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Australia to Ban YouTube Accounts for Under-16s

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Australia is set to ban children under 16 from creating accounts on YouTube and other social media platforms under sweeping new legislation aimed at protecting young users from harmful online content and algorithms.

Communications Minister Anika Wells revealed on Wednesday that nearly 40% of Australian children had reported encountering harmful material on YouTube. “We want kids to know who they are before platforms assume who they are,” she said, stressing the need to limit algorithmic targeting of children online.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese confirmed that the new age limit will apply not just to YouTube, but also to Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and X. “We want Australian parents and families to know that we have got their back,” he told reporters. “There’s a place for social media, but there’s not a place for predatory algorithms targeting children.”

The laws, which were first introduced last year, are expected to take effect on December 10. Companies that fail to comply may face fines of up to AU\$49.5 million (US\$32 million).

Previously, the government indicated YouTube might be exempt due to its common use in educational settings. However, Wednesday’s announcement marks a firm reversal. A YouTube spokesperson responded that the decision is a “jarring U-turn,” stating, “Our position remains clear: YouTube is a video-sharing platform... not social media.”

Technology companies have expressed concern about how the law will be implemented. TikTok accused the government of overlooking feedback from mental health and child safety experts who opposed the blanket ban. Meanwhile, Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, warned that enforcing the law may place “an onerous burden on parents and teens.”

Though the current legislation lacks specific details on enforcement, the government maintains that even if imperfect, the policy sends an important message. “It may not be enforced perfectly just like alcohol laws but it’s the right thing to do,” said Albanese.

International observers are closely watching Australia’s move, with several governments considering similar regulations to restrict underage access to social media platforms.