

## Australia's Childish Fantasies: Age Verification for Social Media

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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*The Australian government has been in a banning mood of late. In keeping with an old, puritanical tradition, the killjoys and wowsers have seized the reins of power and snorting a good deal while doing so. In important matters such as anti-corruption and environmental protection, the government of Anthony Albanese is showing fewer teeth and no gumption. On foreign policy, it has proved craven in its Middle Eastern policy, obsequious to the United States, to which it has handed the wealth of the land to in the event of any future conflict Washington wishes to fight.*

With such an impoverished policy front, other areas for righteous indignation have been sought. And there is no better trendy (and trending) target than the devilry that is social media, traduced for creating any number of vague maladies of society.

Within such ills, one boringly conventional group has been found. When the wowsers are in charge, chances are they will always pick out the vulnerabilities of children and do their utmost to politicise them. Spare them, demands Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, from using and opening social media accounts unless they are of a certain age. (He's not quite too sure where to draw the line - a politician's old dilemma.) Keep them innocent from the horrors that lurk in the minefield that used to be quaintly called the Information Superhighway. Let government officials, supposedly in league with parents evidently incapable of influencing let alone instructing their children, come up with appropriate ditches, moats, and other barriers to guard against the digital monsters that approach the keep.

Inspired by South Australia's breathtakingly naïve Children (Social Media Safety) Bill 2024 to fine social media companies indifferent to excluding children under the age of 14 from using their platforms, along with a [report](#) by former High Court Chief Justice Robert French on how this might be done, the PM [told](#) the ABC that he was "committed to introducing legislation before the end of this year for age verification to make sure we get young people away from social harm." Such harm was "a scourge", involving, for instance, online bullying, or "material which causes social harm".

Typical to such proposals is the wistful glance to things past, preferably idealised and unblemished. Albanese's is curiously shorn of books and libraries. "I want to see kids off their devices and onto the footy fields and the swimming pools and the tennis courts." That's where the more traditional, good spirited bullying takes place.

These laws are yet another effort to concentrate power and responsibilities best held by the

citizenry, especially when it comes to decisions for individuals and family, in the hands of a bureaucratic-political class remunerated for reasons of paranoia and almost entirely devoid of merit.

Even before it reaches the legislative stage, sensible heads can spot the canyon like flaws in such verification regulations. Lisa Given, who cuts her teeth on studying information technology, [calls](#) it, with rank understatement, “a very problematic move.” By adopting such a prohibitive position, children also risked being excluded “from some very, very helpful supports on social media.”

Child advocacy group Alannah and Madeline [take the firm view](#) that raising the age is a sniff and a sneeze at the broader problem, band aid and the shallowest of balms. “The real issue is the underlying design elements of social media and its algorithms, recommender systems, and data harvesting, which can expose children and young people to inappropriate and harmful content, misinformation, predatory behaviour and other damaging harms such as extortion.”

This dotty regime is also based on the premise it will survive circumvention. It won't. Children will find a way, and technology will afford them the basis of doing so. In May, [documents uncovered](#) under Freedom of Information by *Guardian Australia* identified that the government's own communications department had doubts.

One document surveying the international state of age assurance technology dispiritingly noted that: “No countries have implemented an age verification mandate without issue.” The UK's *Digital Economy Act 2017*, which gave the regulator powers to impose penalties on websites not using age implementation systems to prevent minors accessing pornography, failed. The reasons: “multiple delays, technical difficulties and community concern for privacy”. (A current scheme in the UK, still in early stages, only applies to adult sites, not social media.)

Legal challenges are also noted in countries where age verification requirements have been imposed. In France, the age verification law gives websites the latitude to decide age verification for their users. In December 2021, Arcom, the digital regulator, commenced legal action against non-compliant websites in an effort to block them. To date, the issue remains bogged down in the courts. A similar law in Germany has also “faced difficulty in compliance and enforcement, with attempts to block non-compliant websites currently before the courts.”

In the United States – and here, the warning is prescient – attempts to block access in a number of states have seen defiant subversion. In Utah, the demand for Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) merrily rose by almost 1,000% following the announcement of a law imposing age verification requirements for porn sites. In Louisiana, VPN usage increased threefold after the commencement of a similar law.

The lists of defects in such proposals are monumentally impressive. Broadly speaking, they work (and fail) on the infantilisation principle. Children must be kept childlike by adults who fear growth. Keeping children immature and cocooned to certain realities, however ghastly, is a recipe for lifelong dysfunction and psychiatric bills. It is an incentive to deny that actions have consequences, that learning can be damnably difficult though, in many instances, deliciously rewarding. Instead of encouraging fine circumspection and growing maturity, these laws encourage comforting insularity and prolonged immaturity.

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***Dr. Binoy Kampmark** was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG). Email: [bkampmark@gmail.com](mailto:bkampmark@gmail.com)*

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