

School Social Media Bans: Why It's Too Late.

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Introduction

Australia's social-media restrictions for under-16s are a positive development. They acknowledge that platforms designed to maximise attention, participation, and data extraction are not developmentally neutral environments for children. The national Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024 requires age-restricted platforms to take reasonable steps to prevent Australians under 16 from creating or maintaining accounts. The restrictions came into effect on 10 December 2025 (eSafety Commissioner, 2026). At school level, related rules can also limit the possession or use of phones and social-media applications during the school day. These interventions are attempts to protect children from a commercial environment that has become too powerful to leave entirely to the individual family unit. Yet the intervention reveals a paradox: governments are protecting children from a system already adopted by the adults and institutions responsible for raising them. The ban may delay exposure, but it cannot restore the world preceding ubiquitous connectivity or reverse twenty-five years of accumulated dependencies. The technology and internet of things is available almost everywhere, adaptable to willing participants, and embedded in ordinary Western societal life. Complete disconnection from this environment is formally possible but practically difficult. This essay proposes that school social-media bans are a valuable act of prevention but are ultimately too late to repair the wider cognitive and social transformation already embedded in modern societies. The central problem is not simply that young people may use social media too much. It is that internet companies have built infrastructures in which human attention, identity, communication, and public life are continuously organised by commercial systems of prediction and behavioural feedback. The result is proposed here as an existential crisis: societies increasingly depend upon systems that they also have reason to harbour concern thereof. A genuinely effective response would require the owners of those systems themselves to be regulated according to both the classical tenets of liberal-democratic freedom and

foundational standards of civil society and the socially cohesive communities that arise within and are sustained thereafter: all of which require genuine epistemic sovereignty of the individual. But even strong regulation would confront accumulated generational discontent, fragmented public narratives, weakened institutions, and a population already reliant on the conveniences of algorithmic systems and associated cognitive crutches: personal employment and entertainment are fundamentally and practically irreversibly linked to such systems in modern society.

The Australian Intervention: Protection Without Restoration

The Australian policy is important precisely because it moves beyond the assumption that children and parents alone should manage platform risk. Under the national framework, the burden falls on designated social-media platforms to take reasonable steps to prevent under-16 users from holding accounts. This is a meaningful shift in responsibility. It recognises that a child's apparent choice to join a platform is made within an environment designed by companies with vastly greater technical knowledge, behavioural data, financial resources, and capacity to impact on influence and conduct.

The policy's positive value is therefore prospective. It may reduce exposure to recommender systems, public metrics, social comparison, harmful content, peer surveillance, and continuous notification during formative years. It may create a period in which children can develop friendships, concentration, emotional regulation, and identity away from the most aggressive forms of platform mediation. Galea and Buckley's (2024) discussion of the National Academies' consensus report and the American Psychological Association (2023) both support a careful approach in which content, design features, developmental stage, and individual differences matter more than simplistic claims about screen time alone.

The difficulty is that protection from an inevitable influence is not the same as repair, perhaps closer to palliative. A ban can prevent a child from entering a damaged environment; it cannot recreate the environment that existed before the damage. Children are raised by adults whose own attention, communication, and expectations have been shaped by digital media. Schools operate through online portals and messaging systems. Families organise around connected devices. Public information, employment, banking, transport, healthcare, government services, and commerce increasingly presume internet access. A child may be prevented from possessing a social-media account while still growing up inside a society organised by the same infrastructures.

From Communication Tool to Social Environment

The last twenty-five years have not merely added a new set of communication tools. They have changed the environment in which communication occurs. Australian Bureau of Statistics data recorded home internet access in 67% of households in 2007–08, a substantial increase from the early years of household connectivity (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). By 2024, the International Telecommunication Union estimated that approximately 5.5 billion people were online globally (International Telecommunication Union, 2024). Pew Research Center surveys have also documented the movement from occasional adolescent internet use toward near-universal smartphone access and routine social-media participation among American teenagers (Pew Research Center, 2022). These figures do not prove social decline, but they show the scale and speed of the environmental transition.

The important change is not only quantity. Digital and algorithmic systems are now portable, persistent, personalised, and adaptive. The user carries the environment into the bedroom, classroom, workplace, street, and family conversation. The system observes what the user

attends to, which posts are opened, which faces are recognised, which words produce a response, and how long a person remains engaged. It then adjusts what appears next. The individual is not simply consuming a fixed medium. The medium is learning how to address the individual.

This adaptability makes the technology especially powerful for a willing participant. A person seeking connection can find communities; a person seeking reassurance can receive affirmation; a person seeking outrage can find provocation; a person seeking status can pursue visibility; a person seeking escape can disappear into endless novelty. Platform systems do not need to impose one uniform culture. They can accommodate and intensify many cultures simultaneously. This is one reason the problem cannot be reduced to passivity. Users bring desires, grievances, identities, political and individual commitments to the system. The system identifies, ranks, monetises, and feeds them back in increasingly efficient forms.

The relationship is therefore neither simple coercion nor free choice. Users choose, but their choices train systems that then restructure the field of available choices. In what Heidegger (1977) called *enframing*, human conduct itself becomes data that can be ordered, calculated, and used to predict future conduct.

Cognitive and Developmental Atrophy

The strongest empirical case concerns not a universal loss of intelligence, but a gradual reorganisation of the conditions under which attention, memory, identity, and judgement are practised. Cognitive offloading research shows that people routinely use external objects and systems to reduce the demands placed on memory and decision-making (Risko & Gilbert, 2016). Offloading is not inherently harmful. Writing a reminder, using navigation, or

consulting a reference can extend human ability. The problem arises when external systems cease to be occasional aids and become the default medium through which a person remembers, chooses, communicates, and evaluates.

Platform use intensifies this tendency because the system does not merely store information. It selects what should be noticed. It supplies reminders, recommendations, social feedback, search results, and continuously updated measures of relevance. The user is encouraged to ask not only ‘What do I think?’ but ‘What is appearing?’, ‘What is trending?’, ‘What is recommended?’, and ‘What will receive a response?’ Over time, this can weaken the practice of initiating attention from within.

The relevant everyday scenario is familiar. A person opens a phone to check one message. A notification presents a short video, a controversy, or a recommendation. The user follows the cue and then another, eventually losing track of the original purpose. This does not demonstrate permanent neurological damage. It does demonstrate how easily intention can be displaced by an adaptive environment that is more immediate than the person’s original plan. Research on media multitasking, sleep disruption, and attention provides plausible mechanisms through which repeated interruption may affect concentration and wellbeing, although the size and direction of effects vary considerably between individuals (Galea & Buckley, 2024; Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

Adolescence makes this issue more consequential. It is a period in which peer evaluation, identity, emotional regulation, and autonomy are still developing. Social media can support belonging and self-expression, especially for young people who are isolated offline. It can also convert social development into a continuous public performance. Festinger’s (1954) theory of

social comparison helps explain why visible measures of attractiveness, popularity, achievement, and approval may create a persistent evaluative background. A young person does not merely meet peers; they encounter a stream in which peers appear to be more successful, more attractive, more socially connected, or more politically certain.

The evidence remains mixed. Orben, Dienlin, and Przybylski (2019) found only a small average association between digital-technology use and adolescent wellbeing, while other research identifies greater risks for particular users and patterns of engagement. The defensible conclusion is not that platforms ruin every adolescent, but that a major developmental environment was commercialised before its long-term consequences were understood.

This is the meaning of cognitive atrophy in the argument. It refers to the weakening of practices: sustained attention, boredom tolerance, reflective judgement, face-to-face negotiation, internal memory, and independent initiation, when the surrounding environment continually rewards speed, novelty, response, and assistance. A person may retain full intellectual capacity while becoming less practised in using it without technological prompting.

Division, Fragmentation, and the Loss of a Common World

The social crisis extends beyond individual attention. Platforms have also altered the conditions under which communities and public narratives are formed. McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook (2001) demonstrated the importance of homophily: people tend to associate with others who resemble them. Digital platforms can make this ordinary tendency scalable, searchable, measurable, and commercially valuable. The user can find an audience that confirms an existing identity, while platform systems can learn which forms of confirmation prolong engagement.

Research on selective exposure, partisan sorting, and affective polarisation suggests that digital media can contribute to political division, although they do not create all division by themselves. Törnberg (2022) argued that digital media can drive affective polarisation through partisan sorting. Harris and colleagues' (2023) SPIR framework similarly emphasises the interaction between selection, platform design, incentives, and real-world context. This is a more credible model than the claim that an algorithm independently brainwashes a population. Political resentment, inequality, institutional failure, cultural conflict, and strategic manipulation pre-exist platforms. Platforms can nevertheless amplify and monetise these conditions.

Putnam's (2000) account of declining civic participation offers a useful background theory. Communities depend upon repeated activities in which people encounter one another as more than consumers or opponents. Clubs, associations, local institutions, public broadcasters, schools, workplaces, and shared rituals have historically created overlapping worlds of reference. They have never been perfectly inclusive, but they provided opportunities for people with different interests to inhabit a common environment. When communication moves into personalised feeds, the common background becomes thinner.

This does not mean that everyone previously shared one unified narrative or that the pre-digital public sphere was harmonious. The claim is more modest and more serious: the number of institutions capable of producing common reference points has weakened relative to the power of personalised distribution. People can now inhabit different informational realities while using the same public language. A political event, war, scientific finding, or local dispute can be experienced through radically different emotional and factual frames.

The result is not just disagreement; liberal democracy requires disagreement. The problem is disagreement without a sufficiently shared world in which disagreement can be negotiated. The owner of a platform may not choose the content of every post, but the architecture determines how rapidly it spreads, which communities see it, whether it is rewarded, and whether correction can compete with emotional impact. That architecture has become a political institution without being fully governed as one.

The Impossible Exit

If the problem were only social media, individual withdrawal might be a realistic solution. A person could delete applications, turn off notifications, and return to other forms of communication. The problem is that the internet has become more than a collection of optional platforms. It is now an infrastructure of ordinary life e.g. employment and economic subsistence itself. The digital world is present in employment, education, financial services, health systems, transport, government, security, domestic appliances, and social administration. Internet-connected devices are increasingly embedded in homes and workplaces e.g. the internet of things. Participation may still be voluntary in a narrow legal sense, but non-participation carries substantial practical costs.

This produces the central existential paradox. The system is experienced as harmful, but it is also experienced as necessary. It is criticised as distracting while being required for work. It is feared as manipulative while being used to locate information. It is blamed for division while being relied upon for political expression. It is rejected in principle but retained in practice because the surrounding world has been organised around it.

Total disconnection is therefore the only theoretically complete solution, but it is not a viable social solution. A person can disconnect from a platform; a society cannot easily disconnect from an infrastructure on which its institutions depend. The Internet of Things extends this dependence beyond the screen. The digital environment is no longer merely where people go. It is increasingly what the built environment assumes.

Willing participation must therefore be understood within constraints. People choose platforms, but workers, parents, students, and citizens increasingly need digital systems they did not design. Exit is possible at the level of an application but costly at the level of social participation.

The Accountability Crisis: Look to the Owners

The target of frustration should therefore shift. Children and parents can make poor decisions, and individual responsibility remains real. But the main political and moral gaze should fall on the owners and operators of the internet structures that made this scale of dependence possible. Internet companies built systems that extract behavioural data, optimise engagement, personalise exposure, and distribute social rewards at global scale. They cannot reasonably claim that all consequences belong to users when the design of the environment is their central commercial product.

Government absenteeism is also part of the crisis. Vines's (2024) chronology traces Australian platform regulation from the 2015 children's online-safety legislation through inquiries ending in 2023, documenting concerns about harm, power, privacy, data, and misinformation. The ACCC was examining competition, advertising, journalism, and platform power by 2017,

publishing its major report in 2019 (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2019).

Zuboff's (2019) surveillance capitalism helps explain the lag. Behavioural data became profitable across a supply chain involving platforms, advertisers, data services, investors, and purchasers of prediction. Governments tolerated self-regulation while digital growth promised innovation, revenue, productivity, and convenient services. Regulation trailed commercial adaptation because governments were responsible for controlling the system but increasingly dependent on its economy. Absenteeism was partly a failure to act decisively against a profitable infrastructure whose costs were displaced onto citizens and communities.

The appropriate response is not to abolish liberal-democratic expression. A democratic society must protect the individuals thought, dissent, protest, satire, minority positions, journalism, political organisation, and the right to challenge institutions and popular viewpoints. Nor should 'social cohesion' become a justification for imposing one approved ideology. The problem lies in confusing freedom of expression with freedom from accountability for the machinery that ranks, amplifies, targets, monetises, and accelerates expression.

Governments should genuinely and collaboratively (via extensive and comprehensive cross-sectional consultation) legislate the structures rather than merely policing individual speech. This could include meaningful transparency about recommender systems; independent auditing of high-risk design features; limits on manipulative defaults and dark patterns; strong privacy protections; restrictions on behavioural microtargeting; obligations to provide chronological or non-personalised alternatives; accessible researcher access; due process for moderation; protection against coordinated inauthentic behaviour; and requirements that

platforms assess systemic effects on children, public institutions, and social cohesion. The aim would be to make democratic participation more genuinely free by reducing the invisible pressures that currently shape what becomes visible and rewarding.

Yet, this is where the proposed crisis becomes somewhat darker dear reader.

Effective guardrails may be introduced after platforms have already helped produce generational distrust and division. Regulation can reduce future amplification, but it cannot easily retract beliefs, restore damaged relationships, rebuild lost institutions, or return a common public world. None of these have ever existed in a perfect form however consider the erosion of substance therein over the past 25 years: ask yourself – if anything, what has already been eroded or lost (or gained) associated with platform amplification? The owners are accountable for the architecture, but society must still live with the consequences of the architecture's previous operation.

Why It Is Too Late

The phrase 'too late' should not be used to claim that individuals cannot recover. Human beings can change habits, rebuild attention, form relationships, and create institutions. Nor should it be used to claim that every social-media effect is negative. The argument is about historical scale and reversibility.

First, the technology has been embedded across generations. Children have encountered platforms during development; adults have incorporated them into identity and work; institutions have redesigned themselves around digital communication. The system is reproduced through ordinary practice. Each generation does not merely inherit devices. It

inherits expectations that social life should be immediate, searchable, responsive, visible, and personalised.

Second, the damage is not confined to individual wellbeing. It is distributed through families, schools, workplaces, news systems, political parties, and civic associations. A child may be protected from an account while remaining surrounded by adults and institutions whose communication habits are platform-shaped. This is why an age restriction cannot independently repair social cohesion.

Third, discontent has been accumulated and amplified by actors who were able to secure reach through the same infrastructures. Some are malicious; others are opportunistic, extremist, conspiratorial, commercially motivated, or strategically political – pluralistic menace and associated disorientation are arguably now imbued within the modern *Zeitgeist*. They do not need to invent every grievance. They need only to identify grievances, connect them to a target, and circulate them through systems that reward emotional response. The outcome can be a society in which suspicion travels faster than correction and outrage becomes a reliable form of belonging. At what cost? What is at stake? What is changed, changing and towards what end?

Fourth, even a genuinely viable solution would operate on a long temporal horizon. Children would need to grow up with different practices of attention, sociality, civic participation, and meaning. Adults would need to model those practices. Schools and communities would need to provide alternatives. Public institutions would need to regain trust. A generation may be required before a different social environment becomes normative. In the meantime, most

people remain reliant on the conveniences and crutches that make the current system difficult to leave.

The metaphor of atrophy is appropriate only if it preserves the possibility of rehabilitation while acknowledging disuse. A muscle that has been neglected is not necessarily destroyed, but rebuilding it requires sustained conditions that are different from those that produced the weakness. Western and modern societies have not yet created those conditions at scale.

Quick Thought Experiment: The Systemised Self and the Hollow Absolute

The long-term philosophical danger can be described through the speculative theoretical concept of The Systemised Self (Galu & Kairos, 2026). This is not a diagnosis of all internet users and not a synonym for frequent technology use. It is a speculative terminal state in which a person's preferences, habits, memories, relationships, identity, and decisions are increasingly organised through systems of prediction, recommendation, ranking, convenience, and feedback.

The Systemised Self remains capable of choosing. The problem is that the conditions of choice are increasingly supplied by the system. What appears as preference may be a response to repeated recommendation. What appears as identity may be a profile assembled from past behaviour. What appears as social belonging may depend upon quantified approval. What appears as knowledge may be a personalised stream calibrated to sustain attention. The self is not eliminated; it becomes progressively legible and responsive to external systems – mediated, curated, invented.

The Hollow Absolute (Galu & Kairos, 2026) names the final paradox. The system becomes practically absolute because it is difficult to escape and increasingly necessary for ordinary participation. It becomes functionally authoritative because it determines what is visible, relevant, recommended, connected, and rewarded. Yet it is hollow because it cannot provide a substantive answer to the question of meaning. It can tell a person what is popular, efficient, likely, or engaging. It cannot tell them why they should care, what they owe to others, or what makes a life worth living.

Marcuse's (1964) account of one-dimensional society is relevant here. A system can narrow the horizon of thought not by banning every alternative, but by making alternatives difficult to imagine or impractical to enact. The modern algorithmic system (transformer based large language models) does not necessarily command people to believe one doctrine. It can instead make its own categories: engagement, reach, relevance, speed, visibility and optimisation appear to be the natural measures of value.

The ban therefore arrives at a philosophical threshold. It attempts to preserve children from a system whose deeper logic has already entered adult identity and institutional life. The question is no longer only whether children should use social media. It is whether a society that cannot practically disconnect can still prevent the system from becoming the primary organiser of human meaning.

Counterargument: Why the Ban Still Matters

The essay's bleak conclusion should not obscure the genuine value of the policy. A delay can matter, developmental timing matters. Reducing exposure during adolescence may lessen some harms even if it cannot restore the whole social environment. The ban can also shift

responsibility from families toward companies, generate public debate, and create political pressure for stronger platform accountability. Perhaps it is the first logical step in the right direction; however, its telos must be comprehensive in order to reach beyond palliative impacts alone.

There are also serious objections. Social media can support young people who are isolated, disabled, geographically distant, or marginalised. It can provide information, peer support, creative expression, political participation, and access to communities unavailable locally. Age assurance may create privacy risks. Enforcement may be inconsistent, and determined young people may evade restrictions. A ban may push some activity into less visible services, human competition and innovation mobilises quickly where opportunity and a vacuum exist. It may also encourage parents and institutions to outsource moral education to the state rather than teach young people how to navigate digital environments.

These criticisms are not peripheral, they propose to demonstrate why the answer cannot be a simple prohibition of communication. The strongest policy must protect children without denying their rights to information, association, and expression. It must also distinguish between harmful content, harmful design, and ordinary social interaction. The evidence does not support treating all use as equivalent. This may well become the fundamental Platonic dialogue of the 21st Century e.g. where does expression end and harm begin, and what therefore is the essence of freedom?

Nevertheless, the counterargument does not refute the central thesis. It shows that a ban may be a useful instrument within a larger programme while remaining incapable of solving the

historical problem. The policy can be good and still be too late, it can reduce future harm while leaving accumulated harm substantially intact.

What Can Still Be Done

If there is no complete solution, there can still be meaningful obligations. Governments should regulate platform owners with a focus on design, data, amplification, transparency, and accountability rather than relying primarily on individual discipline. Liberal-democratic expression should remain protected, but private infrastructures that organise public attention should not operate as if their only obligation were to maximise engagement. This is why the political debate determining ‘the essence of civil human epistemic freedom’ is a fundamental dialogue in parallel to the evolution of algorithmic systems. The ‘essence’ would inform the foundational pillars and guardrails of modern Western liberal democracy at a time when it is arguably vulnerable.

Schools should not merely enforce bans. They should create forms of social and intellectual life that make disconnection possible: sustained reading, practical collaboration, debate, art, sport, local participation, face-to-face conflict resolution, and unquantified achievement. Families and adults must also confront the contradiction of demanding that children disconnect while remaining permanently available themselves. Hegels telos and absolute spirit feature art, religion and philosophy as critical to human freedom and expression towards self-recognition and recognition of the self in the other, reconciling the disparate into a unifying societal purpose and end.

These measures are mitigation, not a clean exit. Their purpose is to preserve attention, patience, trust, judgement, and the ability to belong without being continuously measured.

Conclusion

Australia's school social-media restrictions are a positive response to a real problem. They may create valuable developmental distance and place some responsibility where it belongs: on the platforms that designed the environment. But the policy is too late to transform the wider condition by itself. The internet is now ubiquitous, adaptable, and embedded in how Western societies work, learn, communicate, trade, govern, and belong. Complete disconnection is theoretically attractive but practically unavailable.

The most serious responsibility lies with the owners and operators of the technological structures themselves. Governments must regulate those structures in a way that protects liberal democratic expression while enforcing minimum civil societal standards against manipulative design, opaque amplification, coordinated abuse, and the commercial intensification of division. Yet even effective guardrails arrive after years of generational exposure. They may prevent further deterioration, but they cannot instantly reverse distrust, fragmented identities, damaged institutions, or the loss of common narratives.

This is why the issue is proposed as existential. The question is whether a society can remain self-directing while depending upon systems that increasingly organise attention, preference, identity, and public reality. One speculative endpoint is the Systemised Self, which still experiences agency while the conditions of agency are supplied by technological prediction. The Hollow Absolute is the speculative final contradiction: practically unavoidable, functionally authoritative, and unable to provide substantive meaning.

The ban may close one entrance to the system, but it cannot dismantle it or restore generations already formed within it. No practical, complete, and immediately felt solution currently exists. What remains is limiting further harm where it is demonstrated and preserving spaces in which people can still ask what they are becoming before the system answers for them.

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