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Australia's social media ban has not yet disrupted the status quo

Australia's experience suggests that bans may be ineffective and let social media companies evade responsibility, writes **Andy Burrows**

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As a growing number of countries follow the herd to introduce an Australian-style social media ban, new research published in *The BMJ* suggests that this may not be the best course.¹ The findings underscore that the purported benefits of bans may have been overstated, and it raises further questions about the evidence base underpinning outgoing UK prime minister Keir Starmer's decision that the UK should follow suit.

This month, the Molly Rose Foundation published research finding that almost half of girls aged 13-17 years had been exposed to high risk content about suicide, self-harm, and eating disorders on major social media sites in a week.² The need for urgent policy interventions is clear, but responses must be well targeted and able to tackle the drivers of exposure to harm.

The arguments presented for Australia's social media ban have shifted over time, but the initial case put forward by Anthony Albanese's government—that this emergency firebreak was necessary and decisive—now appear flawed.

The findings published in *The BMJ* corroborate other studies that have found most teenagers continue to use prohibited social media platforms after bans.^{3,4} *The BMJ*'s study¹ finds that 85% of participants under age 16 years continue to use social media. There is limited evidence that age restrictions lead to immediate substantive reductions in use.

The results also suggest modest reductions in time spent using social media. Time spent was relatively stable for those aged 12-13 years and dropped only slightly for teenagers aged 14-15 years.

If a ban is neither delivering substantive reductions in usage of social media platforms, nor resulting in substantial changes in time spent on other activities, this raises legitimate doubts about what the ban is supposed to achieve.

Since Australia's approach may not deliver immediate benefits, the rationalisation for the UK and other countries following suit has changed. Politicians are softening how bans are framed, recasting them as delays on when young people open social media accounts or as ways of delivering a long term reset of cultural norms, rather than treating them as emergency policy solutions.

Despite valid arguments for resetting cultural norms, *The BMJ* study¹ states that “the full impacts of the Act may not be evident for a decade.” A study from the University of Chicago concluded that it is unlikely that the equilibrium threshold needed to shift cultural norms among teens will ever be reached, at least

without substantial and expensive follow-up policy interventions.⁵ That same study concludes that compliance with the ban is likely to decline over time.

Given that the intent of the legislation was to reduce exposure to online mental health harms and support healthier adolescent development, it is worth noting that *The BMJ* study¹ concluded that the ban is unlikely to affect these outcomes, particularly in the short term.

In countries such as the UK, where fledgling online safety regulation is being implemented and planned, the rush towards a social media ban may do more harm than good. If Australia's ban has proven largely unenforceable, it is difficult to imagine the UK delivering different outcomes. It is unwise to proceed with an Australian-style ban rather than pushing for social media companies to be better regulated under the Online Safety Act.⁶

If children under 16 are banned, social media companies will not be incentivised to make their products safer or more age appropriate. A more effective approach would be to insist that tech platforms follow stringent product safety standards and explicit safety-by-design requirements as a precondition of entry to the UK market. Regulatory regimes need the power and risk appetite to reset the incentives for some of the largest, richest companies in the world.

More than eight years after the death of Molly Russell after her exposure to pro-suicide content on social media, a tragedy that appalled the entire country and that catalysed the UK's politicians to intervene, we still face a remarkable and deeply troubling state of affairs.

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- 6 Clifton M. Britain bans social media for under 16's: who are the winners and losers? Politico Pro 2026.