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Workshop 6

Youth Online Safety – Are Social Media Age Bans a Solution?

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1. Blanket age bans risk oversimplifying a complex issue rather than reducing harms. It is important to fully understand the complexity of the issue which includes and requires among others child participation, hearing all expert voices, learning from international partners, and putting children's rights at the center. More viable solutions would be an age-appropriate design system, combining safety by design (with more focus on for ex. age inappropriate content and algorithms) with youth voices embedded earlier in the regulatory design and holding platforms more accountable.
2. It is important for policies to also focus on privacy, proportionality and accuracy. We need to continue the work towards harmonizing age verification measures, digital literacy and meaningful engagement with young people themselves. Any measures taken need to be centered around child rights, youth participation, and be harmonized.
3. Technical instruments to implement age bans can be privacy invasive while not guaranteeing for no more harms. There is a need to carefully assess the real-world effectiveness and proportionality of age restrictions. In terms of implementation, the technology is challenging and may negatively affect inclusion and push children towards more dangerous environments. From a security perspective regulating platforms would have a better benefits vs. harms ratio.
4. We should move away from the idea that bans will get rid of everything and change everything. Age restrictions/bans should be considered not in isolation but within current policy and regulatory context, which at European level is multi-layered and includes several national and EU level initiatives. We should be aware of the distinction between regulating access and regulating content.
5. We should be aware that this is a social issue, and the focus should not be on arbitrary age gates, but rather on mitigating the harms that users encounter through attention-exploiting, profit-driven algorithms. Digital literacy and education alone cannot help us.

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