BIG BROTHER WATCH

Big Brother Watch Briefing on a Proposed Social Media Ban for Under-16s

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About Big Brother Watch

Big Brother Watch is a civil liberties and privacy campaigning organisation, fighting for a free future. We're determined to reclaim our privacy and defend freedoms at this time of enormous technological change. We're a fiercely independent, non-partisan and non-profit group who work to roll back the surveillance state and protect rights in Parliament, the media or the courts if we have to. We publish unique investigations and pursue powerful public campaigns. We work relentlessly to inform, amplify and empower the public voice so we can collectively reclaim our privacy, defend our civil liberties and protect freedoms for the future.

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Introduction

Whilst well-intentioned, proposals for a government-imposed social media ban for children under 16 years old would fail to keep children safe, and introduce serious unintended consequences affecting the rights of the UK's 68 million internet users.

In summary, for children, the proposal would:

- Fail to reliably keep under-16s off social media

- Cause social media platforms to abandon a raft of child safety measures, other than the unreliable age-gate

- Drive young people to less regulated corners of the internet

- Prevent particularly marginalised and isolated children from enjoying the benefits of social media, including seeking peer support and specialist resources via online communities

- Exclude children from reading and engaging with legitimate political discourse, hindering their civic development and critical thinking skills

For children and adults alike, the proposal would:

- Introduce **mandatory biometric age checks and digital ID requirements** for the entire UK population, locking millions of people out of social media who do not have or do not wish to use ID online, and creating serious cybersecurity risks for those who do

- End anonymity on social media, with serious consequences for safety and freedom of expression. This would particularly affect (underage) victims of domestic and sexual abuse, as well as whistleblowers, journalists and members of LGBTQ communities.

Far from keeping under-16s safer, a blanket ban on social media would cut children off from educational resources, community support groups, and children's safeguarding services. As a result, **42 leading children's organisations, experts and bereaved families, including the NSPCC and Molly Rose Foundation have said** [in a joint statement](#) **that they do not support a social media ban.**

Human rights experts, including the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights[1] and Amnesty International,[2] oppose a social media ban for children.

Big Brother Watch recommends that parliamentarians oppose a government-imposed social media ban.

To effectively tackle the harms caused by children's excessive use of social media, we suggest that the government:

- Supports parents with accessible information about how to impose healthy, age-appropriate restrictions on their children's internet use (only a third of parents currently use any parental controls)[3]

- Supports children to build healthy relationships with social media by encouraging digital literacy education in schools

- More effectively regulates data exploitation by 'Big Tech' social media companies

1   https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/regulate-platforms-not-children-council-of-europe-commissioner-for-human-rights-urges-caution-over-social-media-bans
2   https://www.amnesty.org.au/social-media-ban-for-children-and-young-people-an-ineffective-quick-fix-that-will-not-prevent-online-harms/
3   https://www.internetmatters.org/hub/news-blogs/research-tracker-awareness-usage-parental-controls/

<u>PRIVACY</u>

<u>De facto digital ID checks</u>

To attempt to "ban" under-16s from social media, platforms would first have to identify whether a user is under or over 16. Age verification processes are necessarily invasive, and pose severe risks to the privacy and personal data of children and adults alike.

Currently, age verification technologies include ID uploads, biometric face scans and algorithm-driven behavioural analysis. In practice, ID uploads will be required for many millions of internet users, and almost all of the younger generation – biometric age estimations cannot distinguish between a 16 year old the day before and the day after their 16th birthday, and cannot reliably detect the age of many millions more of people who may appear younger or older than they are. As a result, they will have to upload a copy of an ID. Given that 16 year olds cannot drive, the ID is likely to be a passport for those who hold one. Even if the government or the platform permit biometric age estimations for age verification rather than mandatory ID checks, ID checks will be a de facto requirement for millions: "false negative" biometric checks, i.e. checks that wrongly estimate 16+ year olds as under 16, will necessitate an individual to upload a copy of their ID as an alternative method of age verification.

<u>Biometrics and privacy risks</u>

Proponents of age estimation technology may argue that a social media company need not collect IDs in order to verify an individual's age, and argue that biometric face scans offer a less invasive alternative to ID uploads. However, such age checks are highly invasive and obstructive, as discussed above. Many responsible parents and teachers should, and do, teach young people to closely guard their biometric data and *not* to exchange such sensitive personal data, or indeed to be pressured to use webcams to send personal photos, online.

Further, processing deeply sensitive biometric data jeopardises security by depending on the compliance and cybersecurity of each individual provider. Even when a third-party company claims not to store this data, there is no absolute safeguard against misuse, regulatory non-compliance, data breaches, or attacks from criminal hackers or hostile states.

In 2025, ID photos used to verify the ages of over 70,000 Discord users were leaked in a data breach after hackers targeted the third-party company it used for age verifications.

The mass rollout of age-verification requirements for all social media users would increase the likelihood of similar, even larger cyberattacks. [1]

[1] Chia, O. 'ID photos of 70,000 users may have been leaked, Discord says,' BBC, 9 October 2025.

National cybersecurity risks

Because every digital age verification method gathers highly sensitive personal data, they create serious cybersecurity risks and goldmines for hackers.

The mass collection of the ID or biometric information of 68 million British internet users has serious implications for UK cybersecurity and privacy, as a breach of databases containing this information would put millions of people, businesses and institutions at risk.

Behavioural profiling and privacy risks

Another option presented as being a privacy-friendly form of age-verification is behavioural profiling. For this method, platforms engage in granular analysis of a user's behaviour, ranging from what videos they click on to how fast they scroll, to estimate a user's age. This method relies on assumptions of how a user under the age of 16 might engage with a platform but in doing so, effectively bans 'childish' behaviour rather than children themselves. Such a method would unfairly discriminate against the many over-16s who engage with child-friendly content for personal or professional reasons, as well as adults with learning disabilities who may display 'childish' behaviour online. Under this system, every microscopic interaction with a platform would be used to build a profile of a user which, given the nature of social media, would be linked to a named account. **Besides being ineffective, behavioural profiling is far from privacy friendly and represents a frightening step towards widespread granular personal surveillance.**

An end to online anonymity

The cybersecurity risks posed by age verification technology have devastating consequences for online anonymity. There are many legitimate reasons why law-abiding people may want to access social media anonymously, including for the purposes of seeking advice on financial, relationship or health matters, or to participate in civic life by sharing political views, calling for change or expressing critique against the government or an employer.

Online anonymity is especially important for maintaining the safety of vulnerable people, including victims of domestic and/or sexual assault, members of the LGBTQ community, people belonging to (or distancing themselves from) religious minorities, or people struggling with stigmatised issues like addiction. In many cases, members of these groups already struggle to seek help or advice, and we are deeply concerned

that mandatory age verification would put up yet another barrier preventing them from doing so. Especially for vulnerable people without access to an ID (for instance because an abuser has confiscated it), or those not willing to take the risk that biometric information gathered during a face scan could be made public or sold, the widespread rollout of mandatory age verification technology would limit their ability to communicate freely and restrict their access to information.

Under widespread age verification requirements for social media, a 17-year-old gay boy struggling with religious extremist parents, a 26-year-old victim of domestic abuse, a 37-year-old woman considering an abortion, a 48-year-old man with a gambling addiction and a 72-year-old in serious debt would all be prevented from accessing anonymous support on affected platforms.

INEQUALITY

Discrimination risks

The privacy risks associated with age verification would significantly affect some groups more than others. Biometric age assurance technology, particularly when applied to teenagers, is riddled with inaccuracy as well as racial biases.[4] In cases where it underestimates the age of someone over 16, or is not able to identify them due to facial disabilities, users would be forced to upload an ID document to access the service, since this is the only reliable way to verify an individual's age. This means that a social media ban for under-16s would create a society in which a deeply flawed technology decides who does and does not need to present their ID in order to enjoy their right to access legitimate, even child-friendly information on social media. **In many cases, members of already marginalised and over-surveilled groups, would be forced to give up more of their privacy than others to access the same online services.**

A blanket ban on social media would disadvantage children and exacerbate inequalities

For thousands of children, social media is an essential lifeline on which they rely that is central to their wellbeing. **Big Brother Watch is deeply concerned that an overnight ban on social media for under-16s would cause real and serious harm to some children.**

For under-16s rejected by their families for their sexual orientation, or children suffering from isolation as a result of bullying, social media provides a space where they can seek help, community and joy. For children living in geographically isolated or

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4 Evershed, N., Nicholas, J., 'Social media ban trial data reveals racial bias in age checking software: just how inaccurate is it?', *The Guardian,* 18 September 2025; 'Artificially Intelligent, Genuinely Harmful: AI and Age Assessments in the UK Asylum System', *Right to Remain,* 31 July 2025.

deprived areas, social media provides resources and help that they may not otherwise have access to. Highlighting the central role that online connectivity plays in the wellbeing of vulnerable children, 42 children's charities including Childline and the Molly Rose Foundation have opposed a blanket ban, and research by Internet Matters has found that 'the positive impacts of being online continue to outweigh the negatives'.[5]

Social media platforms can significantly empower children to shape their own learning by exploring interests, skills, hobbies, and languages not offered in a school context. Not all children have easy access to public libraries or safe areas to play, and not all schools have after school programs. Many parents do not have the time to drive children to and from scheduled activities, or lack money to pay for dance classes, music lessons, art courses or hackathons. **A ban would only serve to exacerbate the inequality of opportunity between children from rich families in well-resourced neighbourhoods and poor children in deprived areas.** This would particularly affect children whose physical or mental disabilities limit or preclude them from participating in offline social or creative activities.

As one of the most multifaceted technologies in history, the impact of social media on children fundamentally depends on how it is used. A 14-year old scrolling on their phone may be watching inane videos - or they may be learning to code on YouTube, watching painting tutorials on Pinterest, providing feedback on someone's creative writing on Tumblr, commenting on a news story on Facebook, reading how other teenagers chose their GCSE subjects on Reddit, creating inside jokes with cousins on Snapchat, watching 'a day in my life' vlogs of someone with their dream job on Instagram, or using TikTok to upload music they created after sampling another teenager's music on Spotify. Some of these activities used to happen offline. **But when youth clubs, music shops and local libraries have been closing at record rates,[6] forcing children off social media will push countless, particularly disadvantaged children, into social, intellectual and creative isolation.**

Social media usage amongst children is not a black and white issue. For many children, the sense of safety, acceptance and community created by social media is not additional to their offline life – it is the only one they have. Banning social media overnight will cause these children serious and real harm. Every child deserves to be protected in a way that allows them to thrive. We are concerned that while well-

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5 Internet Matters, *Children's Wellbeing in a Digital World, Year Four Index Report* (2025)*, p. 5.*
6   Harris, J. 'Britain's youth clubs have been quietly decimated. What's most revealing is that few seem to care', *The Guardian,* 12 October 2025; Lynch, P. Tomas, P. 'Public libraries in 'crisis' as councils cut services', *BBC,* 3 September 2024.

intentioned, a blanket ban on social media will not achieve these aims, and will instead have disastrous consequences for children and adults alike.

CENSORSHIP

Age-assurance requirements seriously impact the free expression and civic participation of over and under-16s

While many age-verification companies purport not to store their user's personal data, these assurances will likely not be enough to allay the fears of whistleblowers, journalists, campaigners, and dissidents aiming to share their views anonymously. The free speech implications of this are serious. **Big Brother Watch is concerned that a significant number of people will be deterred from participating in democratic activity including journalism or activism knowing that their personal data is at risk.**

Over half of British adults use social media as their main source of news, and amongst 12–15-year-olds, this figure is even higher.[7] While there are serious Social media is a revolutionary tool that has transformed democratic life – from political discourse to grassroots protest movements. **Widespread age-verification requirements would force Britons to sacrifice their privacy or risk their data just to access the news in the way they are used to, and lock under-16s out grassroots civic discourse entirely.**

While children do not enjoy all of the same freedoms as adults, the UNHCR explicitly grants them the right to organise politically, for instance through protests. But children already face significant hurdles when exercising this right.[8] Being locked out of all forms of social media would exacerbate these hurdles significantly and make **youth-led political movements such as the Climate Marches near impossible.**

A ban on social media for under-16s would also cut children off from observing and participating in legitimate political discourse altogether. Rather than being able to listen first-hand to the experiences of people across the world facing political repression, under-16s would be forced to receive all their news from large, mainstream media organisations. Given plans to give 16-year-olds the vote by 2029, these proposals would severely undermine the civic competence and political literacy amongst young soon-to-be voters.

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7 See: 'News Consumption in the UK: 2025, Research Findings', *Ofcom*, 21 July 2025.
8   'Children's Right to Protest', *Amnesty International,* 3 August, 2021.

'Social media' is not well-defined. A blanket ban gives the government sweeping powers.

Lawmakers around the world have struggled to define 'social media'. In many cases, there is little technical difference between platforms not typically considered 'social media' like Childline's moderated messaging board or local neighbourhood news forums, and widely-used social media platforms such as Reddit. The British government has previously attempted to define social media as a 'user-to-user service' – but this definition also includes educational platforms such as Wikipedia, Google Classroom, and safe, encrypted messaging apps like WhatsApp.

While the government may decide to follow in Australia's footsteps (noting the Australian social media ban is currently subject to a legal challenge[9]) and hand-pick a number of large social media platforms, this decision would necessarily be an arbitrary one with no technical foundation. Big Brother Watch is concerned that this would give **the government draconian powers to require users to forfeit their privacy when accessing websites it decides to target.** Under the Online Safety Act, social media content on controversial but legitimate political topics such as the situation in Gaza or the Ukraine war is sometimes already age-gated.[10] The dangerous possibility that a future government could abuse social media ban legislation to age-gate and thus strip anonymity from entire platforms that could be deemed politically challenging represents a highly concerning threat to democracy and free expression.

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9   https://www.digitalfreedomproject.org.au/our-case
10   Davies, N., Sardarizadeh, S., Murphy, M., 'Some Gaza and Ukraine posts blocked under new age checks,' *BBC,* 1 August, 2025.