



Digital Transformations for Health Lab,
University of Geneva, Geneva,
Switzerland

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Early data from Australia indicate that social media companies can't be relied on to protect children

Policy makers need to focus on holding social media companies to account for the impact of their products, argues Louise Holly

Louise Holly *policy and research coordinator*

Over the past two decades, children's use of social media and other technologies has quietly become normalised and increasingly woven into their daily lives. In the UK, for example, 79% of children and adolescents aged 3-17 now report that they use social media.¹ Using social media can help children fulfil some of their social and educational needs, but they are ultimately commercial products designed to serve their owners and shareholders—not the interests of children.

To drive profits, platforms' business models prioritise maximising user engagement and fostering emotional dependencies. This has led to the introduction of design features that promote emotionally charged content and drive habitual usage.² Consistent associations between social media platforms that are driven by algorithms and negative health outcomes have aggravated fears about children's digital media use.^{3 4}

Several countries have recently announced plans to introduce legislation that will reduce children's exposure to social media harms, but early data on Australia's world first Social Media Minimum Age Act suggest that such measures will not produce a noticeable short term impact. A study conducted three months after the law was introduced found that a substantial proportion of young people aged under 16 continued to access social media, mainly by using their own accounts.⁵ Age verification strategies employed by platforms, primarily self-declaration of age and photo uploads, have been ineffective in reducing use.

Evidence from public health shows that entrenched behaviours take time to change, even after harms are recognised, so these results are not surprising.^{6 7} Children's circumvention of age assurance mechanisms was anticipated by critics of the law.⁸ Given the benefits that children perceive from social media, and the absence of consequences for non-compliance for underage children, the law alone was unlikely to shift behaviour.

However, these findings should not be interpreted as a failure of children's compliance. The law was not designed to change the habits of children, but the practices of selected social media platforms. Platforms were required to take reasonable, privacy preserving, and proportionate steps to verify users' age, applying these to new and existing accounts.⁹ Companies were given a year to introduce measures to remove underage accounts and prevent children and adolescents aged under 16 from creating new accounts. If over 85% of children and adolescents

aged under 16 reported that they continued using the restricted platforms three months after the act came into force, the platforms have clearly failed in their duty to comply with both the letter and spirit of the law. This is a worrying finding that should make other countries considering blanket restrictions on children's social media use pause for thought.

Insights for other governments

Early insights on children's social media use in Australia signalled that the major platforms will continue to resist regulation and any challenges to their power. Anticipating similar legislation being introduced in the UK, several social media companies have recently undertaken a public relations campaign to promote their teen accounts and present them as suitable for children.¹⁰ Such efforts have been criticised for attempting to shift the responsibility for keeping children safe onto parents.

As I have written previously, debates over the merits and limitations of restrictions related to age can be a distraction from more fundamental problems.¹¹ Even if studies suggested that the Australian law was having an immediate effect on reducing children's social media use, we would not be able to stop and celebrate. Public health challenges are never overcome with a single measure. Age restrictions alone do not make online spaces safer or tackle platforms' addictive features, algorithm driven content, and commercial incentives that we increasingly understand to be at the root of harms associated with social media use.^{12 -14}

Restrictions related to age might help to reduce some children's exposure to harm, but complementary efforts are also needed to create a safe and healthy digital environment such as those highlighted in recent G7 statements.^{15 16} Policymakers need to intervene further upstream and invest heavily in enforcement of existing laws such as the EU's Digital Services Act and UK's Online Safety Act, which aim to embed children's rights and safety in the design of digital tools and environments. Incentives or penalties for platforms' compliance with regulation need to be carefully considered and litigation is also proving effective in challenging social media platforms' defence that there is no proof that their products cause harm.¹⁷

Early lessons from Australia suggest that restricting children's access alone will be insufficient to achieve meaningful change. Policymakers need to focus on what happens on these platforms in the first place: how they are designed, what they prioritise, and

whose interests they serve. This means holding companies more accountable for the impact of their products and services, enforcing existing regulation, and taking children's experiences seriously. If we are to support children to thrive in a digital world, the question is not only what should be restricted, but what kind of online environments we should be building instead.

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