

What to do about Sunak's silly plan to curb social media for under-16s? Highlight and delete.

Chris Stokel-Walker, *The Guardian*, December 16th, 2023

Rishi Sunak's government says to expect a consultation in January that could limit access to social media for under-16s, up to and including outright bans on access to sites like TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook.

5 The backdrop is the government's increasingly tough talk on big tech companies, and the rules through which the UK is trying to rein in the tech sector's power. That's exemplified through the Online Safety Act, which includes within its provisions a requirement that platforms "enforce age limits and use age-checking measures on platforms where content harmful to children is published".

10 One thing the government couldn't get into the Online Safety Act, despite trying, was an outright ban on the use of encryption in messaging platforms and social networks. Encryption is where the contents of messages are scrambled to prevent snooping by governments or individuals.

15 Yet the government has continued to press the idea that encryption is only used by criminals and paedophiles, rather than by, for instance, political dissidents, the displaced fleeing persecution, or victims of abuse who seek contact with the outside world. Reporting of the planned crackdown comes after the government lambasted companies like Meta, the parent company of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, for going ahead with plans to introduce encryption across its messaging services.

20 But the idea that groomers can do whatever they want thanks to the shroud of encryption is false. Equally misguided is the idea that it's possible to impose a blanket ban on 14- and 15-year-olds accessing social media. It's as if those in charge of the legislation have never met a child, never mind had any.

25 Believing that it's possible to prevent young people accessing social networks seems delusional at best, given that there are plenty of them under 13 who are already using the sites. We have already had a generation shaped by the internet and social media, and they did not all become victims of trafficking and abuse, nor have they been shaped into broken, browbeaten husks of humanity.

Quite apart from the fact that the broadside against teenagers appears to be little more than an attempt to attract the interest of the Daily Mail, it also ignores just how important and integral social media – and interactions online with peers – are for users now.

30 It can be easy to fixate on the negatives, which undoubtedly exist. Fourteen-year-old Molly Russell took her life in 2017 after viewing content related to depression, self-harm and suicide on social media. Her story, and others like hers, cannot be ignored.

35 Yet there are positives to being on social media. Today's 14- and 15-year-olds had to navigate the transition from primary to secondary school during enforced lockdowns due to the pandemic. For them, social media was the only place they could interact for months. It provides them with important social skills, the ability to explore their identity and an opportunity to learn about the world.

40 To take that from them risks pushing teenagers further into the online shadows, a paradoxical result, given the government's fixation on the supposed evils of encryption, or means that they'll opt out altogether, and enter the online world at 16 more naive and prey to the same evil forces – but without any of the protection gained from experience.