Youth and Social Media

Anonymous

Department of English, Anoka Ramsey Community College

ENGL 1121-22: College Writing and Critical Reading

Prof. Chris McCarthy

4/22/2024

Have you ever received memes from your parents that just weren't that funny? The internet and social media have brought us closer than ever before. Today you can reach anyone across the world with the tap of a screen. Social media has no doubt brought people together in ways that before its time were unimaginable. However, with this advancement being so new and accessible, especially to children, we must ask the question: are we doing all we can to keep its dangers at bay? In the article "It Was A Mistake To Let Children Online. Here's What We Do Now." From *The New York Times*, Yuval Levin (2022) argues that social media is "no place for kids" and we need to raise the age restrictions that have been set in place. Levin mentions how even though there are restrictions in place, many kids can easily bypass them by lying about their age. He emphasizes the dangers children face online such as bullying and an increase in mental issues. One example being body image issues. Levin acknowledges that social media does have benefits for children when it comes to socialization and development, and that "restrictions will come at a cost." He argues that the risk is worth it to protect youth on social media. Levin offers a solution to enforce age laws through a system of government verification with the option for parents to allow their kids on social media. He claims, "Empowering parents is really the key to this approach." Though I agree that children are especially vulnerable when it comes to the dangers of social media, by taking away this element that has been so ingrained in their lives we face the risk of negatively impacting their social development. I think that instead of jumping to take it away completely, that we explore other options such as kid accounts and parental controls before completely eradicating it from their lives.

Levin (2022) argues that though there are age limits set in place, the use of self-verification methods do little to stop kids under thirteen from creating social media accounts. As someone who grew up when Instagram first started gaining popularity I know about that personally. I was not thirteen when I agreed to the terms and conditions clearly stating it was for individuals thirteen years or older. Much like the age law for social media, there are many laws involving age requirements for other things such as driving cars, voting, drinking, and smoking; however, underaged individuals find ways around those laws even with higher risks attached to them and the same would happen if we were to increase the age limit.

Levin (2022) admits "Some teens would find ways to cheat, and the age requirement would be porous at the margins." If we raise the age limit, even with more secure verification, underage individuals will find ways around it, much like they have done before. Kids will find ways onto social media no matter what barriers are put in place, so we need to create a safer environment online for them instead of taking social media away completely.

Though I disagree with some of Levin's ideas, I agree completely that children are at risk with current social media regulations. Levin states, "[…] there is evidence that social media exposure poses serious harms for tweens and older kids, too." This is not a stance that lacks reasoning, and many medical professionals agree that there are certain risks for tweens and teens online. Levin (2022) focuses on the typical aspects. Bullying, depression, anxiety, and body dysmorphia. In the article "APA chief scientist outlines potential harms, benefits of social media for kids" published by the American Psychological Association (2023) supports this point, arguing "Social media also heightens the risk for negative peer influence among adolescents, as well as for addictive social media use and stress,[…]"

Mental health is only one aspect of the dangers social media has stored away from youths. In the CNN article "Instagram is leading social media platform for child grooming" by Rob Picheta (2023) states, "Overall, police in England and Wales have recorded more than 5,000 cases of online grooming." Personally, when I was a child on social media, and before I turned my Instagram private I had grown men DM'ing me. I was taught well enough by my parents to block, then report and quickly turned my account private, but I had never told my parents about it. I know people I grew up with who experienced the same thing and most times, these grown adults were disguising themselves as kids. Grooming online is more prevalent today than I believe is known by parents because many kids will not tell confide in parents, out of fear or shame. I believe that the act of grown adults messaging kids is repulsive, but even removing child social media accounts won't remove images of children off the internet. It won't stop parents from posting holiday pictures or vacation memories or birthday wishes. Though it may eliminate direct communication between

adults and children, instead of taking the children away from danger, we need to find a solution that keeps danger away from the children. A feature where direct messages are turned off, comments filtered or taken away as well. Or perhaps parents having joint accounts with children's profiles is an alternative way to protect children from bullying and give access to parents, so they can see what their children see.

Why is social media so popular among kids if many are aware of the dangers of it? According to Levins (2022) it is because "the draw of the platforms is a function of network effects — everyone wants to be on because everyone else is on" meaning that kids want to be on because their friends are, which is how much of the world works. Trends come and go and many people, not just children follow the social patterns. In the article "Surgeon General Issues New Advisory About Effects Social Media Use Has on Youth Mental Health" by the US department of Health and Human Services (2023) reports "[…] social media helps them [adolescents] feel more accepted (58%), like they have people who can support them through tough times (67%), like they have a place to show their creative side (71%), and more connected to what's going on in their friends' lives (80%)." Social media's pull is more than a trend. It's a tool that kids use to be social. Yes, if none of their friends were on it they wouldn't be either but not because it's trendy but because the entire value of social media would be depleted. With all the benefits it has for youth, taking away social media would be taking away safe spaces for teens in the LGBTQ+ community, or taking away resources for social development in kids who aren't able to make friends at school, or a way to keep in touch with kids in military families. Though there is danger lurking on social media, there is also a certain danger kids face when taking it away. By restricting access to social media, the aforementioned groups of children pay the price.

Although Levins may argue that increasing the age limit for social media will protect children from the harms that plague social media, he doesn't acknowledge the harms that kids face if we take it away. Even if we increase the age limit, children will always find ways to do things they are not supposed to. It's true that there are many dangers to the internet, but many would admit there are dangers in most

every aspect of life and it is our job as a society to find ways to protect and educate children to prepare them for those situations. Taking social media away from today's youth takes away many resources that benefit them. When deciding how to go about this issues, there are many more questions to be asked, such as if we raise the age limit, will the children who did wait until they were thirteen see it as a punishment for doing nothing wrong? What about the sixteen-year-old who has been exposed to social media since they were thirteen? Do they keep it, or will they have to now wait years until they are allowed back on? It is up to society, politicians, and media companies to find regulation policies, however, they are all complacent in the danger social media poses. Many politicians gain publicity from social media, and the companies who control social media profit off the grasp it has on children. Adults face dangers from social media, but are we going to petition to take theirs away as well? How much do we take away before we realize we are the problem not social media?

References

American Psychological Association (2023, Feb. 14). APA chief scientist outlines potential harms, benefits of social media for kids https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2023/02/harms-benefits-social-media-kids#:~:text=Recent%20research%20shows%20over%2050,foster%20social%20connections%2C%20he%20said.

Levin, Y. (2022, Aug. 15). It Was a Mistake to Let Kids Onto Social Media Sites. Here's What to Do Now. *New York Times.* *Opinion _ It Was a Mistake to Let Kids Onto Social Media Sites. Here's What to Do Now. - The New York Times.pdf

Picheta, R. (2019, Mar. 19). Instagram is leading social media platform for child grooming *CNN.* https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/01/uk/nspcc-grooming-social-media-report-scli-gbr-intl/index.html

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2023, May 23). Surgeon General Issues New Advisory About Effects Social Media Use Has on Youth Mental Health https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/23/surgeon-general-issues-new-advisory-about-effects-social-media-use-has-youth-mental-health.html