

Could an under-16s social media ban lead to an epidemic of loneliness?

By Rt Rev. Philip North, Bishop of Blackburn

A ban is a blunt and simplistic instrument. It is relatively easy to implement and so a tempting tool for those in power to employ. But bans carry consequences that are rarely predictable.

The UK appears to be moving fast in the direction of a complete ban on social media for Under 16s. Ever since Australia led the way, political parties have been jumping on the bandwagon, supported by a range of pressure groups and worried parents. In a speech this week the Prime Minister Keir Starmer said he wanted to 'crack down on the addictive elements of social media and promised 'immediate action' following a period of consultation.

There is doubtless strength behind the arguments of those who want an outright ban. The algorithms of the social media companies are irresistibly powerful and draw young people all too easily into a world in which they can be exploited and manipulated. A ban seems a simple and easy way to protect a generation whom many believe to be threatened by voracious, greedy corporations who are motivated not by the wellbeing of the young but by the returns they generate for shareholders.

The environment is fast becoming one in which it is hard to speak up to oppose such a ban. But have we really explored the unintended consequences?

The last three decades have seen the most extraordinary erosion of opportunities for young people. Adults have imposed upon young people a narrowed down school curriculum with life-giving opportunities such as music, sport, dance and the arts squeezed to the margins. Years of austerity have all but wiped out youth work with many of the most deprived communities described in a recent report from the University of Leeds as 'youth work black holes.'

Protective parents are increasingly unwilling to allow their young people to go out, depriving them of social contacts and experiences. Uniformed groups and youth organisations struggle to recruit and retain volunteer leaders, especially those willing to work with teenagers.

The result is a loneliness pandemic, felt especially amongst the young. Research by the Co-op foundation suggests that 95% of young people aged between 10 and 25 feel lonely. The Children's Society's *Good Childhood Report 2024* claims that 15 years olds in the UK have the 'lowest life satisfaction in Europe.'

Against such a backdrop, surely a key reason that so many young people turn to social media is that it is one of the few ways left to them to engage unsupervised on a regular basis with peers. They scroll on their phones because there is so little else left for them to do.

A simplistic ban, plonked onto the statute book by politicians keen to glean the adult vote, will surely compound this loneliness pandemic. Once again adults will be imposing their will on young people without taking into account the broader context of their lives.

Which leaves me with two questions. First, why are we punishing the victims for the sins of the perpetrators? Doomscrolling, online harassment, extremism and many of the iniquities of social media are not the invention of young people. Teenagers did not write the algorithms that now hold sway over them. That was done by social media companies whose excesses Government seems frightened of addressing. So surely, rather than banning social media, we need safe social media where young people can engage with each other in a healthy environment. Outlawing technology will not help to prepare children for a world in which technology is all-prevailing.

And second, if adults are going to restrict young people's use of social media, what will those adults put in its place? A ban will only achieve the intended outcome if it is accompanied by a wholesale rethinking of the opportunities available to young people. We need a new deal for the young.

We need to recreate spaces where young people can mix and engage with each other. We need to reinvest in youth work and youth centres. We need to recover opportunities for cultural expression with all the richness and challenge they bring to young lives. We need to provide residential experiences for young people where they can mix with each other in safe and appropriately challenging spaces. We need to rethink the school curriculum so that it develops the whole person rather than merely churning out economically productive units.

In the Diocese of Blackburn we are trying to step into this space. A significant grant from the Strategic Mission and Ministry Board is funding 30 youth workers employed by local PCCs under a project titled, 'Ignite.' The initiative will enable local churches to be ambitious about the way they resource the lives of young people, providing safe spaces where they can be together and explore together the joys and mysteries of being human. But of course even thirty trained professionals is a drop in the ocean compared to the savage cuts made to youth provision since the financial crisis.

A social media ban may be tempting. It will satisfy the 'something must be done' brigade. But it also risks making already denuded young lives even more miserable. If we ban, let's also think what we put back. For wouldn't it be lovely to live in a nation where opportunities for young people are so rich and fulfilling that mobile phones seem boring?

+Philip Blackburn