

AUSTRALIA

Social media ban for 16-year-olds, benefits and risks

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Australia recently took the bold step of banning social networking for children under the age of 16, a move that has sparked fierce debate. On 27 November 2024, Australia's parliament passed the [Online Safety Amendment \(Social Media Minimum Age\) Bill](#) which

requires platforms (which are not yet clearly defined) to prevent access by young people, or face fines of up to \$32 million. This measure is the result of growing concern about the impact of social networks on mental health, backed up by studies and testimonies linking the use of social networks to bullying and self-harm.

According to Premier Anthony Albanese, leader of the *Australian Labour Party*, the law is a bulwark against the harmful effects of technology on young people. However, the practical implementation of the legislation has its shortcomings: it is still unclear how the age of users will be verified without using identity documents, a measure that raises privacy concerns. Furthermore, platforms such as YouTube or WhatsApp could be excluded from the measure, regardless of their popularity among younger people.

Despite the grey areas, the law appears to have broad public support: 77% of Australians were in favour, according to a recent poll. But there is no shortage of criticism. Some human rights groups fear that the ban could isolate vulnerable young people, depriving them of vital support networks, while others are concerned about a possible increase in digital surveillance.

In addition to Australia, other countries have passed restrictive legislation to limit minors' access to social networks. In France, a law was passed requiring social platforms to verify the age of users and obtain parental consent for those under 15. Companies that fail to comply risk fines of up to 1% of their global turnover. The law also allows parents to suspend the accounts of children under 15 and requires tools to limit the time young people spend online.

The issue is controversial in the US. Utah, for example, has introduced laws that impose restrictions on social use by minors, such as night-time curfews and parental consent for registration. Similar laws have been passed in Texas and Arkansas. Florida proposed a similar under-14 ban, but the measure was stymied by free speech concerns.

On the other hand, China stands out for its strict approach. The use of social media such as Douyin (the local version of TikTok) is limited to 40 minutes per day for users under the age of 14. In addition, the government imposes strict controls on access and content, with a system that also requires personal identification to access the platforms.

The main problem, however, is verifying the age of social media users: one of the main challenges in implementing restrictive regulations. Currently, solutions vary in effectiveness and invasiveness, with several countries experimenting with innovative

technologies to address this issue. For example, the UK has explored the use of third-party verification services, which check age using biometric tools or existing databases such as electoral or bank registers. These methods offer a trade-off between security and privacy, but are still being implemented.

The platforms themselves are also moving in the direction outlined by various governments. Instagram is reportedly experimenting with biometric solutions such as facial recognition to estimate the age of users. While promising, these methods raise concerns about the collection and management of sensitive data.

From an educational point of view, the Australian move is in line with the proposals of experts such as Alberto Pellai and Daniele Novara, who suggest restricting access to smartphones for those under the age of 14. Their position is based on the risk of addiction that social and video games can cause, which can affect cognitive and emotional development.

Ultimately, the Australian measure raises a fundamental question: is it possible to protect young people without restricting their freedom? While the intention seems laudable, the risk of creating a generation of 'underground digital natives' ready to bypass all controls is real. Only time will tell whether this path will set a new global standard or be an experiment doomed to failure.