

Alienating the young people

by Aidan Cornelius-Bell

Published: 2024-09-09

Dear friends,

The ALP has announced new legislature being developed to ban young people from social media at an arbitrary age [1]. This differs from existing laws which, on paper, limit what younger people can see and do on social media. The alleged basis of this particular movement is, alongside other attacks on the youth such as phone bans, “protecting the children” . If I had created a more sophisticated blogging engine I may have inserted the gif of Helen Lovejoy screaming: “won’ t somebody please think of the children” at this juncture, but you’ ll just have to use your imagination.

There are a litany of problems which arise from this new law. Not least of which is for adults, who will also, obviously, be subjected to “age verification” to use social media. Let’ s start here. Meta has long held the policy that Facebook, Instagram and other social properties they own should represent a real human. This is partly to combat bots, and partly because it plays well with the marketing of these platforms as “real” [2]. However, adding age verification, regardless of the mechanism, seriously increases the chances of invasive advertising profiling. Even if Meta, for example, have nothing to do with the verification process, as in they are subject to a TRUE or FALSE return from an (external) government verification process, they are still able to corroborate more personal details about you, and what do Meta, X, Snapchat and ByteDance want? Data ...about you! That’ s their -real-product.

But the problems don’t end here. Aside from issues of encouraging increasingly lax parenting and how much of a role should the government have in raising children... How might this answer change when the government is increasingly neofascist? How about when children meet the arbitrary age the government has decided is ‘okay’ for them to engage with social media, and they have had absolutely no preparation for this hyper-online world? Certainly young people are not being educated about the role and place of social media, the internet, and technology’ s role in contemporary capitalism. Indeed, increasingly this is deliberately mystified by the back-to-basics bullshit peddled by the ALP and LNP. We have gone from a Millennial generation of “digital natives” (an assertion so thin it barely existed in the first place) to a Gen Z who could be legitimately convinced that the internet is run by wizards.

A surefire way to ensure the population is incapable of analytical thinking, critical analysis, and transformative thinking is to focus on literacy and numeracy at the expense of everything else. Do people actually believe our primary and secondary education system is designed to bring “intelligence” ? And now that the federal government has direct control over school curriculum, again, and has spent years stripping anything resembling “thinking” from the curriculum, they’ re moving on to domination of higher education (again) [3]. Between the states focus on phone bans, and now a federal focus on attempting to block kids form social media, we are seeing two simultaneous backslides in education, privacy, and the agenda of informed and agentive citizenry.

So, this bill heralds the beginning of verified identities online, the end of anonymity (from advertisers in particular), and another wave of young humans who have been deliberately abstracted from the tools and means of production through a third rate education. A great start to the day. But let’ s also look briefly at some of the political manoeuvres going on under the hood here.

Malinauskas, one of the most authoritarian right-wing conservative M.P.s ever to grace this state’ s grotesque parliament, has had a hard-on for controlling children and young

people since he seized office from his, startlingly, more 'liberal' predecessor. He has already ideated and/or enacted legislation that requires ISPs and social media to have a duty of care for young people using their services (an enforcement impossibility of magnificent scale), empty attempts to curb deepfakes [4], increased parental control over young people by making them guardians of online accounts, forced more burnt out Autistic people into toxic work environments [5], oh and of course most importantly brought back the "Adelaide 500" (bread and circuses). It will surprise no one, then, that, alongside Albanese interest in making Malinauskas the next P.M. he is drawing on reports and research commissioned, influenced and funded by Malinauskas for this latest federal legislation.

This move comes in the global context of nanny-state crackdowns on encrypted private messaging (of course, politicians are exempted from this, their messages must be private, yours however are public property) and fundamentally technology-breaking legislation from this country [6], age verification laws emerging in the US [7], increasing website blocking in ways that only inconvenience and delay legitimate users [8], and blocking adult websites in, purportedly, "free" nations [9]. Criminals, felons (including, yes, that presidential candidate), and ethically disgusting people are not inhibited by these technologies. Indeed even most average users need spend only a few minutes searching for ways to bypass verification and censorship technology. If it is this easy to bypass, what is really happening? Of course it feeds capitalist rhetorics. Moreover, imagine the scene in schools where a handful of technologically more literate students are able to bypass verification and use social media tools to harass students who aren't so empowered, this is the reality we are rapidly heading towards. What about when a foreign company refuses to implement age-verification due to technical impossibility? Will all of Australia loose access to the social web like Texas lost access to adult websites?

You and me, dear reader, may be amongst the last who had an opportunity to understand contemporary technology in a real way. As with all technologies which have come before, once the capitalists secure their mode for extracting maximum profit from it, the technology itself must become mystified else risk its use for liberatory ends. In a few weeks I have a journal paper coming out about how LLMs have been deliberately mystified and labelled as "Artificial Intelligence" for what is really a collection of data, relatively simple algorithms, some filters and many hours of human labour. This is an example of this kind of capitalist obfuscation of technology and ideas. They, the 1%, want us to be mystified, confused, and unawares of the power, potential and workings of technology. A tale as old as time, without control of the means of production, the capitalist class is nothing -indeed, they are nothing but a leech, and without control they are unable to -leech-.

If we accept this lens, that capitalism is deliberately stripping anything resembling agency and thinking skills right from birth, we can see why successive global governments are undermining the quality and nature of education, shifting problems and blame to drive division, and inventing solutions to problems which result only in pain for the workers and further accumulation for the capitalists. This age verification move in Australia is another in a long line of terrible decisions from a government more interested in driving capitalist profits than working for the people. It is a nanny state move which takes responsibility away from parents who should be championing the fostering of curious and analytical engagement the world, towards an ever intensified "know nothing; work for crumbs of leisure" system which the government -deeply- knows is what they are perpetuating and obscenely benefiting from.

The ALP, and increasingly Liberal party in coalition -yes the new Labor-Liberal coalition (huh, an LLC), are bringing fascism just as they brought neoliberalism to this country. And the brains behind the operation, if you could even call them that, are capitalist bootlickers to the extreme.

Its a sick society we' re living in, folks. I wonder what hell-trip is next for our exciting

instalments.

In solidarity,

Aidan

-
1. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/article/2024/sep/09/social-media-age-limits-to-go-before-parliament-ahead-of-next-election-albanese-says>
 2. <https://transparency.meta.com/en-gb/policies/community-standards/inauthentic-behavior/>
 3. <https://www.canberra.edu.au/about-uc/media/media-releases/2024/september/the-honourable-bill-shorten-mp-announced-as-the-next-university-of-canberra-vice-chancellor-and-president>
 4. <https://www.premier.sa.gov.au/media-releases/sa-government-to-tackle-deepfakes>
 5. <https://employcare.com.au/what-does-autism-works-mean-for-people-with-autism-in-sa/> not to mention they are -paying employers- for the ‘inconvenience’ of ‘dealing with’ an Autistic person, could. he. get. more. offensive.
 6. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-46463029> <https://www.wired.com/story/australia-encryption-law-global-impact/> <https://www.csoonline.com/article/2154094/chat-apps-end-to-end-encryption-threatened-by-eu-legislation.html> <https://www.gbnews.com/tech/signal-encryption-russia-venezuela-whatsapp-ban>
 7. <https://www.theverge.com/23721306/online-age-verification-privacy-laws-child-safety>
 8. <https://www.comparitech.com/blog/vpn-privacy/internet-censorship-map/>
 9. <https://www.newsweek.com/porn-access-blocked-million-americans-1856686>