

Hey kid, wanna try some social media?

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Cars and trucks kill. In 2020, 1,745 Canadians died and 7,868 were seriously injured in motor vehicle accidents. So why not just ban them? Well, private vehicles are great for getting from A to B. Entire cities are built around them. Banning automobiles isn't realistic.

But that doesn't mean we toss the car keys to 13-year-olds and send them off on joyrides.

Yet that's what we've done with social media on smartphones. We've put a generation of children in the cab of a dangerous machine, then let TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube and Facebook take the wheel.

In the United States, where most big tech companies are headquartered, lawmakers are taking a crack at keeping young teenagers off social media. A bill is working its way through the U.S. Senate that would effectively raise the age at which teens can open social-media accounts to 16 from 13. The bill is a proposed update to the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, or COPPA, a 1998 law that prohibits internet companies from collecting personal information from anyone younger than 13 without parental consent. It's supposed to undercut the business case for targeting kids online.

The bill has a decent chance of passing; if there is one thing Democrats and Republicans share, it's suspicion of social-media giants. The proposed legislation, known as COPPA 2.0, is in part a response to the testimony last year of Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen, who told Congress how her former employer ignored internal research that found Instagram, which is owned by the same company as Facebook, made one in three teen girls feel worse about themselves.

You've got to respect the U.S. bill's sponsors for trying; you've also got to recognize that, even if it passes, it probably won't make much of a difference. Teens and preteens routinely lie about their ages when they're online. And plenty of parents are fine with their kids having a social-media presence, as long as they have some say over what kids post.

A survey published last year by the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital in Michigan found that a third of children aged 7 to 9, and half of those aged 10 to 12, used social-media apps in the past six months. There's no reason to think the numbers are different in Canada. If anything, they're almost certainly higher on both sides of the border – the Michigan survey was filled out by parents.

According to the Canadian non-profit MediaSmarts, a third of Canadian students in Grades 4, 5 and 6 had Facebook accounts as far back as 2013, despite the platform ostensibly being closed to children in that age group. As a society, we left the keys on the counter a decade ago and turned our backs as kids traded Facebook for slicker rides like TikTok and Snapchat. Companies have zero incentive to enforce the age threshold of 13 that currently exists, and every incentive to do whatever they can to hook eyeballs, regardless of age.

Now comes the obligatory section of this editorial where we acknowledge that social media is not all bad for all youth at all times. Yes, it gives some children and adolescents, particularly those who struggle to make friends in the real world, a chance to connect online and over long distances with people who

share their interests. Yes, some research suggests it can make a narrow subset of preteens feel less alone. Yes, there are corners of the internet that are funny and warm and supportive and kind.

Unfortunately, evidence continues to mount that, when it comes to social-media apps on addictive smartphones, the bad overwhelmingly outweighs the good. Social-media feeds expose youths to cyberbullying and harassment, cost them sleep, zap their concentration, eviscerate their self-esteem and damage their mental health – all as they navigate puberty with underdeveloped brains incapable of much restraint.

Even if the content children and preteens create and consume is harmless, hours spent learning how to be a person through a phone are hours not spent learning how to be a person in the real world.

Wouldn't it be nice if, instead of leaving it to parents and youths to try police things for themselves – to install their own seatbelts and set their own speed limits – governments forced social-media companies to make a genuine effort to keep kids off the online road until they turn 16? Wouldn't it be nice if fewer adolescents, many of whom are already wary of social media's hold on their lives, felt obligated to be there because everyone else is?

It won't happen. But a parent can dream.