 Reading time: 6 min.

On 10 December 2025, Australia became the first country in the world to ban social media use for under-16s, marking a turning point in the regulation of digital platforms. The law, which requires tech companies to implement effective measures to prevent access for under-16s or risk fines of up to 50 million Australian dollars, has reignited the global debate on the impact of social networks on young people's mental health. But perhaps the most revealing aspect of this discussion emerges from a disturbing paradox: the very leaders who created and manage these platforms drastically limit their use for their own children.

The Silicon Valley paradox: tech leaders restrict their children's access to their own products

Neal Mohan, CEO of YouTube since 2023 and named Time magazine's CEO of the Year for 2025, recently admitted to imposing strict restrictions on social media use for his three children. In an interview, Mohan stated that he and his wife actively limit the time their children spend on YouTube and other platforms, adopting stricter rules on weekdays and allowing more freedom at weekends. Mohan expressed his belief in the principle of moderation when it comes to online services and platforms for their three children. This stance is particularly significant considering Mohan leads one of the world's most popular video platforms, with billions of active users. His personal approach reveals a deep awareness of the risks these tools can pose to the development of young people.

Mohan is certainly not an isolated case. His predecessor, **Susan Wojcicki**, former CEO of YouTube, had adopted an even more restrictive policy. Wojcicki forbade her children from browsing videos on the main app, allowing them to use only YouTube Kids with strictly enforced time limits.
Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google and Mohan's superior, has spoken of carefully monitoring his children's use of technology.
Bill Gates, co-founder of Microsoft, is another emblematic example of this trend. Gates has spoken openly about not giving his children smartphones until they were teenagers. Gates recounted not giving his children mobile phones until they were 14, despite them complaining that other children had received them earlier. Furthermore, the Gates family had strict rules such as no devices at the dinner table.
Mark Cuban, the billionaire entrepreneur, went even further, installing Cisco routers and management software to monitor which apps his children were using

and to shut down phone activity when necessary. This active vigilance demonstrates the level of concern that even the most seasoned investors in the tech sector have about their own products.
More recently, **Steve Chen**, co-founder of YouTube, has raised a specific alarm about short-form content. Chen warned that short videos equate to shorter attention spans and stated that he would not want his children to consume exclusively this type of content, citing concerns about an inability to watch videos longer than 15 minutes.
Evan Spiegel of Snapchat limits his children to minimal screen time.
Steve Jobs, the late co-founder of Apple, was famous for limiting his children's iPad use, as recounted in biographies.
Tim Cook, the current CEO of Apple, has expressed concerns about excessive use, championing built-in tools like Screen Time.

The fact that the creators and leaders of social platforms restrict their own children's access to their products should give society profound pause for thought. As one commentator observed: The people who built social media don't trust it to raise their own children. This paradox raises fundamental questions about the ethical responsibility of tech companies and the duty to protect the most vulnerable users.
These personal choices contrast sharply with corporate strategies that prioritise growth over moderation.

The documented impact on mental health

The concerns of these tech leaders are not unfounded. Scientific research has produced a growing body of evidence on the risks associated with excessive social media use by young people. One American study found that teenagers aged 12 to 15 who used social media for more than three hours a day faced double the risk of poor mental health outcomes, including symptoms of depression and anxiety.
The World Health Organization has documented an alarming increase in problematic social media use among adolescents in the European region. Rates rose from 7% in 2018 to 11% in 2022, with girls reporting higher levels than boys (13% versus 9%). This data highlights not only the scale of the problem but also the gender differences in the impact of social media.
Research has identified several mechanisms through which social media can harm young people's mental health. Continuous social comparison is one of the most insidious factors. Teenagers spend hours curating their online identities, trying to

project an idealised image of themselves. Girls select hundreds of photos, agonising over which ones to post, while boys compete for attention by trying to outdo each other with increasingly extreme content.
Cyberbullying emerges as another critical factor. Research shows that teenagers' exposure to online discrimination and hate predicts increases in symptoms of anxiety and depression, even after controlling for how much teenagers are exposed to similar experiences offline. Online bullying can be more severe and therefore more damaging to psychological development than traditional bullying.

Algorithms and "behavioural cocaine"

A particularly worrying aspect concerns the very design of social platforms. The Australian Minister for Communications used a powerful metaphor, describing social media algorithms as "behavioural cocaine," citing the words of the feature's creator. This definition captures the essence of the problem: the platforms are designed to maximise user engagement, often at the expense of their well-being. Algorithms are programmed to promote any content in which the user shows interest. If a teenager searches for information on mental health conditions like depression or suicide, the algorithm will start feeding them more and more content on these topics, potentially creating an environment that reinforces negative thoughts.

The Australian law: a model for the world?

Australia's decision to ban social media for under-16s represents an unprecedented social experiment. The law, passed by Parliament in November 2024, came into force with significant public support: a poll found that 77% of Australians supported the age limit.
The platforms affected by the ban include Instagram, Facebook, Threads, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, Twitch, and Kick. Services such as YouTube Kids, Google Classroom, WhatsApp, and gaming platforms like Roblox and Discord are excluded. The responsibility for enforcement lies entirely with the tech companies, which must take "reasonable measures" to prevent under-16s from creating or maintaining accounts.
The Australian Prime Minister stated that the law gives control back to Australian families, affirming the right of children to be children and giving parents greater peace of mind. The stated goal is to get young people away from screens and onto sports fields, into art classes, and into real-life interactions.

Criticisms and doubts about effectiveness

Despite public support, the Australian law is not without its critics. UNICEF

Australia has expressed concern that the real solution should be to improve the safety of social media, not simply delay access. The organisation points out that social media also has positive aspects, such as education and keeping in touch with friends.
Critics argue that the ban could push young people towards less safe parts of the internet or encourage them to use VPNs to circumvent the restrictions. The law could lead children to alternative platforms or private apps like Telegram, pushing them into less regulated online spaces.

The role of parents and digital literacy education

Beyond government legislation, the crucial role of parents in educating their children about the conscious use of social media is clear. Active supervision and clear limits are essential.
Jonathan Haidt, a professor at New York University and author of “The Anxious Generation,” has argued that children should not have smartphones until they are 14. Haidt recommends giving children basic mobile phones instead of smartphones, stressing that a smartphone is not really a phone, it is a multi-purpose device through which the world can reach your children.
Open communication is very important. Rather than invasively monitoring the content of a teenager’s phone, it is suggested to keep lines of communication open and establish trust, so that young people feel comfortable turning to their parents if problems arise.

The WHO has stressed that digital literacy education is fundamental, recommending the implementation of programmes in schools that cover responsible social media use, online safety, critical thinking, and healthy gaming habits.
Schools should incorporate digital literacy education into their curricula, teaching students how to navigate social media in a healthy and productive way. This multidisciplinary approach, which integrates policy regulation, digital literacy, and targeted mental health interventions, will be essential for creating a healthier digital environment for adolescents.

Future prospects

The Australian initiative could create a global domino effect. Countries like Norway, France, Spain, Malaysia, and New Zealand are exploring similar bans. Denmark announced last month that it will ban social media access for anyone under 15, with the law potentially coming into effect as early as the middle of next year.
In the UK, recent regulations impose severe penalties on online companies that fail

to protect young users from harmful content. In the United States, similar attempts, such as those in Utah, have faced legal challenges, highlighting the controversial nature of such regulations.

The influence of social media on young people represents one of the most complex challenges of our digital age. Australia’s decision to ban access for under-16s, supported by the example of tech leaders who restrict their own children, highlights the seriousness of the problem. However, the solution cannot lie solely in a ban.
A multifaceted approach is needed that combines effective regulation, digital literacy education, active parental supervision, and, above all, greater responsibility from tech companies to design platforms that put user well-being before profit. As Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, stated: young people should be in command of social media, not commanded by it.
The behaviour of tech leaders with their own children perhaps offers the clearest lesson: the apps will not impose limits on their own. Children need rules, care, and real guidance at home. Leaving children alone with social media is not freedom, it is neglect. This uncomfortable truth should guide parents, educators, and legislators in creating a safer digital future for the next generations.
The challenge now is to find the right balance between protecting young people from the real risks of social media and allowing them to benefit from the opportunities that digital technology can offer. As the world watches the Australian experiment, one thing is certain: the debate on regulating social media for minors has only just begun, and the decisions we make today will shape the mental health and well-being of future generations.