. What is more, Alphabet goes to great length to scare away end users who have found that possibility against all odds of actually disabling Google's pre-installed apps. This kind of deceptive design and the vague threat of a broken operating system "or other apps" that no longer function as intended, is a clear violation of Alphabet's obligations under Art 6(3) and 8(1) DMA and can only be seen as an attempt to circumvent the DMA and therefore breach Art 13(4) DMA.

Based on the above, we call on the European Commission to open non-compliance proceedings under Art 20 DMA to investigate Alphabet's relevant conduct, in view of issuing a non-compliance decision under Art 29 DMA.

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