

Sample – Campaign 9

Opposition to Australia's Proposed Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024

The Australian government's proposed **Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024** seeks to prohibit individuals under the age of 16 from accessing social media platforms, with social media companies mandated to enforce age restrictions through age verification technologies. While the bill's aim of protecting children from online harms is commendable, it raises significant concerns regarding privacy, equity, practicality, and, notably, parental rights.

This submission addresses the various issues with the proposed legislation and provides alternatives for achieving the shared goal of safeguarding young Australians.

1. Privacy and Data Security Risks

Age verification technologies required by the proposed bill often rely on sensitive personal information, such as government-issued IDs, facial recognition, or biometric data. This approach raises significant privacy concerns, particularly in light of Australia's data breach crisis. For example, the **2022 Optus data breach** exposed the personal information of millions of Australians, demonstrating the vulnerability of centralized data systems (ABC News).

The proposed bill does not adequately account for the risks associated with storing such sensitive data, including potential misuse or unauthorized access. The **Office of the Australian Information Commissioner** (OAIC) has warned that such systems could lead to increased risks of identity theft or unauthorized profiling of young individuals.

2. Parental Rights and Responsibilities

One of the most concerning aspects of the proposed legislation is its encroachment on **parental rights**. The bill essentially overrides the role of parents in deciding how, when, and if their children should engage with social media. Parents, not the government, are best positioned to understand their child's maturity, needs, and readiness for social media.

By mandating a blanket restriction, the government assumes a one-size-fits-all approach, disregarding the nuances of individual families. Parents may wish to allow their children supervised access to social media for educational purposes, connection with peers, or participation in community groups. The **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**, to which Australia is a signatory, emphasizes the importance of parental responsibility in guiding their children's development (Article 5, UNICEF).

This legislation undermines parental agency by transferring decision-making authority to the government and social media platforms. Instead of empowering parents with tools to monitor and guide their children's online behavior, the bill imposes rigid controls that may conflict with family values and priorities.

3. Potential for Exclusion and Inequity

The bill risks disproportionately excluding marginalized groups, particularly those who may lack access to government-issued identification required for age verification. For example, children from low-income families or those without easy access to legal documentation may face barriers to accessing online platforms that provide vital educational resources and social connections.

Additionally, the implementation of age verification systems may alienate young Australians in rural or remote areas, where digital literacy and infrastructure are often limited. This exacerbates the existing digital divide and could leave vulnerable groups further isolated.

4. Questionable Effectiveness

Determined minors have historically found ways to bypass online restrictions, and this bill is unlikely to be an exception. Whether through falsified documents or accounts borrowed from adults, the enforcement of minimum age requirements will likely be inconsistent and incomplete.

Further, the legislation does not address the root causes of online harms, such as cyberbullying, inappropriate content, or predatory behavior. These issues require comprehensive education and proactive platform moderation, rather than blanket age restrictions that penalize responsible young users.

5. Impact on Mental Health Support

Social media platforms often serve as critical avenues for mental health support, particularly for young Australians. According to the **Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)**, mental health conditions affect 1 in 7 children aged 4-17, and many turn to online communities for peer support and access to resources (AIHW).

Restricting access to social media could inadvertently cut off these lifelines, leaving vulnerable children without avenues to express themselves or seek help. While online safety is important, the proposed bill does not account for the potential harm caused by isolation.

6. Economic and Operational Burden on Businesses

Enforcing age verification systems would impose significant costs and logistical challenges on social media platforms, particularly smaller businesses and startups. According to the **Digital Industry Group Inc. (DIGI)**, compliance with such regulations could stifle innovation and reduce competition in Australia's digital economy (DIGI Submission).

Large platforms may have the resources to implement complex verification systems, but smaller operators could be forced out of the market, consolidating power among a few tech giants. This would undermine diversity in the digital landscape, reducing consumer choice and opportunities for local innovators.

7. Freedom of Expression Concerns

The bill raises serious questions about the balance between online safety and freedom of expression. By restricting access to social media, the government risks infringing upon the rights of young Australians to access information and participate in public discourse. The **Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC)** has repeatedly emphasized the importance of ensuring that safety measures do not come at the cost of fundamental rights ([AHRC](#)).

For many young people, social media serves as a platform for advocacy, self-expression, and learning about global issues. A blanket ban disregards these benefits and may stifle their ability to engage with the world.

8. Lack of Comprehensive Consultation

Critics of the bill have highlighted the lack of meaningful consultation with key stakeholders, including young people, parents, educators, and digital rights organizations. This top-down approach fails to consider the real-world implications of the legislation and ignores potential alternatives that could achieve the same goals without overreach.

For instance, existing tools such as parental controls, content filtering, and education programs could be expanded to provide a safer online environment without resorting to blanket bans.

Conclusion

While the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024 is well-intentioned, its implementation risks unintended consequences that outweigh its benefits. The bill infringes on parental rights, jeopardizes privacy, and may exclude vulnerable groups, all while failing to address the root causes of online harms.

A more effective approach would involve empowering parents, enhancing digital literacy education, and promoting proactive moderation by platforms. By prioritizing these measures, Australia can create a safer online environment without compromising the rights and freedoms of its citizens.