



Ubiquity Symposium

Teens and Screens

Age-based Restrictions to Internet Content

by Jeff Riley

Editor's Introduction

Driven by concerns of perceived potential negative impacts on young people, a growing worldwide trend has emerged to restrict the access of young people to some online content but shielding youth from the negatives of the internet by depriving them of the wonders to be found there, and the benefits that access brings, is not the answer.

Our youth have shown us how they want to conduct their lives, and how they want to structure their society: They will conduct much of their lives online because it suits them to do so. Our role as parents and elders is to teach, to guide, to protect, and to help them make their chosen world a safe place. We need to let them experience, and they will learn and grow.

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There is a growing worldwide trend to legislate to restrict, and, in some cases, prevent young people from accessing online internet content, particularly, but not limited to, social media platforms. Driven by concerns of perceived potential negative impacts on young people, particularly on their mental health and well-being, as well as the need for better online privacy and safety, this movement has been growing more vocal and strident in recent years.

In the United States, the [Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 \(COPPA\)](#) is a federal law that became effective in April 2000 and requires website operators, under prescribed circumstances, to seek verifiable parental or guardian consent to collect personal information about people under the age of 13 years. COPPA also requires website operators to implement measures to protect the privacy and online safety of people under the age of 13 years.

The [Kids Off Social Media Act](#) was introduced to the U.S. Congress in February 2025 and seeks to prohibit social media platforms from (a) allowing people under the age of 13 years to create or maintain social media accounts, and (b) recommending content using algorithms to people under the age of 17 years.

In the U.S., the states of Florida and Utah have recently passed laws restricting or banning social media for minors, and similar legislation, more and less onerous, is under consideration in other states. In Utah, legislation requires parental or guardian consent for social media access for people under the age of 18 years, whereas in Florida, social media access is banned for those under the age of 14 years.

In November 2024, both houses of the Australian federal parliament passed the [Online Safety Amendment \(Social Media Minimum Age\) Bill 2024](#), and in December of that year, the Governor-General of Australia gave royal assent to the bill, thus making the bill an official Act of Parliament and passing it into law. Implementation and enforcement details aside (the bill won't come into force for 12 months, after age-assurance technology trials are complete), the law makes it illegal in Australia for (selected) social media platforms to allow people under the age of 16 years to access their services. This is the first time anywhere in the world that social media platforms have been required by law to deny all access to their services based on the age of the prospective user.

As a consequence of COPPA, many social media platforms require prospective users to be 13 years or older, simply because the cost and work involved in seeking and verifying parental or guardian consent for users under that age is too onerous. This effect is not limited to online platforms that fall under the jurisdiction of the United States. Indeed, the preamble for the Australian bill mentioned above notes: “The current minimum age of access under the Terms of Service of all major social media services is 13 years. This stems from the 1998 decision by the United States (US) Congress in the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act, which prohibits websites from collecting information on children younger than 13 years without consent.”

Other countries and jurisdictions either have passed, or are considering passing, laws to restrict young people accessing social media platforms and other internet content in various ways.

The Motivation for Legislation

Why are these laws and bans being implemented, or considered, at all? What problem, or problems, are they trying to solve?

The motivation for stricter legislation is largely driven by concerns of a perceived potential negative impact of excessive exposure to internet content, particularly the mental health and well-being of young people, as well as a need for better online privacy and safety.

A simple web search results in myriad pros and cons for restricting/allowing access to internet content, including social media platforms. Academic papers, research articles, opinion pieces, and just plain blogs abound with views, theories, advice on, and reasons for restricting, or not, access to internet content, and more specifically, social media platforms. The irony of many of the articles in favor of restricting access being hosted on social media platforms should not escape us. Irony aside, who’s right? Is that even a reasonable question? On the surface, there are compelling reasons both for and against restricting access to internet content for young people, so how do we resolve the question?

There are, of course, plenty of concerns regarding unrestricted access to internet content, for youth and adults alike. The internet is awash with irrelevance, lies, misinformation, disinformation, toxicity, and disgraceful and distasteful content. But it is equally awash with facts (important and frivolous, but facts just the same); information; knowledge; and astounding, wondrous, and interesting content. A blanket, age-based ban restricts all access to the entire range of content. A reasonable question to ask is whether the response is commensurate with the problem: Is a blanket ban a reasonable response to concerns that excessive exposure to some internet content may cause harm to some people?

Looking specifically at the Australian bill described above, the [explanatory memorandum](#) for the bill asserts:

“Parents and carers feel unsupported to make evidence-based choices about when their children should be on social media and many are overwhelmed by pressure from their children and other families. This is supported by a recent survey conducted by the eSafety Commissioner, with 95 per cent of caregivers reporting that children’s online safety is the hardest parenting challenge they face. Setting a minimum age removes ambiguity about when the ‘right’ time is for their children to engage on social media and establishes a new social norm.”

The Australian government’s response to parents and carers asking for evidence-based support to help them make informed choices about when their children should access social media (and, presumably, other internet content), is not to provide evidence-based support, but instead to obviate the need for any such support, or choice, informed or not, by simply implementing a blanket, age-based, ban on access to social media platforms. The government justifies this by asserting that the ban removes the ambiguity about when the “right” time is for people to engage on social media. The ambiguity surrounding the “right” time for people to access social media, or indeed any online content, exists because people are, in fact, individuals, and different, and shouldn’t necessarily be treated as though their entire cohort is homogeneous simply because they haven’t yet reached a particular age. The ambiguity is not, as asserted by the explanatory memorandum, removed by the bill: it is ignored. What is actually removed is the need to think about it and develop an evidence-based response, supported by research, allowing (even encouraging) parents and carers to abrogate their responsibility to children in their care with respect to deciding when those children are capable of accessing internet content with reasonable safety.

What evidence is given that the government’s response is the right response? The [explanatory memorandum](#) goes on to state:

“Community sentiment in New South Wales (NSW) aligns with this finding. The NSW Government conducted a Have Your Say survey with more than 21,000 responses in relation to social media use and impacts in August and September 2024—87 per cent of respondents expressed support for a minimum age for social media. For respondents aged 16 or older, 16 years was the most commonly suggested minimum age (40 per cent) and 18 years the second most common (25 per cent), with an average suggested age of 16.2 years old.”

So, the Australian federal government supports the bill by quoting a survey conducted by one Australian state, where a significant proportion of the respondents to the survey support

implementing a minimum age for access to social media platforms, *provided the minimum age restriction doesn't affect them.*

Is Legislation the Right Answer?

Returning to the Australian bill described above, the motivation for it is generally representative of the motivation for similar legislation in other jurisdictions—to protect young people from possible harm that might ensue from accessing some internet content. But does the bill actually address the stated, or implied, motivation? The outline of the bill begins with “The Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024 (the Bill) amends the Online Safety Act 2021 (Online Safety Act), with the aim of establishing a minimum age for social media use, *placing responsibility on social media platforms for the safety of their users.*” [Author’s note: italicized text is for emphasis].

It does no such thing. First, the bill only affects users under a prescribed age (stated in the bill as 16 years), so it does not place responsibility on the social media platforms for the safety of their users, only some of their users. But in fact, the bill states “There are age restrictions for certain social media platforms. A provider of such a platform must take reasonable steps to prevent children who have not reached a minimum age from having accounts,” thus placing responsibility on (selected) social media platforms to take reasonable steps to prevent persons who have not reached a maximum age from having accounts. If a person who has not reached the “maximum age” manages to defeat the “reasonable steps” to prevent them from creating an account, the social media platform is not required by this bill to protect, much less guarantee, their safety. Their only responsibilities are (a) to take reasonable steps to prevent underage persons from having an account, and (b) in the process of taking reasonable steps to prevent access by underage persons, not collect information, as proscribed by the bill, about underage persons.

An unspoken presumption in the legislation (proposed and passed) is that adults are capable of navigating the internet content presented to them (otherwise the legislation would apply to everyone, not just children), though we know from experience that not all adults are equally capable at navigating problematic areas of life, let alone some of the toxic internet content. An individual’s ability to safely navigate the soaring peaks and the abysmal depths of internet content is not solely related to their physical age, and a 16-year-old is certainly as capable the day before their 16th birthday as they are the day after their 16th birthday. Arbitrarily restricting access to internet content based solely on physical age is nonsensical and not the right answer.

Furthermore, problems of implementation of enforceable age-based access controls (how can online platforms confidently verify age without violating data collection laws for minors?), and jurisdictional problems (does jurisdiction lie with the sovereign entity in which the platform host

resides, or the sovereign entity in which the service is provided, and how can it be enforced?) make the enforcement of any legislation very problematic, and open to error and manipulation.

Legislation is Misplaced and Misguided

It is true that harm can come from the internet. It is also true that, in the U.S., [the leading cause of death of children aged 1 to 17 years is firearms, and has been since 2020](#). While there are legal restrictions on gun ownership, especially for minors, it is indisputable that firearms, even for minors, are far more accessible in the United States than almost all other countries in the world: Firearm ownership statistics and, sadly, firearm-related violence and crime statistics are testament to that [1]. It's a sad irony that the United States, a society that, in the face of rich, powerful, and self-interested lobby groups that demand, and secure, virtually unfettered access to firearms, many of which are more powerful and capable of carnage than anyone outside a war zone could ever need them to be, is either unwilling or unable to protect its children from gun violence, and would instead choose to "protect" them from the richness of the internet, and all the good that it can bring. Lawmakers in the U.S. would serve the population, particularly the youth, better by focusing their attention on firearms control.

But the United States is not alone in its misplaced and misguided legislation. While the Australian government has recently passed a law, described above, that mandates that people under the age of 16 years are children who don't have the capacity to decide for themselves what and who to engage with on the internet, Queensland, a state of Australia, has passed laws that mandate that offenders aged between 10 and 17 years (inclusive) who commit specific serious crimes face the same penalties as adults.

If Not Legislation, Then What?

While the internet has been around, in one form or another, for about [40 years](#) (but, arguably, the roots go back at least [50 years](#)), what most people mean when they refer to "the internet" was conceived of as the World Wide Web (WWW) in 1989 ([described in a paper published in 1990](#)), and first opened to the public in 1993, with public adoption accelerating over a few years and mainstream use beginning to emerge in the mid-to-late 1990s. Most people who have children old enough to access the internet with reasonable autonomy did not grow up with the WWW, and in fact came to know of, and access, it in adulthood (albeit early adulthood for some). Indeed, I think it is fair to say that most people in that age group, leaving aside the minority that work(ed) in academia and/or the computing industry and were exposed to the internet and WWW earlier than the general public, have concerns about their children accessing internet content because they (the parents and carers) lack knowledge and understanding of the internet

and WWW. Like most people who drive cars, they know enough to get by (maybe), but lack any real understanding of the technology or how it functions.

Lack of knowledge and understanding breeds uncertainty, concern, and fear, and rather than attempting to address that uncertainty, concern, and fear by implementing legislation that, in reality, is a blunt instrument, governments around the world should be helping to educate parents, carers, and their children regarding the internet and WWW. Teaching people, of any age, about, and how to avoid, the dangers involved in any endeavor is a far more productive and enduring solution than attempting to prevent them, especially by faulty legislation, from engaging in the endeavor.

There is undoubtedly danger lurking on the internet, especially for people who haven't yet learned how to recognize it. There is also danger in walking to school, crossing roads, climbing trees, exploring forests and caves, swimming in the ocean, climbing hills and mountains, lighting campfires, playing sports, learning how to drive cars, dealing with alcohol, and just about anything else we might do in our youth. We allow our children to do these things, but we don't, generally, leave them to themselves. We help them. We accompany them. We guide them. We protect them. Most importantly, we teach them, and then we wean them off our supervision and protection. We let them experience, and we let them learn and grow. Dealing with the vagaries of the internet is not really much different from dealing with the vagaries of any other part of life. And make no mistake, despite early predictions to the contrary, the internet is part of our lives and will continue to be, and will continue to grow in importance, not only to individual lives but to society as a whole. The internet, in one form or another, has become, and will continue to be, a necessary part of the fabric of civilization.

Just like the real, physical world, while there is danger on the internet, there is also information, knowledge, entertainment, and a vast treasure trove of wonder. In many countries around the world, youth today have, literally in their hand, a device that provides access to more information, knowledge, and, yes, entertainment, than anyone has ever had access to in the history of the world. For adults reading this, take a moment to imagine how your life might be different if you had access to such a device in your younger years. To be sure, that same device provides access to mountains of useless information, piles of misinformation and disinformation, outright lies and outrageously stupid conspiracy theories, and distasteful and disgraceful filth. Much like the real world. As most of us have learned to navigate that in real life, guided, guarded, and educated by trusted teachers in our lives, so will our youth learn to navigate it on the internet.

Society Online

Almost since the advent of television, critics have said that too much screen time affects the development of social skills, and more recently, the criticism has been extended to internet browsing and social media use. This type of criticism is not new, and is often leveled at new technology, particularly, it would seem, when that new technology threatens to educate the masses and draw their attention from the path dictated by the current, often self-appointed, societal thought leaders—whether that be the church or secular rulers (governments, dictators, monarchs, etc.), or just commentators.

Reading books was once considered to be an unhealthy and dangerous pastime. Sociologist [Frank Fuerdi](#) drove this point home in a 2015 essay [2]. He explains how in 360 BC, Plato wrote of Socrates' fears that "reliance on the written word would weaken individuals' memory, and remove from them the responsibility of remembering," and that "reading could trigger confusion and moral disorientation unless the reader was counselled by someone with wisdom." Even as recently as the late 18th and early 19th century, science was being invoked to legitimize warnings about the dangers of reading:

"In his *Medical Inquiries and Observations Upon the Diseases of the Mind* (1812)—the first American text on psychiatry—Benjamin Rush, a founding father of the United States, noted that booksellers were peculiarly susceptible to mental derangement. Recasting Seneca's ancient warnings in the language of psychology, Rush reported that booksellers were prone to mental illness because their profession required the "frequent and rapid transition of the mind from one subject to another" [2].

Fortunately, society has matured somewhat since those times, and reading is now almost universally considered to be beneficial in many ways (though, sadly, we still have places around the world where zealots dictate what may, and may not, be read by (sections of) the local population). Given time, screen time might be thought of in the same way as reading (and hopefully not restricted by zealots).

Watching television is typically purely for entertainment or informational purposes, and not generally interactive (especially with respect to other people), and so can be likened in some ways to other typically solitary activities such as reading books, walking alone in the wilderness, exercising alone, daydreaming, etc., and as such any criticism of people spending too much time watching television can also be applied to the other activities mentioned (all of which have well-understood positive impacts on well-being, but may neglect, or negatively impact, the development of social skills). While watching television is somewhat different in that it is generally a more passive pastime than most of the others listed, the other examples give some indication that the screen time is not necessarily the problem, but the activity being undertaken may be (simply because it is solitary in nature). For that reason, the discussion of too much screen time here will be confined to activities involving the internet and online interaction.

The agorae of ancient Greece were open spaces used as meeting grounds and marketplaces, serving as places for citizens to gather, trade, debate, and participate in public life, and in the process facilitating and encouraging the democratic process. Youth, in particular, use social media platforms in the same way, and in many cases, it's how they find their voices, formulate their ideas, meet new people, and hone their judgement and discernment skills. In short, the internet, and particularly social media and messaging platforms, is where young people socialize today, by choice: the internet is to the youth of today what the agora was to the ancient Greeks.

[The internet, the WWW, “online” are increasingly where most \(but not only\) young people live their lives.](#) Much of the world's population, and most of the world's youth, shop online, sell online, barter online, and browse (as a precursor to shopping) online. The internet is the first place most people go to seek information and knowledge. Much of the world's business is conducted online. And for our youth (but again, not just our youth), it's very often the first place they go to seek companionship and find new friends.

Research conducted by the Pew Research Center, in 2015 (“Video games, social media and mobile phones play an integral role in how teens meet and interact with friends”) and 2022 (“Majorities of teens credit social media with strengthening their friendships and providing support while also noting the emotionally charged side of these platforms”), indicates that young people have, for some time, turned to the internet as their preferred place to socialize, and that this trend is continuing [3, 4].

Rather than limiting the development of social skills, the internet, social media, and messaging platforms are where the youth of today learn and hone their social skills:

“It connects me with the world, provides an outlet to learn things I otherwise wouldn't have access to, and allows me to discover and explore interests.”—Teen girl

Social skills don't need to be learned in person, especially if most interactions are not going to be in person. Online interactions are the best way for people who spend most of their lives online to learn appropriate social skills. Limiting access to the internet, and in particular social media and messaging platforms, will hinder the development of social skills for the young people of the world.

Safety Online

The internet is treacherous, but so are large parts of the real, physical world—even in what we might optimistically refer to as the “more civilized” parts of the world. Life is treacherous, but with the right education, guidance, and shepherding, it is navigable.

The internet reflects life in the real world and not much happens on the internet that doesn't already happen in real life: online communities and social media platforms tend to mirror real-life social dynamics. However, the advent of the internet has made possible communication channels that were not available in the past, and that has brought the world closer together.

Interest groups, self-help groups, bulletin boards, etc., all existed before the internet, but the internet has provided a means to extend the reach of all these things to the entire world (at least the entire connected world), allowing them to be larger and more diverse, and more interactive in real-time.

Business processes have been revolutionized, too. While [B2B and B2C processes](#) existed before the internet, taking them online has streamlined and simplified much of the transactional load of providing and supporting those processes. Similarly, the economy is largely digital now, and the internet has even spawned its own currency. Currency, stock exchanges, and even [decentralized ledgers](#) existed before the internet; however, the advent of the internet has facilitated the move to a [digital economy](#) that mirrors economic activities in the real world.

There are bad actors online, just as there are bad actors in real life. While online communities can be more concentrated and intense than real life, they can be safely navigated with education, experience, and caution.

If the internet is not safe, then we need to make it safe—it's where most people will live a significant portion of their lives, and many already do. Legislation to restrict access to minors doesn't help to make the online community safe, and it doesn't allow our youth to learn how to navigate an environment, like real life, replete with obstacles, opportunities, and options. We need to approach the internet as we do real life—we shouldn't just restrict access for the vulnerable and hope for the best for the rest.

Online service providers should be responsible for the services they provide, including the content of web pages they serve, just as providers of services (and sellers of goods) in the real world are responsible for any harm their services or products may cause. Most countries have existing legislation that regulates service providers, and wholesalers and retailers of goods, requiring service providers to provide safe environments (e.g., hotels, concert halls, meeting rooms, etc., analogous to online social media and messaging platforms), and sellers of goods to provide goods that adhere to safety and quality standards.

The internet is just another place where life, both personal and business, is conducted, and regulation and legislation for life on the internet should be informed by regulation and legislation for life in the real world. That's not to say it should be exactly the same: just as regulation and

legislation may differ for different environments in real life, so should they be tailored to online life.

Summing Up

Depriving our young people of unrestricted access to internet content would be to deprive them of all the benefits that access brings, from the wonders to be found there, fostering their curiosity and encouraging their imagination, to the skills to be learned by interacting with the online community. Shielding our youth from the negatives of the internet is not the answer, nor is regulating internet content beyond the regulation we impose in the real world. Instead, we should educate our youth, just as we educate them about the dangers of the real world. How we teach our youth, when we teach them, and the pace at which they learn, adapt, and grow, is almost certainly not universal, and shouldn't be the subject of legislation targeting a specific age group.

Is there an age below which we should shield our children from things we think they shouldn't see, experience, or do? Yes, just as we do in real life. Real life abounds with content—niche printed material sold in specialty stores, audio/visual media (CDs, tapes, DVDs, etc.)—that is not always the subject of restrictive legislation. In the U.S., for example, movies and computer games, available on DVD or similar media, are classified, but the classifications are not enforced by legislation. Parents and carers are given discretion, and it is not illegal to allow minors to view R-rated content.

Knowing at what age we should shield our children, and what should be shielded or not, is part of our role as parents, and doesn't need to be the subject of internet-specific legislation. Most countries have existing legislation that either already adequately specifies and regulates the responsibilities that parents, guardians, and caregivers, have toward minors, or could be modified to include responsibilities with regard to exposure to inappropriate content, without the need to implement a blanket ban based on age.

Our youth have shown us, and continue to show us, by their actions, how they want to conduct their lives, and how they want to structure their society. Our youth will continue to conduct much of their lives online, on the internet, because it suits them to do so. While we—the people of my generation, “the elders”—may provide the foundation, and perhaps the scaffold, upon which future generations will stand and grow, it is not for us to architect the future. The future belongs to our youth, and, in turn, their youth, and it is theirs to shape. Restricting access to internet content for anyone, but especially for our youth, is a bad idea and not worthy of a mature society.

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