

2. Denmark bans Social media for Children – Governance

Denmark to ban social media for children under 15. Citing severe mental health and addiction risks, Denmark has banned social media for children under 15, highlighting a global trend toward child digital protection. This contrasts with India's current approach, which focuses on regulating platforms through the IT Rules, 2021, rather than imposing an outright age-based ban.

Denmark Bans social media for Children Under 15

Denmark has announced a ban on social media use for children under the age of 15, a decision driven by increasing concerns over mental health issues, online addiction, and data privacy risks affecting adolescents.

Key Highlights of the Ban

Age Restriction – Children under 15 are now barred from creating or using social media accounts. Children aged 13–15 may be allowed access to select apps, but only with explicit parental consent.

Government's Rationale – The government stated that social media "steals children's time, childhood, and well-being." It directly linked excessive social media use to a decline in mental health and an increase in social isolation among young people.

Legislative Support – The proposal has received broad parliamentary backing, indicating a smooth passage into law.

Platforms Affected – The ban covers major platforms popular with youth, including Snapchat, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok.

Data Insight – The move is supported by data showing that Danish children spend an average of 2 hours and 40 minutes on social media daily.

Global Context – Denmark's ban follows similar actions, such as Australia banning social media for those under 16 in 2024. Other European nations are also actively reviewing their digital age limits to address youth mental health risks.

Significance – This marks a significant move toward prioritizing child digital protection and online well-being in Europe. It may serve as a model for global regulation of children's access to and interaction with online spaces.

Social Media Regulation in India

India governs its digital landscape primarily through the IT Act and its subsequent rules, which have been updated to address the challenges posed by social media.

Primary Legislation – Information Technology Act, 2000. This is the foundational law governing all digital activities and electronic commerce in India.

Specific Rules – Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code)

Rules, 2021. These rules specifically target social media platforms and impose a range of obligations.

Key Provisions under the 2021 Rules

Appointment of Grievance Officer – Platforms must appoint a grievance officer to receive and address user complaints in a time-bound manner.

Removal of Harmful Content – Platforms are legally required to remove content that is deemed illegal, harmful, or objectionable upon receiving a valid order.

Traceability of Origin of Messages – This controversial provision requires platforms (especially messaging services) to be able to identify the "first originator" of information, which has raised significant concerns about user privacy and encryption.

Due Diligence – Platforms must exercise due diligence, which includes verifying the authenticity of user accounts and the content they host.

Transparency Reports – Platforms are mandated to submit periodic transparency reports to the government, detailing the complaints received and the actions taken.

Relevant Authorities

Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) – The nodal ministry responsible for formulating and implementing policies related to IT, electronics, and the internet, including social media.

Cybercrime Investigation Cell (Cyber Cell) – The specialized police unit that investigates cybercrimes, including those originating on social media.

Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) – The national agency that monitors and responds to cybersecurity threats, incidents, and vulnerabilities.

Purpose and Concerns

Stated Purpose – The regulations aim to balance the right to free speech with the pressing need to control misinformation, hate speech, and other harmful content that proliferates on social media.

Concerns Raised – These rules have also faced criticism, with concerns that they could lead to censorship and enable government surveillance.

Reasons for Advocating Bans on Social Media Use

Cyber Bullying – Young children, particularly girls, are often easy targets for cyberbullying, and social media platforms can amplify this harassment.

Example – The app TikTok has frequently been in the news for exposing young girls to cyberbullying.

Pornography – Children can accidentally or intentionally come across pornographic materials, which can negatively impact their impressionable minds and create a risk of addiction.

Example – In 2022, India recorded over 1,000 cases of Child Pornography, with Karnataka reporting the highest numbers.

Addiction and Feedback Loops – Social media platforms are often designed to exploit users' attention using dopamine-driven feedback loops, making young, developing brains highly susceptible to addiction.

Mental Instability – An increasing online presence is seen as negatively affecting cognitive development. It can lead to isolation, which in turn impacts socialization skills and future mental stability.

Example – Professor Jonathan Haidt's book, 'The Anxious Generation', provides a direct link between the rise of smartphones/social media and the "epidemic of mental illness" in youth.

Exposure to Violence – Contact with violent or harmful viral content (e.g., sexual abuse, bullying, hate speech, soft porn) can lead to children developing violent tendencies.

Example – A survey by the Mumbai-based Association of Adolescent and Child Care in India (AACCI) in Mumbai and Gurgaon schools found that aggression among students was on the rise.

Health Impacts – Social media addiction can manifest as ADHD (Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder), aggression, memory issues, stress, and depression. Physical symptoms include headaches, eye and back discomfort, lethargy, and communication difficulties. Excessive use directly affects and disrupts the sleep patterns of children.

Falling Prey to Misinformation – Social media is a major hub for false information and propaganda, and children can be easily brainwashed.

Example – A UNICEF study found that only 2% of children and young people possess the critical literacy skills needed to judge if a news story is real or false.

Arguments Against Banning Social Media Use

Enforcement Challenges – Outright bans are notoriously difficult to enforce in a digital environment, as children can easily find ways to bypass these barriers (e.g., using VPNs, lying about their age).

Example – When South Korea passed its "Cinderella Law" (banning gaming from midnight to 6 – 00 a.m.), it led to a rise in children committing identity theft to access gaming platforms.

Shared Device Usage – In the Indian context, digital literacy among adults can be low. Children often help their parents navigate the internet, making it unfeasible to expect parents to effectively guide their children on safe online usage.

Example – A survey of 10,000 children in Tier 2/3 cities and Delhi government schools found that 80% of children helped their parents navigate online platforms.

Low Digital Literacy – Implementing technical solutions like Age Verification Technologies (e.g., ID-based verification) would be extremely difficult for populations with lower literacy.

Example – NSSO (National Sample Survey Office) data from 2021 showed that only 40% of Indians knew how to perform a simple task like copying or moving files on a computer.

Absolving Accountability – A ban might perversely discourage technology companies from taking responsibility. If children are not supposed to be on the platform at all, companies have less incentive to design platforms with child safety parameters in mind.

Negation of Positive Digital Engagements – Social media is not uniformly negative. It can help children think critically, engage with people of similar interests, and build essential socialization and communication skills.

Example – Climate activists like Greta Thunberg effectively used social media to propagate their message and build a global community of like-minded youth.

A Learning Tool – The digital age provides unprecedented opportunities for children to communicate, learn, socialize, and play, exposing them to new ideas and more diverse sources of information than ever before.

Forward

Adopt Age-Appropriate Design – Follow models like the U.K's 2020 Age-Appropriate Design Model, which mandates that platforms provide children with better default settings (e.g., high privacy) and expose them to minimum risk from the moment they join.

Continuous Feedback on Technology Designs – Platforms must perpetually upgrade their technology designs as new risks emerge. A feedback mechanism should be in place to monitor changes in children's behavior resulting from platform use. Example – A recent study noted that platforms like Meta, Google, TikTok, and Snapchat have collectively made 128 changes related to child safety and privacy.

Digital Safety Literacy – This should be taught as a core curriculum subject, just as children are taught safety practices for the physical world.

Discussion on Law on 'Sharenting' – A legal framework is needed to address "sharenting"—the practice of parents publicizing large amounts of potentially sensitive content about their children online.

Example – The Assam Police have used their social media channels to warn parents against this practice.

Parents as Role Models – Restricting social media for children while adults use it excessively will only make children **resentful and deceptive**. Parents must regulate their own use. Research shows that parental support in maximizing the benefits of being online also works to mitigate the harms.

Evidence-Based Policy – High-quality, child-centered research must guide policies, platform designs, and industry-wide standards (e.g., defining what content is appropriate for different ages). This requires faster research processes that can keep pace with rapidly emerging digital risks.

Implement Safety-By-Design Principles – This principle, popularized by the Australian eSafety Commissioner, involves inculcating safety features into the "DNA" of products. Give minors privacy by default. Provide standardized, easily accessible, and well-explained reporting processes across all platforms. Use AI to detect bad actors who are attempting to interact with children. Eliminate sexual, violent, and other age-inappropriate content from their feeds.

Source – <https://www.dw.com/en/denmark-to-ban-social-media-for-children-under-15/a-74666210>