Until social-media giants take responsibility for the harm they cause, I support Australia's age ban

Level 3: Advanced

1   Warmer

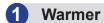**a.   Take this short quiz about your social-media use. Discuss your habits and opinions with your classmates.**

1.   How often do you use social media?

   a.   several times a day

   b.   once a day

   c.   a few times a week

   d.   rarely or never

2.   Which social-media platform do you use the most?

   a.   Facebook

   b.   Instagram

   c.   Twitter / X

   d.   TikTok

   e.   other (please specify) _____

3.   What is your main reason for using social media?

   a.   staying in touch with friends and family

   b.   following news and current events

   c.   professional networking

   d.   entertainment

   e.   sharing your own content

4.   How do you usually feel when you use social media?

   a.   happy

   b.   anxious

   c.   entertained

   d.   envious

   e.   informed

5. If social media disappeared, how would you feel?

    a. less stressed

    b. disconnected from friends and family

    c. unsure how to spend my time

    d. more productive in my daily life

    e. unaffected

2 Key words

a. **Write the correct words from the wordpool to complete the sentences below. Then find and highlight them in the article to read them in context.**

addictive	**dopamine**	**normalisation**
copious	**echo chamber**	**polarisation**
counteract	**malleable**	**proliferate**
detrimental	**mandate**	**romanticisation**
disinformation	**misinformation**	**weaponise**

1. To adapt or convert for use as a weapon is to _____.

2. If something is _____, it is abundant or plentiful.

3. When something is _____, it is very difficult to stop using it or doing it.

4. _____ is a chemical in the brain associated with pleasure and reward.

5. A(n) _____ is an environment where a person encounters only beliefs or opinions that match their own.

6. _____ means separating people into groups with opposing opinions or beliefs.

7. Sharing false or inaccurate information about something is _____.

8. False information shared deliberately to influence people's opinions or hide the truth is _____.

9. To _____ is to do something to reduce or prevent bad or harmful effects from happening.

10. Someone easily influenced or something that can bend or change shape easily is

    _____.

11. To _____ is to increase rapidly in number or amount.

12. A(n) _____ is an official order or commission to do something.

13. Something _____ is harmful.

14. _____ is the action of making something seem better or more appealing than it really is.

15. _____ is the process of making something normal or standard.

b. **Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity. You might have to change the form of the word.**

1. Many people, especially teens, find social-media platforms _____ and hard to stop using.

2. There is _____ information on the internet, but not all of it is true.

3. Digital-literacy education can help _____ the spread of fake news.

4. The _____ of influencer lifestyles on social media can create unrealistic expectations.

5. Excessive screen time can be _____ to mental health and sleep patterns.

6. The _____ of sharing personal information online has raised privacy concerns.

7. Conspiracy theories can _____ very quickly on social-media platforms.

8. Some people _____ their social-media posts to spread hate and cause harm.

9. Likes and positive comments on social media can trigger a(n) _____ release in the brain so people want more.

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Algorithms which intensify polarisation harm young and malleable minds the most. If digital platforms won't self-regulate, the government needs to step in

Chanel Contos
18 September, 2024

1 I support the Albanese government's proposal to impose an age ban on social media overall, and surprisingly, so do many young people. A survey of 14- to 29-year-olds found that 42 per cent of those surveyed were positive about the idea, with 25 per cent neutral. But as a standalone action, a ban will not be the intended cure for the real issue at hand.

2 The reality is there have always been various age restrictions on platforms, and since I signed up for Facebook at age 11, they've been a breeze to get around. I have doubts this will change as laws will never be able to keep up with the agility of digital natives. I also have concerns that without adequate education of why a ban is being imposed, and without alternatives for teens to socialise online, this may drive children to deeper parts of the web that are decentralised and growing.

3 Meta's recent announcement of "teen accounts" on Instagram for under-16s is the latest attempt by a social-media giant to give parents greater control. However, it's unclear whether this will address the core issue, which is algorithms and how they are weaponised against us by social-media giants. Back in 2014, when a stay-at-home sick day meant a copious amount of Instagram scrolling, you would inevitably see a message saying "You're all caught up – you've seen all new posts from the past 48 hours." The idea of a finite scroll session imposed by the platform you're using is now a distant memory. In 2016, Instagram switched from posts shown to you in chronological order, exclusively by people you followed, to an algorithmic feed that prioritised content based on a user's interactions and engagement.

4 In my experience, this switch is when platforms pivoted from being a fun way to keep up to date with friends (albeit still riddled with issues, particularly for teenage girls who were captivated by the various dieting and self-harm trends of the 2010s) to an addictive platform, personally tailored to keep you on-app for as long as possible.

5 Algorithms risk harming children by getting them hooked on the dopamine of unlimited fast-paced content, and they can affect us all by hindering our ability to think outside of echo chambers, which provide us with intense confirmation bias of our beliefs, intensifying political polarisation. We have seen more hateful and extremist online rhetoric, as well as the spread of misinformation and disinformation – posing a serious threat to democracy. Whether conscious or not, we have all become victims of deepened ideological divides. Simultaneously, there has been little to no education for the masses about media literacy to counteract this.

6 This, of course, harms young and malleable minds the most. Platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and Instagram know that young men are intrigued by content that expresses frustration with dating and women. It detects this quickly and pushes more extreme and radical viewpoints that can create a feedback loop, reinforcing harmful beliefs. Hence the emergence of "incels". Members of this online community of "involuntary celibates" blame women and societal structures for their inability to form romantic or sexual relationships, and violence (to the self and others) is highly glorified in these online spaces. It's hard to separate this community from the proliferated online abuse women are subjected to.

7 There are many benefits to social media too, of course. The Teach Us Consent campaign, which led to the mandated consent education we now have in Australia, began when I posted an Instagram story. Gaining momentum on social media, the campaign gave many young people a means to use their voice and tell policymakers about their experiences with sexual violence. And for many with difficult or isolated home lives, it is a true blessing to have constant access to a community.

8 However, anyone who grew up with their own laptop or iPhone knows it was common to come across objectively detrimental content on social media (whether that be eating-disorder idealisation, hateful commentary, pornography or self-harm romanticisation). The normalisation of this kind of content demonstrates the scale of harms that can exist on these platforms when unregulated.

9 Social-media platforms have long known about the significant harm they cause to their users, particularly young people. Ideally, these platforms would self-regulate to prevent this. But social-media

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companies know very well they directly benefit from our anger, divisiveness and the valuable time we spend on their platforms. So until they accept responsibility, I see the government's proposed ban as a small but significant step. If nothing else, it would place social-media platforms on notice, and it may give parents the confidence to restrict the age at which their children are allowed to join a platform, where they will inevitably be shaped, for better or for worse.

Chanel Contos is the founder of Teach Us Consent and the author of *Consent Laid Bare.*

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3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. What percentage of young people surveyed were positive about the age ban on social media?

2. Why does the author doubt that an age ban alone will solve the core issue with social media?

3. What does the author suggest might drive children to deeper parts of the web?

4. Why did Meta introduce "teen accounts" on Instagram for under-16s?

5. When did Instagram switch to an algorithmic feed?

6. What does the algorithmic feed prioritise?

7. According to the article, what effect do algorithms have on children?

8. How do these algorithms affect all users negatively?

9. What positive outcome did social media help achieve in Australia?

10. What could the government's social-media age ban do besides directly protecting children?

4 Key language

a. Change these nouns back to their verb form.

1. restriction   _____

2. interaction   _____

3. confirmation   _____

4. polarisation   _____

5. misinformation   _____

6. disinformation   _____

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7. frustration   _____

8. idealisation   _____

9. romanticisation   _____

10. normalisation   _____

b. **Add the suffix *-tion* to the verbs below.**

1. educate   _____

2. interact   _____

3. regulate   _____

4. prevent   _____

5. demonstrate   _____

6. proliferate   _____

c. **Choose four words with the suffix *-tion* from part a or b. Write a personalised sentence for each one.**

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5 Discussion

a. **Discuss these statements.**

- "Young people cannot live without the internet."

- "Algorithms have made social media unhealthy and addictive."

- "Social-media companies have a responsibility to protect people's safety and wellbeing, especially children and teens."

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6 In your own words

a. Do some research about the effects of social media on mental health. Answer these questions.

- What positive and negative effects does social media have on mental health?

- What are the top concerns around tweens and teens using social media?

- Why do people continue to use social media if it makes them unhappy?

- How is excessive social-media use like any other addiction? How is it different?

- What are social-media companies doing to change their algorithm and / or policies to improve the situation?

- What have some governments done to help protect people?

- In your opinion, what is the right thing for social-media companies to do?

b. Report your findings to the class and share the facts you learnt, as well as your opinions. Include facts and statistics that support your research. Give reasons to support your answers.