

## The UK's social media ban for under-16s has just empowered big tech

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This week, the UK announced a wide-ranging ban on social media that will soon block users from communicating or accessing information on apps such as X, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, TikTok and Snapchat unless they prove that they're over the age of 16.

5 "Tech giants had their chance and failed," the prime minister, Keir Starmer, said, "but we're stepping in to protect children." All internet users should be protected from exploitative systems online, but this new law will only foster more harm and help the most powerful tech companies consolidate power and influence over everyone's lives.

10 In order to verify the age of a user, tech companies may require them to upload government ID along with an image for AI to verify. Soon, in addition to basic login information, tech companies could gather facial scans, detailed biometric data and highly sensitive info from millions of users.

The data is then used to build consumer profiles which are sold to advertisers for a profit or, more recently, used to train AI systems. To maximise profits, tech companies also use this data to deliver hypertargeted content to keep us engaged.

15 All data is subject to protection laws when harvested and sold between companies, but it can also be stolen and exploited by bad actors. Intimate user data can be weaponised against people in myriad ways, including for identity theft, or by governments seeking to crack down on free expression.

20 Despite such concerns, some advocates have been calling for the government to go further still and enact tighter speech restrictions alongside age gating. They correctly point out that many children will still access content by circumventing the age restrictions or gravitate to even more harmful, less-regulated spaces on the internet. So, they seek to ban objectionable content from being uploaded in the first place or restrict its distribution by seizing control of algorithms.

25 But restricting content does not undermine big tech's core business model. All the major social platforms have shown repeated willingness to restrict content based on what a country's government does or doesn't like in order to retain a friendly regulatory environment and increase their scope, power and influence around the globe.

30 Earlier this year, Meta began blocking the accounts of a slew of Saudi Arabian dissidents after orders by Saudi authorities. Meta told the Guardian at the time that they may restrict a content's availability in a country where it is alleged to be unlawful. When governments have the ability to ask tech companies to monitor and censor content, there will always be the risk that authoritarians will use this power to suppress free speech.

35 If we actually want to curb big tech's power and make the internet safer for us all, including children, we must start by passing comprehensive data privacy regulation. Removing big tech's monopolistic control over our online lives would give adults and children access to a wider range of apps and online experiences.

40 The internet is a vital space for young people. We should work to build an online world where everyone, especially young people, can engage freely without being exploited for corporate profit.