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Social Media Minimum Age

Introduction

1.0. This submission is provided by the AI Institute of the University of New South Wales, UNSW.ai. The AI Institute is the largest research institute in Australia devoted solely to artificial intelligence. Over 300 academics from across the university are connected to the Institute, developing and using AI for a broad range of applications.

1.1, We welcome the opportunity to provide input on the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024 that amends the *Online Safety Act 2021*, with the aim of establishing a minimum age for social media use, placing responsibility on social media platforms for the safety of their users.

Executive Summary

2.0. There is clear evidence that social media is having a net negative impact on young people. For instance, the rates of clinical depression in young people has doubled in the US since the introduction of smartphones. And the number of girls presenting at hospitals due to self-harm has increased five fold between 2012, when smartphones became available, and 2019, before COVID started to impact.

2.1. The positive benefits of social media are not to be forgotten and should not be given up. However, these can be kept even with a social media ban. Young people can still access safe environments like YouTube Kids and WhatsApp messaging services even when they are not allowed to access adult services like Facebook and Instagram.

2.1. There are those that say that a social media ban fails to address the harms perpetuated by social media. This is not the case. An age ban for social media will incentivise social media companies to improve services that fall both within and outside a ban. For instance, under a ban, a website like YouTube Kids will likely become a better and more useful service for young people. And other social media companies like TikTok which might fall within a ban will likely look to regulate better their services so that they stop falling within the restrictions of the age ban.

Assuring age of social media users

3.0. Many concerns about restricting the age of users of social media revolve around the practicality of a ban. There is, however, a very simple way to assure the age of users of social media. We simply need devices to record the age of their user.

3.1. When you turn on a device for the first time, you record the language and location of the user. This is, for example, a device that speaks English and is used in Australia. We need simply for the operating system to record also the age of the (youngest) person using the device. iPhones and iPads are single user devices so this is the age of the device's user. Windows and Android permit multiple users so different accounts may need to record different ages.

3.2. A young child does not buy a smartphone. An adult does. We can therefore push the onus of recording the age of the user onto either the person buying the phone, or the person or company selling the phone.

3.3. Just four organizations need to act. Apple to ensure iOS and OSX record the age of users, Google so that Android records the age of users, Microsoft so that Windows records the age of users, and Linux for their O/S. Any service (social media, pornography website, ...) can then query a device whether the user is of an appropriate age for the requested content.

3.4. This solution side-steps issues of privacy, etc. We don't need to collect information about the user's identity. The device merely informs services whether the user is of an appropriate age for the content.

Conclusion

4.0. An age ban for social media could be easily implemented, would prevent harms to young people by restricting access to age inappropriate social media. It would likely even improve the quality of social media that is not age restricted.