

Should the government restrict social media use?

Key Concepts:

Social Contract: Citizens give government the power to make laws; in return, government protects their rights. If it fails to, citizens have the right to challenge it.

Legitimacy: The basis on which government power is considered justified and accepted. A law feels legitimate when most people believe it was made for the right reasons.

On 10 December 2025, Australia became the first country in the world to enforce a nationwide ban on social media accounts for users under the age of 16. The law targets major platforms including TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, X, Facebook, Reddit, Threads, Twitch, and Kick. Crucially, the burden of enforcement falls on the technology companies rather than on young people or their families. Platforms that fail to take "reasonable steps" to prevent under-16s from holding accounts face fines of up to approximately \$50 million AUD.

The Australian government argues the law is necessary to protect young people's mental health and wellbeing. Research has linked heavy social media use to cyberbullying, anxiety, disrupted sleep, and exposure to harmful content. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese compared the policy to existing age-based laws — such as restrictions on alcohol — arguing that imperfect enforcement does not make the law pointless.

However, the ban has significant critics. UNICEF Australia and the Australian Human Rights Commission have raised concerns that the law limits young people's rights to access information, maintain friendships, and participate in public life online. Experts have warned that teens may simply migrate to smaller, less regulated platforms where protections are weaker. Others argue that investment in digital literacy education and improved platform design would be more effective than an outright ban.

The technology itself poses another challenge. Age verification is difficult: some young users reportedly tricked systems by drawing on fake facial hair, while others used VPNs to appear as if they were located in a different country.

Australia's law is being closely watched by governments worldwide. The European Parliament has passed a non-binding resolution supporting a minimum social media age of 16, and Malaysia and New Zealand are considering similar measures.



Comprehension Questions

1. Who has the responsibility to ensure that users under 16 are not making social media accounts?
2. Why does UNICEF Australia disagree with the ban, even though they care about children's welfare?
3. What evidence did the government use to justify the need for the law?
4. What challenges to enforcing an under-16 social media ban are explained in the reading?
5. What does it mean that Australia is being treated as a "global test case"?

Thinking Questions

1. The government argued this law shifts power away from Big Tech and back to families. Do you agree that the law actually does this? Explain your reasoning.
2. Analyse the *unintended consequences* critics are worried about. Which concern do you find most persuasive, and why?
3. Compare the government's approach (age ban) to the critics' preferred approach (digital literacy education and better platform design). What are the trade-offs of each?
4. Is this law primarily about protecting young people, or is it also about governments asserting control over technology companies? Can it be both?
5. "Imperfect enforcement is better than no standard at all." Do you agree or disagree with this argument? Use evidence from the case.

Further Research

1. Do further research into examples of two laws that restrict personal freedom in exchange for security: one you agree with and one you disagree with. Explain your reasons.

Law you agree with:

Where is it:

How is it meant to provide security?

How does it restrict freedom?

Law you disagree with:

Where is it:

How is it meant to provide security?

How does it restrict freedom?

2. What made you agree with one of those laws but disagree with the other? Where should we draw the line between where freedoms can be restricted for security.