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Social media has become an integrated part of today's life and almost anyone can access anything on the internet without any issue. For a while, the responsibilities of what underage children were accessing seemed to solely rely on the parents. Over the last couple of years, much controversy has been raised about the unrestricted usage of social media by underage children. There has also been much debate about whether we should be holding companies responsible for who has access to their sites and programs. As a result, there have been policies and bills being debated and even implemented to restrict underage users from accessing sites that can be harmful. Online Age Verification policies have been implemented in 7 states to protect underage children by restricting and monitoring their access to certain sites (Kramer, 2023).

There has always been controversy regarding privacy and how much say the government should have on what its citizens are able and not able to do or in this case what sites they are able and not able to access. It became clear that the government needed to get involved to better protect its citizens, especially underage children. Politicians have been speaking out regarding the recent Online Age Verifications policies that have been implemented and how they believe this policy will benefit and protect children when living in an online and connected era. In early 2023, Senate Josh Hawley discussed his plans and views on how this policy would be “aimed at protecting children online” (Smith, 2023) and specifically how he was going to push for the inclusion of an age minimum requirement of 16 for social media. Hawley also discussed the inclusion of giving parents the right to have their children’s data and not just account deleted upon request and emphasized the negative impact social media platforms were having on the mental health of children. With a similar agenda, Senate Michael McKell discussed his plans and views to implement Online Age Verification to 18 as a minimum for social media platforms or with parental consent (ABC, 2023). McKell emphasized that this policy was intended to be an

aid to parents with the intention of still giving the parents the right and authority over what sites their children can access rather than simply restricting users from accessing certain sites.

Alabama's state Representative Susan DuBose spoke out on her views regarding the implementation of Online Age Verification and how she believed this would be beneficial and extend beyond just social media sites but also to "restrict minors' access to online pornography" (Britt, 2023). While the main push behind this policy for DuBose was protecting the children, she also mentioned how this policy would help "enforce a stricter moral code" (Britt, 2023) which resulted in much controversy and debate on whether that was beyond the scope of protecting underage children.

Ultimately each politician arrived at the conclusion that an Online Age Verification was needed and was backed by similar yet slightly different motivations. Senate Josh Hawley spoke about the need to protect 'our children' and emphasized how using these sites with little to no supervision can affect the mental health of children. Similarly, Senate Michael McKell spoke about protecting the children but without taking any authority away from the parents. This can be traced to the pushback citizens have when they feel their rights regarding how they raise their children are removed. Representative Susan DuBose arrived at her decision to include a restriction to adult sites based on her audience since Alabama is considered one of America's most conservative states.

While the Online Age Verification policy appears to only protect underage children from the dangers and negative impacts of social media usage and inappropriate sites, there has still been much disagreement and pushback on this policy. Much of the pushback regarding this policy is the invasion of privacy and the policy being declared unconstitutional. Some sites are even requiring proof of age with documentation which has caused many users to feel as though

this is an invasion of their privacy and concerned about how these sites will manage their information. While this policy has the potential to be beneficial, there will still need to be more changes for this policy to be successful (Moore, 2023).

Resources

ABC News Network. (2023, April 7). Utah state senator addresses scope of new law regulating kids' social media access. ABC News. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/utah-state-senator-addresses-scope-new-law-regulating/story?id=98405585>

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