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### **Committee Secretary**

Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications  
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Canberra ACT 2600  
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## **Submission: Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024**

Dear Secretary,

I write to you as a technology journalist on behalf of Pickr in regards to the amendments being proposed to the Online Safety Amendment Bill attempting to raise the social media minimum age and enforce a ban on individuals under a certain age.

As a technology journalist entrusted with reporting news and analysis, as well as a father, I believe it's important for me to submit something arguing the problems of amendments, particularly as they appear to have been submitted with haste. At the same time, I also propose solutions to the problems beyond banning, because banning typically fails.

### **Deprives children and teens of the benefits of social media**

It might seem crazy to a generation that has grown up talking to people face to face, but social media can impart benefits to people, even if it seems like the opposite is true.

Making friends is difficult at the best of times, but online, anyone can find people like themselves that might have made their way to the digital world because physically making friends is hard. It provides a safe space for vulnerable individuals struggling in the physical world to make the connections they need not just to survive, but to live.

Furthermore, it can improve and bolster both creativity and learning. Social platforms provide a way to stimulate growth in both of these areas by exposing individuals to others and to ideas. Collaboration, for instance, is easily fostered in a community, be it online or offline. Social media encourages that, while a blanket ban discourages it.

## Fosters an atmosphere of mistrust

Concerningly, the ban would likely drive kids and teens to misinformation holes on sites and services that won't be policed. Worse, it could send easily influenced and angry individuals to an abyss of lies and anger about the ban which wouldn't be corrected.

A study back in 2021 from [Binghamton University cited this exact point](#), noting that those who were “deplatformed” move to smaller platforms with increased toxicity.

Once subjected to this, I am deeply concerned many of these people would likely stay in these predicaments. Effectively, the government would be intentionally fostering mistrust in the name of protecting children. Clearly, it could do the exact opposite.

## Bans typically don't work

You don't need me to point out the evidence that bans don't work. Almost every expert agrees that a social media ban isn't the solution. However, if you need proof from academics who know more than I do, even as a journalist listening to both sides, consider the following sources, complete with a summary along the side to make life easier:

- [Western Sydney University - June 15, 2021](#)  
Children believe that the digital environment is critical to realising their rights in the modern world, and that they call on parents to let them use it responsibly.
- [The University of Manchester - June 13, 2024](#)  
There is no concrete confirmation that social media has negative effects on the mental health of most young people.
- [University of Technology Sydney \(UTS\) - June 24, 2024](#)  
Young people claim social media allowed them to fulfill responsibilities beyond personal safety, learning about theirs and other cultures, while defusing toxic online cultures.
- [Western Sydney University - June 25, 2024](#)  
By banning the benefits of social media, we risk driving young people underground.

- [Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology \(RMIT\) - September 10, 2024](#)  
Banning social media platforms prevents children from gaining the skills they need.

There's also evidence from the [Centre for International Governance and Innovation](#), from [InTouch Public Health](#), and from the [Australian Academy of the Humanities](#). It seems that plenty of academics and [journalists alike](#) are screaming for the government to pay attention to the facts that this approach will lead to more harm for children and teens. [Over 140 experts already wrote an open letter](#) to the Prime Minister addressing these concerns noting that a ban would be too blunt an instrument.

Just think about that for a second: academics from all across the educational landscape came together for a letter in agreement on why the government shouldn't look to a blanket ban, and should instead consider a solution carefully.

The very people who study this and have the evidence are the exact people the government should be listening to, rather than an internal echo chamber of anti-social media toxicity. It sounds rather like the government's consideration for a social media ban comes from its own fears, or even fears from parents not considering the obvious solution staring at them.

## **Education will work**

Academics are screaming it. Journalists are screaming it. Concerned parents already being proactive about social media are screaming it.

The answer is education. It is *always* education.

We don't let children on the roads without an established education system that teaches them which pedals to push and what the road rules are. They go through stages of learning before they're given an initial limited license, gradually opening up the path for full access to being a driver.

Social media doesn't need a license, but it does need education. Education in schools starting from K6 and through to high school to help young people be made aware of how

to use social media responsibly, and what to look out for. Education for parents online to teach them how to use social media themselves, and how to connect with their kids over social media. Ongoing education that can inform and improve social media skills.

If a digital solution is required to keep parents informed, consider suggesting accounts of young people are linked to parents and guardians to maintain awareness. While an account link is a way to impart a connection between parents and children, the importance of education cannot be underscored.

We teach children digital literacy and how to use computers, and social media should clearly be included as part of that.

## **Addressing the problems with solutions**

The problems claimed by the government seem to reverberate around giving children and teens their lives back, and preventing the heartbreaking outcomes of both cyber-bullying and blackmail scams. Let's address these and provide solutions.

### **"Giving them their lives back"**

When we talk about giving children their lives back and freeing them from digital tyranny, it's important to note that many of these kids have found friends and fostered lives *from* social media. It's a tool and an assist. It doesn't prevent kids from living lives, even if it seems like it could harm them.

[There are already national guidelines for screen time](#) that don't prohibit kids or parents from subjecting too much digital time for their kids, even if excess time may affect diet and behavioural problems. The point is that the guidelines are provided, and parents decide.

A social media ban doesn't assist here. Rather, it affects a parent's job to do their role effectively. Education for the parents and children alike does provide a solution, however. It encourages parents to connect with their children over social, and to possibly learn from them, and to learn from each other.

## Cyberbullying

No one will ever deny the effects of cyberbullying are heartbreaking, but a ban doesn't change bullying. If anything, it just closes one avenue *for* bullying and potentially increases the toxicity elsewhere.

Most [social networks already have rules banning cyberbullying](#), while schools typically have rules against bullying itself. These rules need to be enforced, there's no doubt about that, but it should come from each. The [eSafety Commissioner already provides advice](#) about what to do when someone has been targeted by cyberbullying, and when a school is told about bullying, *it* needs to act.

Bullying and cyberbullying can be worked on with education. Education of the kids. Education of the parents. Both getting involved to work out the signs.

## Scams

Social engineering is no doubt a huge problem online, particularly when it comes to the risk of sextortion scams. Children have died, and that is understandably heartbreaking.

However, a blanket ban will not address or improve this. Simply saying "children will have access when they're emotionally mature" is not a cover-all. If anything, it has the risk of making things worse.

Think about adults in this predicament: they are technically emotionally mature, and yet the scam losses in Australia paint a different story.

[Tracked by the ACCC's Scamwatch program](#), over \$224 million has been lost to scams this year alone. Those people were adults reporting their losses, and there are likely plenty of others who haven't. They were emotionally mature adults available online lacking the education necessary to repel scammers fleecing them.

Education is the answer for adults, and it's also the answer for kids and teens. If we prevent children from having access to the education they so sorely need for social – if we deny the learnings of experts and the access to try it out – we effectively don't change the game. They will lose out in more ways than one.

## Prevents parents from parenting

At its core, the government's blanket social media ban also erodes the rights of parents who are doing what they can to traverse a growing, changing world with their kids.

Who want to address everything their children face by jumping in with them.

And yes, I know that the government won't hit parents or kids with penalties in the ban, and that this is largely an unenforceable system that seeks to penalise the social platforms for a problem they should be doing more to address. However, a ban also prevents parents from deciding what's best for their child.

Does the government have the right to decide whether a child struggling to make friends in the real world shouldn't find friends online instead? Can it fundamentally say the ban will protect more kids than it will harm? Does it have the right to insist it knows best for an area of great complexity when it hasn't addressed the research on this very issue?

## A personal note

I'm one of those parents who would ignore the government's recommendations and parent my children's use of social media myself. I will educate them, even if the government does not. That is *my* job for *my* kids. I don't need the government intervening in an area it clearly doesn't understand.

I've been a technology journalist for over 17 years. I have lived with technology, video games, programming, and to an extent social media my entire life, and I have turned out fine. Social media is clearly still new, still nascent, but even the early days of what you might call social media – bulletin board systems, internet relay chat, instant messaging, and the like – were important ways for this teenager to relate and connect to the world.

Granted, that is anecdotal, and my experience may not be everyone else's, but there are plenty of other people in this same scenario who would not have lived their life and grown up happily had governments suggested blocking and banning technology for their young adult life.



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My belief is that the fears associated with social media appear to come from a generation that hasn't grown up with it, and are looking for solutions to a problem it doesn't understand.

I do understand there are parents worried that government inaction on social media could cause harm to more children. But I also believe that government action on topics it hasn't researched thoroughly and is rushing to enact reform on could lead to worse harm, and a greater problem for young people on the whole.

As it is, this whole topic and submission is indicative of that: the social media amendment submission was made on November 21, 2024 before parliament, and the closing date for [submissions of the inquiry was one day later](#): November 22, 2024.

This need to expedite and rush such an important topic is incredibly disheartening, and suggests a government intent on ignoring the advice in the hopes that no one informed has the time to write an impassioned and thoroughly researched response. I hope this has proven that wrong.

I thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide a submission, and apologise for it being slightly longer than the 1-2 page limitation being requested.

Sincerely,  
Leigh D. Stark  
Founder and Editor of pickr.com.au

**November 22, 2024**