

Communications & Technology: Parental Consent to Join Online Social Networks
Senate Bill 4

Article 1:

Consequences of social-network parental controls

By: Larry Magid January 20, 2009

Last week I wrote about the final report of the Internet Safety Technical Task Force that dispelled some myths about predator danger, pointing out that--while predators remain a threat--teens are far more likely to be bullied, harassed, or even sexually solicited by another young person than by an adult predator.

The task force, on which I served as a representative of the nonprofit ConnectSafely.org, was asked by a group of state attorneys general to evaluate technical solutions for keeping kids safe online. One of the most heralded technologies--supported by several attorneys general--would be to mandate technology that would validate the age and identities of minors.

Some of the proposed age-verification schemes would require access to school records--a controversial notion in its own right. Most would require some type of parental involvement or approval, including requiring a parent's approval before a teenager could use an interactive service like MySpace or Facebook.

On the surface that seems reasonable. After all, parents must concur before their kid can get a driver's license or even a tooth extraction. But medical care and driving are not the same as expressing oneself or seeking out information. Requiring age verification or parental permission could take us down a prickly and potentially dangerous path.

To begin with, as my fellow task force member Marsali Hancock, president of the iKeepSafe Coalition, observed in her blog, "we have no consistent and credible way to determine who is a custodial parent and who is a child. In today's Internet environment, this obstacle is insurmountable." Add to this some very strong concerns about privacy, security, and potential commercial misuse of student data, and the obstacles to these schemes get bigger and bigger.

Even if age could be verified, there is a big question over whether it would accomplish anything, considering that kids are more vulnerable to harassment by other kids than being harmed by adults.

As an addendum to the task force report, my ConnectSafely.org co-director Anne Collier and I attached a memo in which we observed that the very children who are most at risk are often those who come from homes where the parents are least able or willing to provide support. The very parents who ought to be increasing supervision of their children's online activities are those who are least likely to do so, regardless of the tools available to them, because at-risk kids often come from homes providing limited support.

There are also parents who for a variety of reasons--including political, cultural, or religious beliefs, ignorance of the facts, or fear--would deliberately prevent their teens from accessing social-networking sites.

Unintended consequences

Keeping kids off these services could, in some cases, have severe, negative unintended consequences. A graphic example is the number of referrals directly from MySpace and Facebook to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, which is evidence that peers are among the most important referrers of troubled teens. Undoubtedly, there are teenagers alive today who might not be if it weren't for social-networking sites.

Other examples of unintended consequences include teens who are abused, neglected, or otherwise mistreated at home being denied access to a venue for discussing issues pertaining to their own families, including how to find help. There are teens seeking support when caught up in divorces or domestic conflict where the legal guardian wishes to "protect" them from their other parent. I also worry about teens who might lose access to resources to help them find their way out of eating disorders, drug use, cutting, and other self-destructive behavior.

There are parents who, for a variety of not-so-good reasons, might deliberately try to suppress their teen's exploration and expression. I'm reminded of a scene from the movie "Milk" where Harvey Milk gets a call from a gay teenager in Minnesota who is on the verge of suicide because his parents want to "fix" him. I've also heard cases of kids being denied access to information that is counter to their parents' political or religious beliefs.

I also worry about teens who think they might have a sexually transmitted disease being prevented from getting help, and pregnant teenage girls being unable to explore their options.

I am most concerned that at-risk youths will suffer as a result of age verification because it will be almost impossible for them to get parental consent if their parents aren't around to give such consent or don't have the skills to complete the forms. Among them would be some children whose parents will be reluctant to fill out forms in fear of deportation or other legal consequences, as well as teens of parents who are in the United States legally but lack the language skills or literacy to comply.

<https://www.cnet.com/news/privacy/consequences-of-social-network-parental-controls/>

Article 2:

Australia plans to force parental consent for minors on social media

By: Reuters October 25, 2021

Australia plans to make social media companies obtain parental consent for users under the age of 16 and is threatening fines of up to 10 million Australian dollars (\$7.5 million) for internet platforms which fail to comply, under draft legislation published on Monday.

Social media companies, which include anonymous forums like Reddit and smartphone dating apps like Bumble, would also be required to take all reasonable steps to determine users' ages and prioritize children's interests when collecting data, the Online Privacy Bill said.

The new proposed rules would put Australia among the most stringent countries in terms of age controls for social media, and build on efforts to rein in the power of Big Tech, following mandatory licensing payments for media outlets and plans to toughen laws against online misinformation and defamation.

Facebook this month faced anger from US lawmakers after a former company employee and whistleblower handed thousands of documents to congressional investigators amid concerns the company had harmed children's mental health and stoked societal divisions — a development cited by Australian lawmakers on Monday.

"We are ensuring [Australians'] data and privacy will be protected and handled with care," said Attorney-General Michaelia Cash in a statement.

"Our draft legislations means that these companies will be punished heavily if they don't meet that standard," she added.

Assistant Minister for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention David Coleman said the "leak of Facebook's own internal research demonstrates the impact social media platforms can have on body image and the mental health of young people".

Facebook's director of public policy in Australia and New Zealand, Mia Garlick, said in a statement that the company was reviewing the proposed law and understood "the importance of ensuring Australia's privacy laws evolve at a comparable pace to the rate of innovation and new technology we're experiencing today".

Under the draft law, privacy watchdog — the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner — would receive full investigation and enforcement powers, with the ability to fine a corporation up to 10 million Australian dollars, 10% its annual turnover or three times the financial benefit of any breach.

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/25/tech/australia-social-media-parental-consent-intl-hnk/index.html#:~:text=Australia%20plans%20to%20make%20social,draft%20legislation%20published%20on%20Monday.>

Article 3

Bill advances to require parental consent for teens on social media

By: John Mortiz March 24, 2022

In an effort to stem the rise of mental health disorders among teenagers, state lawmakers this week advanced legislation that would require parental consent for children under the age of 16 to engage in social media.

The legislature's Children's Committee have unanimous consent to the bill on Tuesday after receiving supportive testimony from several children's welfare organizations, including the Connecticut PTA and the state's Office of the Child Advocate.

Supporters of the bill pointed to studies linking social media use to a rise in mental health and mood

disorders impacting teenagers, such as depression, body dysmorphia and suicidal thoughts. Other issues, including cyberbullying and sexual exploitation, are also a concern as children begin using social media at younger ages.

The co-chair of the Children's Committee, state Sen. Saud Anwar, D-South Windsor, said that social media platform like Facebook have exacerbated the issue by using data collected from teens' social media account to target them with advertising that encourages spending even more time online.

"They make money on a young boy or girl spending more time on their website and increasing their screen time," Anwar said.

Social media companies that target their platforms to children under the age of 13 are currently regulated by the federal Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, which requires parental consent for websites to collect personal information about children covered by the law.

Advocates for tougher regulations, however, argue that the law and the platforms' age restrictions are too easy for children to bypass by entering a different name or date of birth.

Anwar said lawmakers are seeking to address those concerns by establishing a new method for platforms to obtain a parent's consent before allowing teenagers to create a profile, though they have yet to settle upon a solution.

"We don't want it to be just a click, we want it to be more than that at the entry point," Anwar said.

None of the major tech platforms provided testimony on the bill to the Children's Committee during a hearing last week, though Anwar said lobbyists for the companies are keeping track of the bill's progress.

Representatives from The Connecticut Group, a Farmington lobbying firm that has previously represented Facebook's parent company, Meta Platforms, did not respond to a request for comment Wednesday.

The legislation received bipartisan support on its way out of committee this week, and is sponsored by three Republicans in addition to Anwar, the Democratic committee chairman.

In addition to requiring parental consent for children under 16 to use social media, Anwar said the bill will be revised before heading to the Senate floor to include a provision allowing parents to request that a social media platform remove their child's account.

If passed, the legislation would go into effect on Oct. 1.

http://digitalpub.chron.com/publication/?i=741896&article_id=4238196&view=articleBrowser&ver=html5