

The real social media danger isn't where kids log in—it's who quietly controls what holds their attention

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Credit: Norma Mortenson from Pexels

Imagine walking into a library. You see shelves labeled "Literature on how to commit acts of terror—both for the far right and the far left."

This would, of course, never happen in the real world. Libraries are subject to restrictions and fulfill a democratic function as open, neutral meeting places. But what about the digital world? There are no democratic institutions deciding how digital infrastructure should be developed for the common good.

"When companies like Meta and Google invest heavily in developing design features and algorithms intended to capture and steer our attention, democratic institutions must invest just as heavily in understanding and regulating these systems. We must build digital communities where children and young people can participate safely, not shut them out," says researcher and philosopher Sebastian Watzl at the University of Oslo.

The debate misses the point

Watzl researches the attention economy in the interdisciplinary projects [GoodAttention](#) and [Salient Solutions](#). Together with colleagues, he has recently published a [policy brief](#) in which they argue that the debate on age limits for social media misses the real problem.

"We have debates about screen time and age limits on social media, but in reality, the problem we face is far more wide-ranging. Our attention is in the hands of a few companies, like Google, Meta and X, located in Silicon Valley."

Part of the problem, Watzl believes, is that we have accepted this situation and become somewhat blind to what is happening. We think of these firms as purely technology companies, but in practice they operate as advertising agencies.

Another problem with the proposal to impose age restrictions on social media is that the category "social media" is itself not very precise.

"What counts as social media differs from country to country. Search engines, digital marketplaces, and now AI as well, are other environments that steer our attention," Watzl points out.

Three problems with age limits

According to Watzl, there are three main problems with introducing age limits on social media:

- Children and young people should participate in public debate. We cannot simply remove them from social media without creating new, safe meeting places. This is about both democracy-building and children's rights.
- Age verification creates new privacy problems. In Australia, where an age limit was introduced in December, everyone who opens Facebook must scan their face.
- Children and young people want spaces for social interaction without adult supervision. They will in any case find other places to interact, and companies will develop new services that do not formally fall under the category of "social media." The alternatives are not necessarily better.

"I believe the debate on age limits for social media is precisely the kind of distraction the companies are hoping for. In practice it involves very few restrictions for them," says Watzl.

Our attention is easily captured

Attention is the basis for what we notice, learn and remember. It is formed and influenced by the physical, social and digital environments in which we move. We can direct it ourselves—as you do when reading this article—but it has a fundamental weakness: it is highly receptive to

stimuli and easy to capture. The platforms have detailed insight into exactly how this can best be done. To be fair, so do shops when they put chocolate right next to the till.

"What sticks in our consciousness, and what we overlook, is not random. Online, we are analyzed by algorithms that tailor content to keep our attention for as long as possible. [Addictive design features](#) such as the 'like button' make us check repeatedly how popular our posts are. In this way, the platforms function as an infrastructure that shapes our attention landscapes," says Watzl.

Undermines our freedom to think for ourselves

The concept of the attention economy stems from Nobel Prize-winning economist Herbert A. Simon. Already in the 1970s he described the idea that while information is abundant, our attention is a scarce resource. "A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention" is one of his well-known sayings.

One of Google's former strategists, James Williams, experienced this very concretely. He realized that all the technological stimuli he was helping to create were leaving him profoundly distracted. As a result, he left Google and became a philosopher instead. The liberation of human attention may be the decisive moral and political struggle of our time, he writes in his book *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*.

"The debate has focused heavily on how social media affects young people's health. Meanwhile, something else that is extremely harmful to humans has been overlooked. Our capacity for self-determination is systematically shaped by forces we cannot resist—the forces that cause us to end up in the clutches of algorithms. In this way, our fundamental freedom to think for ourselves and pursue our own interests is

undermined," says Watzl.

Misuse of resources

It is not only our attention that is limited. Society's resources are limited too. So, should we spend them on building a system of checks and age restrictions?

"Instead, the authorities should prioritize requirements for [transparency in algorithmic systems](#) and tighten up restrictions on data collection. We must be able to regain control over recommendation algorithms and be able to switch or leave platforms without losing our networks."

Democracy presupposes that we are able to orient ourselves, and today we receive most of our information through digital interfaces. When these interfaces are controlled by a handful of companies, this concentration of power threatens both democratic values and autonomy.

"The companies influence what we see, how we think and what gains political traction online. In doing so, they exert power over the very infrastructure of our minds and our social world," Watzl concludes.

Five recommendations for regulation

1. Regulate mechanisms of influence: Regulation should target concrete mechanisms that affect our attention—such as algorithms, microtargeting using personal data, and manipulative design features—regardless of platform.
2. Require transparency: Technology companies must be open about their design goals, attention architecture, and algorithmic systems, and make these visible and open to scrutiny.
3. Better enforcement of existing rules: There is already legislation

that could be used to regulate the companies, but it is not being applied. Regulators should use existing competition and digital regulation to reduce concentration of power, data collection and abuse.

4. Ensure interoperability: Make it possible to communicate and transfer data between platforms without losing social connections.
5. Build public digital alternatives: Invest in non-commercial platforms and open systems that promote democracy, learning and autonomy.

More information: [Policy brief](#): Social Media Bans and the Ethics of Attention

Provided by University of Oslo

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