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NEWS TECHNOLOGY

# EU takes shot at Musk over Trump interview — and misses

Europe's chief digital official faces fire for “interfering” in U.S. election.

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Thierry Breton wrote an open letter to Elon Musk ahead of his interview with former U.S. President Donald Trump. | Saul Martinez/Getty Images

AUGUST 13, 2024 4:23 PM CET  
BY MARK SCOTT

BRUSSELS — The European Union's top digital enforcer tried to take on Elon Musk. Within hours, he faced accusations of meddling in American politics and his own staff were back-pedaling hard.

Thierry Breton, who oversees the bloc's enforcement of new social media rules, [sent Musk a letter posted on X](#) that warned the tech mogul about spreading "harmful content," ahead of Musk's [livesreamed interview with Donald Trump](#).

The tech billionaire quickly clapped back. “To be honest, I really wanted to respond with this Tropic Thunder meme,” Musk [wrote to his almost 200 million followers](#) on X, while posting a curse-laden photo from the 2008 Hollywood blockbuster. “But I would NEVER do something so rude & irresponsible!”



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It's Europe's latest quarrel with Musk, who [last week clashed](#) with British politicians who accused him of inciting real-world violence during far-right riots.

But this time, the EU's reputation as the world's digital regulator is at stake.

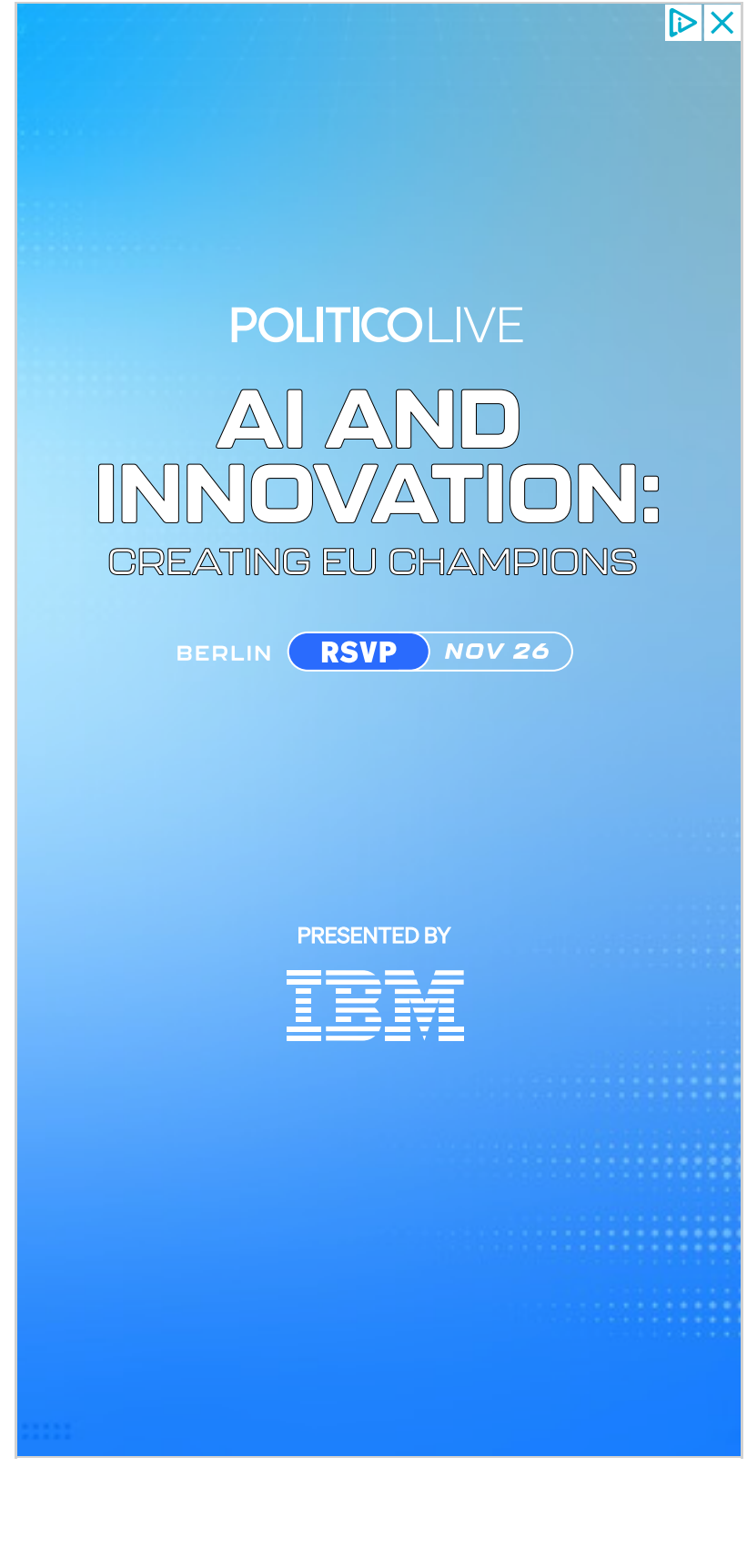
The bloc believes it is leading the charge among global democracies to regain control over tech giants. Over the last five years, Breton, a outspoken French politician, has muscled his way into being the face of Europe's digital regulatory push that, alongside the social media rules, includes efforts to oversee artificial intelligence and boost digital competition.

A former chief executive officer of French technology firm Atos and France's leading telecom operator, Breton prides himself for his tech savvy — and misses no opportunity to mention his 1984 bestselling sci-fi "technothriller" novel "Softwar" as proof.

Last month, French President Emmanuel Macron backed Breton to serve another term at the European Commission. Breton has been vocal in his eagerness to hold onto his digital files, according to three EU officials with knowledge of the matter. They were granted anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

## EU throws a boomerang

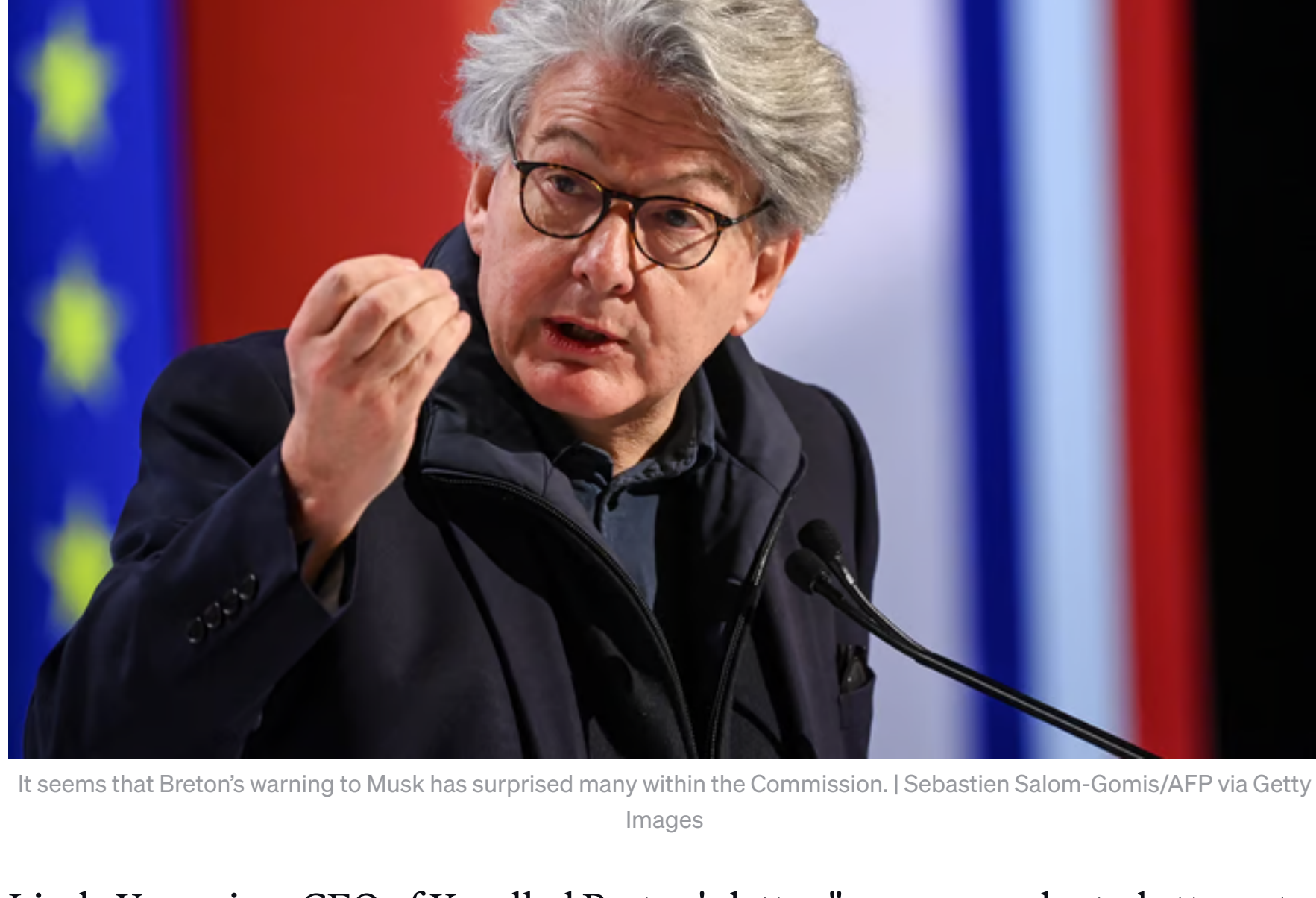
Loud, confident and willing to use his public image for political gain, Breton's comments via social media have not always gone to plan.



The Frenchman, for instance, did not inform Commission President Ursula von der Leyen about the public letter to Musk ahead of its publication on X, according to a Commission spokesman.

Four separate EU officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said Breton's warning to Musk had surprised many within the Commission. The bloc's enforcers were still investigating the platform for potential wrongdoing and the EU did not want to be seen as potentially interfering in the U.S. presidential election.

“The EU is not in the business of electoral interference,” said one of those officials. “DSA implementation is too important to be misused by an attention-seeking politician in search of his next big job.”

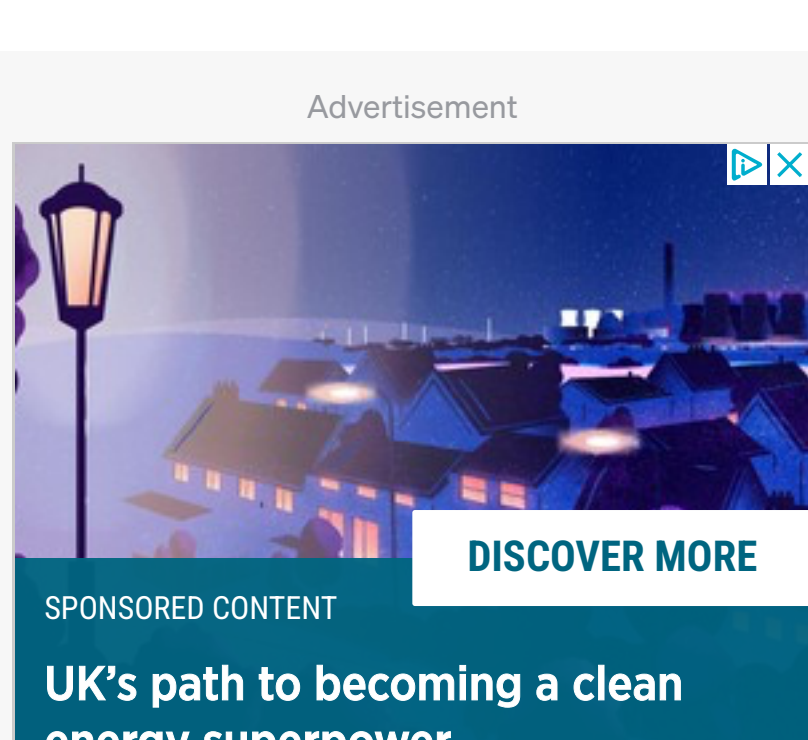
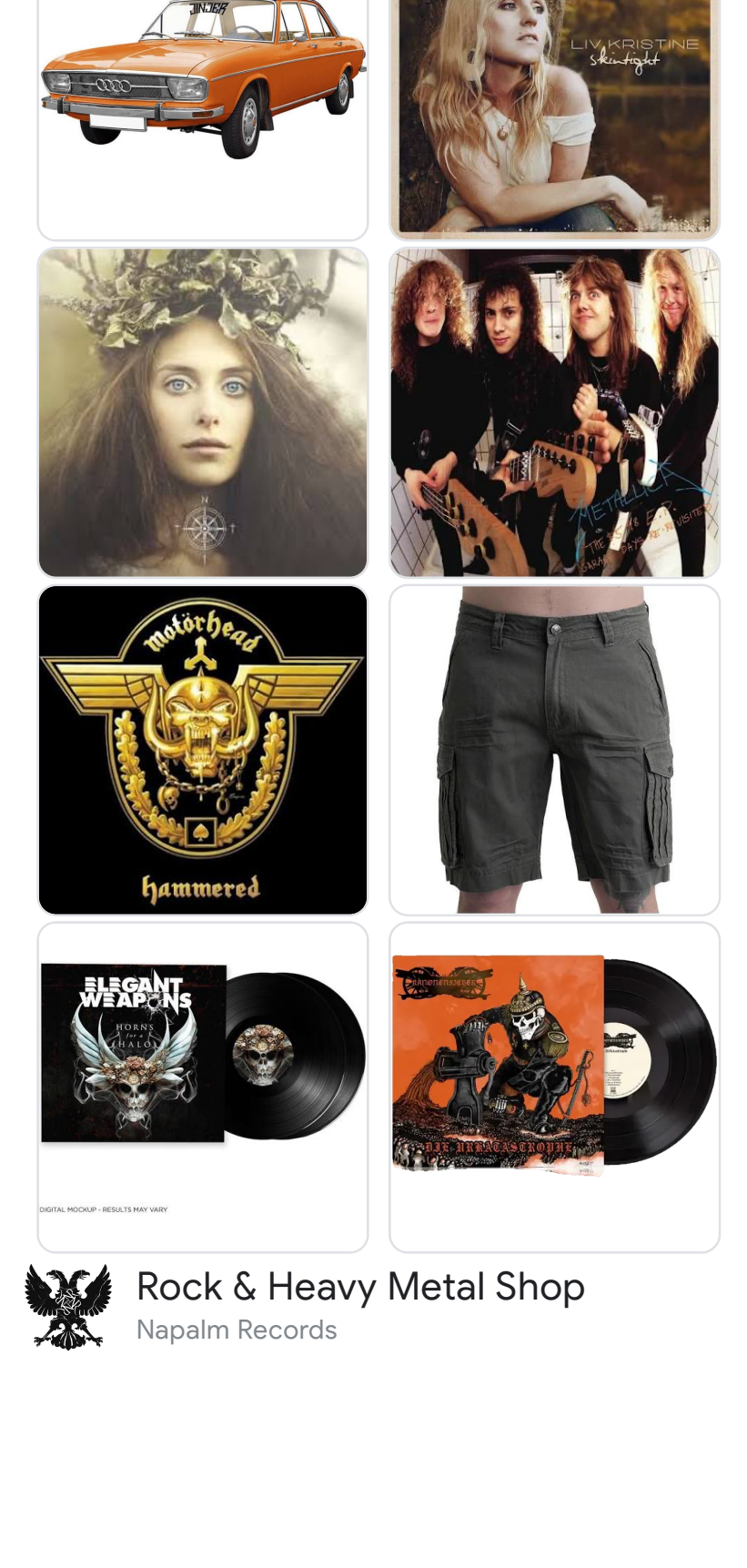


It seems that Breton's warning to Musk has surprised many within the Commission. | Sebastien Salom-Gomis/AFP via Getty Images

Linda Yaccarino, CEO of X, [called Breton's letter](#) "an unprecedented attempt to stretch a law intended to apply in Europe to political activities in the US."

Trump's supporters went a step further. The "European Union is attempting to meddle in the US Election," Chris LaCivita, who is part of Trump's presidential campaign, [wrote on X](#). "They can go to hell."

A Breton aide, speaking on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly, said that the EU had a legal obligation to ensure the bloc's laws were respected.



Under the bloc's regulatory structure, European commissioners, who are nominated by national leaders, have a say in how rules are implemented, but typically do not meddle in how officials enforce the law. Last year, just as Europe's social media rules came into force, Breton [also urged enforcers](#) to focus on potential harm at both X and TikTok, according to four officials with knowledge of those discussions.

## California love lost

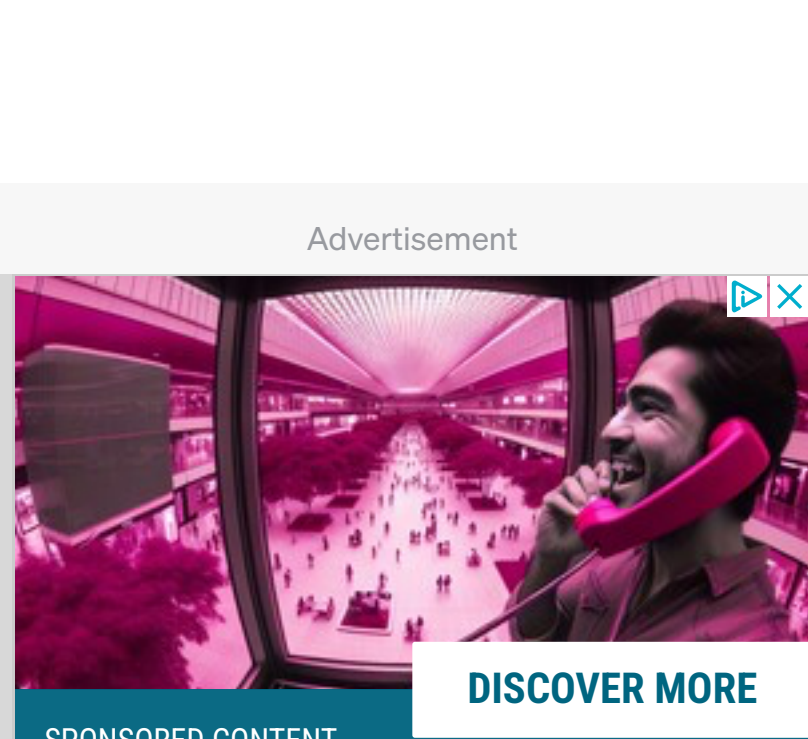
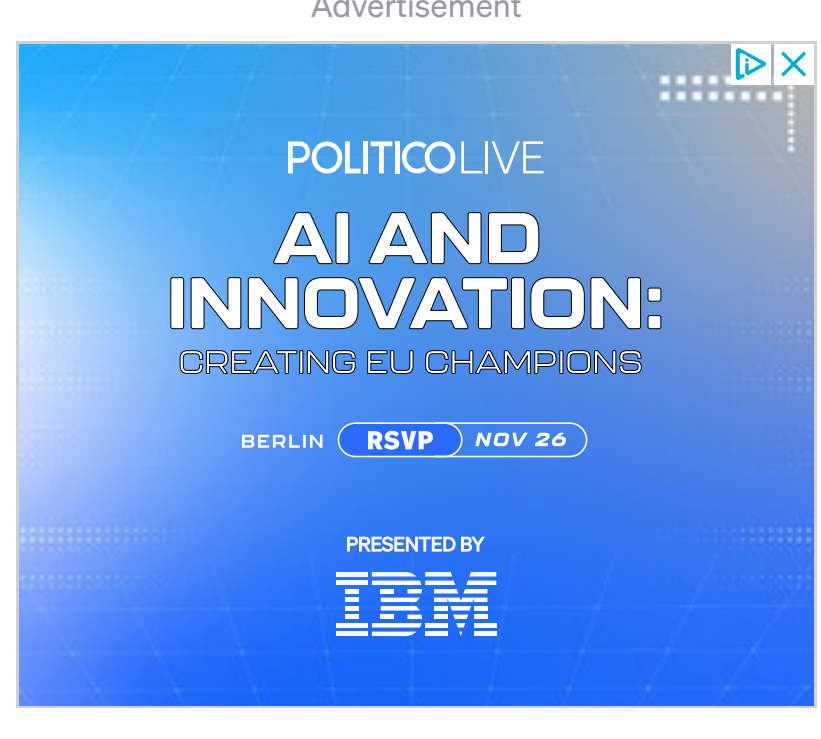
Breton and Musk were once tech bros-in-arms.

The two have met repeatedly to discuss Europe's social media rules, known as the [Digital Services Act \(DSA\)](#). Those laws include fines of up to 6 percent of global turnover if tech giants like X fail to quell hate speech and other online harms on their platforms. The Commission — with Breton leading the charge — has visited X's offices in San Francisco at least twice to check how Musk is complying with the laws.

In 2022, the men [met at a Tesla factory](#) in Austin, Texas and posed for an awkward video, posted on X, where Musk was dressed in casual T-shirt and jeans, while Breton — ever the European bureaucrat — sported a suit and tie. In the three-minute clip, the European commissioner spoke about how he had discussed the bloc's new social media rules with the tech mogul.

But the camaraderie fizzled out, and Brussels [charged Musk's social network](#) in late July for failing to uphold the bloc's social media laws — the first-ever such investigation under the DSA.

Europe's enforcers claimed that X's so-called "blue checks," which any user can now buy, had misled others about the potential trustworthiness of online content. The company also was not transparent about how groups bought online advertising on the platform and had not given outsiders access to its public-facing data — charges that would amount to infringements under the DSA.



X now has an opportunity to respond to the charges before a final decision is taken, most likely in the first half of 2025.

Musk, as ever, was quick to respond to the challenge. "The DSA IS misinformation!" he [wrote on X](#) in July.

Eddy Wax contributed reporting.

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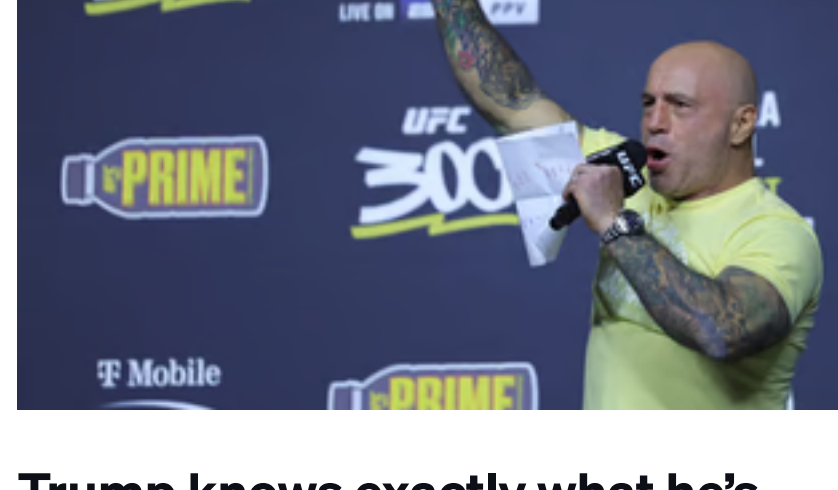
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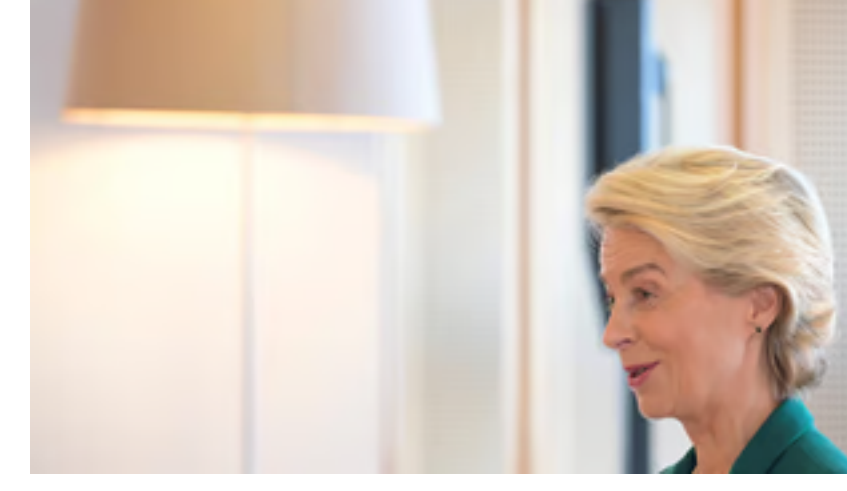
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