

## Can teenagers outwit Australia's social-media ban?

Enforcing the new law may prove tricky

*The Economist*, Dec 5th 2024

"We've got your back," Australia's prime minister, Anthony Albanese, told parents on November 29th, a day after pushing through some of the world's strictest limits on screentime. One year from now, under-16s will be banned from using social media, in a move intended to protect them from harm. Teenagers groaned. Parents discreetly high-fived. Policymakers around the world took notes.

Most social-media platforms are notionally off-limits for under-13s, a cut-off that was widely adopted after America passed COPPA, a law to protect children's online privacy, in 1998. But the rules are widely ignored and feebly enforced. Britain's communications regulator, Ofcom, reports that 22% of the country's social-media users aged between eight and 17 have an account with an adult's date of birth. TikTok (minimum age: 13) is used by half of British eight- to 11-year-olds.

Parents and politicians long turned a blind eye. But amid concern that social media harms mental health, governments are getting tougher. European countries including France, Germany and Italy require younger teens to get parents' permission before signing up. Various American states have passed laws limiting teens' access to social media, though many have hit legal obstacles. Australia, cheered on by its domestic press, is the first country to enact a blanket ban.

The first problem it must solve is enforcement. Younger teenagers lack the driving licences and credit cards that often serve as proof of age, so many companies use machine learning to estimate age via selfie. Today they can guess to within about a year, he says, better than most humans. That still means errors at the margin, especially for people with dark skin, who tend to be underrepresented in training data.

Technical challenges aside, how broad should crackdowns on social media be? The category spans everything from video to messaging. Australia has suggested that TikTok will fall under its ban but that YouTube will be exempt, for its "significant" educational content. Video games are also off the hook, though they have become increasingly social as children use platforms like Roblox to chat as well as play.

Another question is who should carry out the checks. Australia is placing the burden on the social-media platforms: "You create the risk, you've got to deal with it," says Mr Allen. Meta and others say the checks should instead be done by operating systems or app stores, making it Apple's and Google's problem. That would allow users to have their phone vouch for their age anonymously, rather than hand over mugshots or IDs to every social network, gambling app or porn site they visit. For now, governments seem wary of making Apple and Google create global ID registries of their billions of users.

No one yet knows the extent to which keeping teens off social media will reduce their interest as adults. But apps like TikTok, which is already threatened with an outright ban in America, could be disadvantaged if they are banned for teenagers while direct rivals such as YouTube are let off. The big winners from a social-media crackdown may be alternative types of screentime, such as gaming—at least so long as the enthusiasm for banning children's online pursuits goes no further. ■

## ***Climate Change and ‘Last-Chance Tourism’***

Travelers are racing to see parts of the world that may soon vanish.

*The New York Times*, March 3, 2024

A lot of climate discussion revolves around time. Lines rise across charts predicting the next century. Scientists set deadlines for the coming decades. Each month seems to bring news of a new heat record. The sense that time is running out can be heady.

As the Earth warms, natural wonders — coral reefs, glaciers, archipelagos — are at risk of damage and disappearance. This has motivated some travelers to engage in “last-chance tourism,” visiting places threatened by climate change before it’s too late.

“For thousands of years, humans have raced to be the first to scale a peak, cross a frontier, or document a new species or landscape,” Paige McClanahan writes in a piece for *The Times*. “Now, in some cases, we’re racing to be the last.”

One such destination is the Mer de Glace, the largest glacier in the French Alps, where thousands of people go each year to ski. (Early tourists included Mary Shelley and Mark Twain.)

The glacier, like many others, is melting rapidly. A new, higher lift opened recently to stay closer to the retreating ice. And a study published in the journal *Science* last year found that around half of the world’s glaciers will have melted by the end of this century, even if nations stick to the goals of the Paris climate agreement.

“For someone who doesn’t know how it used to be, it’s a beautiful scene,” a visitor to the glacier told Paige. “But when you know the difference, it really is sad.”

There is some evidence that visiting an ecosystem threatened by climate change could lead people to become more aware of their impact on the environment.

In a 2020 survey conducted by researchers at the Mer de Glace, 80 percent of visitors said that they would try to learn more about how to protect the environment, and 77 percent said they would reduce their water and energy consumption.

Some tourist spots have leaned into education. In Peru, officials renamed a trek to the Pastoruri glacier “La Ruta del Cambio Climático,” or “The Route of Climate Change.” And at the Mer de Glace, an exhibit about climate change — called the Glaciorium — is set to open later this year.

There are some, however, who question the value of last-chance tourism. Visiting fragile environments can do more harm than good.

Some people travel to Antarctica because they fear it is being destroyed. But, as Sara Clemence highlighted in a piece in *The Atlantic* last year, travel there requires a lot of fuel, while visitors can introduce disease and damage wildlife. And research by Karla Boluk, an academic from the University of Waterloo, found that a majority of last-chance tourists to two sites in Canada were unwilling to pay extra to offset the carbon footprint of their trip.

“There’s an ethical paradox of last-chance tourism,” Boluk told *The Times*, “and it involves the moral question of whether travelers acknowledge and respond to the harm they promote.”

## When can parents be held responsible for their children's crimes?

Adapted from *The Economist*, Sep 9th 2024

ON SEPTEMBER 4TH Colt Gray, a 14-year-old student at Apalachee High School in Georgia, shot dead two students and two teachers and wounded nine other people. Two days later the boy was brought into court to face charges—as an adult—on four counts of first-degree murder.

His father, Colin Gray, aged 54, appeared in the courtroom that day, too. After the judge told Colt a conviction could send him to prison for the rest of his life, he had a similar message for Colin. If convicted of the two charged counts of second-degree murder, four of involuntary manslaughter and eight of cruelty to children, the elder Gray could be sentenced to as many as 180 years in prison. The state's case against the father has not yet been made in detail, but it involves the AR-15-style semi-automatic assault rifle he gave Colt as a Christmas present last year—not itself a crime—and his apparent negligence in informing the school of Colt's mental health. (In contrast, the boy's mother, who is separated from the father, reportedly contacted the school on the morning of the shooting to warn of an impending "extreme emergency".)

America's criminal-justice system operates on the principle that individuals are responsible for their actions. Why, then, is the shooter's father facing the possibility of spending the rest of his life behind bars, especially given Georgia's decision to try his son as an adult? In what circumstances are parents legally accountable for the misdeeds of their offspring?

Another school shooting three years ago offers a precedent. Ethan Crumbley was 15 when he killed four students at Oxford High School in Michigan and wounded seven other people, including a teacher, with the semi-automatic pistol that his father, James Crumbley, had bought him four days earlier. In April this year James and his wife Jennifer were sentenced to 10-15 years in prison for failing to lock up their weapons at home and for ignoring signs of their son's anguish.

The Crumbley convictions marked the first time parents have been held criminally liable for a mass murder committed by a child. But the general principle that parents have a legal duty to control their children is long-standing. (...) Today laws imposing civil liability on parents for their children's crimes are found in all 50 American states, but most have a tight limit on damages (\$2,500 in Michigan, for example).

Shaundra Lewis, a professor at the Thurgood Marshall School of Law, notes that until 2024 states typically treated instances of parental negligence as misdemeanours. Charging parents for murders committed by their children, she says, is new.

Some observers worry that the advent of long prison sentences for parents of teen murderers risks prosecutorial overreach while doing little to curb mass shootings. But others, like Ms Lewis, reckon that the threat of punishment could be a deterrent; she says that "we have an obligation to do everything we can". Perhaps prison for parents will encourage Americans to keep a better watch on their weapons—and on their children. ■