

Australian government prepares social media ban amid opposition to privacy and free speech violation

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7 December 2025

The Australian Labor government's ban on social media use by those under the age of 16 is set to be rolled out on December 10. The ban is not a child welfare measure but a direct intervention by the state to dictate how ordinary people will be allowed to use the internet.

While the immediate effect is to bar under-16s, the ban's enforcement mechanisms will have consequences for the entire population. Implementing an age-verification regime necessarily requires that every user be identified through biometric checks, face scans, or government and bank databases.

The nominal purpose of the world-first policy according to the government is supposedly to "protect" children's mental health. But the primary causes of distress, particularly among young people, are the government's own policies of austerity, housing unaffordability, militarism and the climate catastrophe.

Some mental health advocates, moreover, have warned that the ban will have a deleterious impact on that front, limiting the ability of children to communicate.

The real concern is that young people are being radicalised by what they are seeing and learning on social media platforms, including but not limited to the escalating environmental crisis, genocide in Gaza and return of fascism most sharply expressed in the second administration of US president Donald Trump. The ban's purpose, therefore, is to censor social media platforms where youth in particular are searching for information about and answers to these major issues.

Albanese formally announced the proposed ban on November 7 last year. Since then, the government has provided precious little information about how the ban would be implemented despite a "trial" period of only a few months.

The government has placed the onus on the social media companies themselves to take "reasonable steps" to ban under-16s from their platforms or risk a \$49-million fine.

Major tech corporations will be required to track social media users and demand personal information from Australians of all ages who plan to use various online platforms.

The immediate effect is intimidatory and chilling. Requiring ID or a facial snapshot to access platforms creates a barrier to anonymous political discussion and exposes users—especially young activists, migrants and dissidents—to targeting, undercutting the use of social media as an online space for political organising and cultural expression.

Indeed, Albanese affirmed in an interview with radio commentator Neil Mitchell in 2023 that, were he granted dictatorial powers, Albanese's first business would be to "Ban social media," due to the presence of "keyboard warriors who can anonymously say anything at all without any fear."

Initially, the list of platforms included in the ban was Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and X. Since then, the government has accepted the eSafety Commissioner's recommendation, based on flimsy arguments, that YouTube be added to the list. Reddit and streaming platform Kick were added earlier last month while Twitch, another popular streaming platform, was added less than three weeks out from the ban's start date.

The measure is incoherent in practice. Platforms like YouTube may remain viewable without login. This means parents won't know what their children are looking at, they will be subject to general algorithms and therefore even more at risk of the things that the government claims they are protecting children from.

In announcing the additional platforms added to the list, eSafety Commissioner Julie Inman Grant said: "eSafety has assessed eight platforms as requiring age restriction but their assessments will be ongoing and this list is dynamic." This leaves the door open for even more restriction of young peoples' access to social media platform after the ban begins.

The ban has drawn consternation from the social media platforms themselves, not over the democratic rights of ordinary users, but due to concerns that the ban will reduce usership and therefore profits linked to usage metrics and advertising revenue.

Most social media platforms have kept users in the dark about the precise methods they will use to implement the ban. Snapchat said in late November that users will need to verify their age via a bank using ConnectID, government-issued photo ID or selfie. Snapchat will be one of the most heavily affected platforms with about 440,000 users in Australia aged between 13 and 15 years.

Social media users who want to protect their identities online through pseudonyms are nominally protected under law and companies are required to provide age-verification options which do not require sharing of government IDs.

Cybersecurity experts warn that personal data will still be at risk as a result of the ban.

No credence can be given to any government or corporate claim that collected identification or biometric data will remain beyond the state's reach. Once age-verification systems are implemented, access by state agencies—police, intelligence services, or national security bodies—becomes routine, especially as Australia deepens its role in the imperialist redivision of the world including using data to attack political opponents.

The government this year announced new Australian Federal Police units which will, among other methods, use “electronic surveillance” to enforce “social cohesion.” The AFP will work with the Australian domestic intelligence agency ASIO and the global imperialist surveillance network the Five Eyes which also uses massive amounts of data to target dissidents and in strategic planning.

These privacy concerns and the broader social and political implications of the ban have led many children and others in the population to raise opposition.

Several petitions have been raised in recent months calling on the government to repeal the ban.

One petition which closed on 27 November garnered 21,901 signatures, highlighting the broad opposition which exists to the government's plans. The petition states that the ban would remove children's “rights and opportunities” by cutting them off from platforms which help “young people learn, connect, and express themselves.”

Last month, two 15-year-old students opened a legal case to be heard in the High Court. The challenge, to be heard in early December, raises that the social media ban will trample over the constitutionally implied right to freedom of political communication by blocking youth from alternative perspectives suppressed in the corporate media and education system.

In response to the legal challenges, Communications Minister Anika Wells said in parliament's Question Time last week that the government would not be “intimidated by threats” and would proceed with the ban.

The Albanese government understands that it sits atop a social powder keg most sharply expressed in younger generations who are confronted by a system which presents them a future of joblessness, homelessness, financial stress and war.

Amid a broader collapse of the two-party system in Australia, the social media ban is a desperate attempt to prevent the further politicisation of an entire generation increasingly opposed to the major parties and the corporate, militarist agendas they represent.

The ban is part of a broader assault on democratic rights in Australia and internationally including laws suppressing protest and attacks on anti-genocide demonstrators. The ruling elite is increasingly resorting to authoritarian measures to stifle political opposition as the environmental crisis, war and social inequality radicalise youth and the working class.

As the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) wrote in a statement on the social media ban in November 2024:

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality calls for the widest opposition to the legislation, including protests, school strikes and walkouts. Such a movement, defending the democratic rights of youth, must take up the broader issues faced by the young people, including the struggle against climate change, war and dictatorship. Ultimately, the younger generation can only secure its future by turning to a socialist perspective directed against the source of the crisis, capitalism itself.



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