Alexandra Ross   May 30th, 2025

What can door hinges teach us about social media regulation?

*Is banning social media really the best way to protect our kids? Here, **Alexandra Ross** explores a more nuanced approach to social media regulation, offering parents a practical framework to evaluate which platforms and features are truly beneficial – or potentially harmful – for their children.*

Parents have grappled to understand the 'right' way for their children to engage with social media for over a decade. Solutions to the growing influence of social media use have been proposed, but are extreme and difficult to enforce. The recent Australian social media ban for under-16s is set to go ahead by the end of 2025, but the guiding document, described as 'sparse on detail', has received mixed reactions. The writer of Netflix production Adolescence, in which 13-year-old Jamie is radicalised online to join incel culture and kills a female classmate, has argued that a social media should be entirely banned for children.

However, unilateral ban approaches barely scratch the surface of the current environment parents are faced with. Social media regulation itself is rife with contradiction: we know that children must and do learn essential online and social skills through social media and screen media. Yet they're also exposed to significant and unfiltered online risks. Unilateral bans also lack complexity in their understanding of the lived experience of social media, and evidence that some platforms facilitate undesirable activities more frequently than others.

 A clearer understanding of the structure and social role of social media needs to cut through the noise and provide regulatory guidance if parents are to make informed decisions about which areas of social media are compelling, worthwhile and ethical for children.

Describing social networks: From *function* to *form*

The simple task of describing social media has proved challenging for both parents and theorists, with modern definitions evolving rapidly since the 2000s. Current definitions, although accurate, are sometimes lengthy and vague, and provide little guidance for parents looking for a functional understanding of these platforms.

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> *Social media are Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others.*
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> *Carr & Hayes, 2015*
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Carr & Hayes' definition is convincing, but also captures the overwhelming variety of functions that any one social media platform might perform. For parents, this approach offers little hope for meaningfully disentangling their stance on the value of social networks for their children. One alternative to considering social media from this varied and descriptive position is to zoom out and consider social media as a structure rather than a collection of functions.

Delegating to non-humans

Actor-network theory describes the impact of human relationships with technology: deeply embedded within our lives, all innovations contribute to organising our space and knowledge to create order. As a technology, social media impacts not just our behaviour, but our idea of what human-led interaction looks like. Latour gives the example of the door with hinges: with the addition of a hinge 'technology', human effort is reduced and *delegated* to the non-human

hinge, replacing the need to deconstruct and reconstruct the opening in the wall each time you want to go into a building.

Social media, although more complex, is no exception to this logic. When we follow someone on Instagram, perhaps we *delegate* to this non-human system the mental work required to keep up with friends on a daily basis. All we have to do is visit this convenient platform once a day to see what our friends and acquaintances have been up to. This delegation forms the first step in understanding social media.

Pipes, taps and water bottles

Developing this idea, Bayer et al. suggest that social media has gone through a transformational shift. They compare this shift to the evolution of pipes and taps to provide water to a bottled water system; both systems provide water, but one is much more convenient. According to Latour's theory we delegate the water containment and distribution to an alternative system, and in return are safe in the knowledge that clean water is readily available everywhere. However, this delegation comes with costs and ethical considerations – in life, bottled water is more expensive and less environmentally friendly than tap water. In reality, certain moral and ethical consequences result from the delegation of human effort to a non-human system.

Affordances: the meaning of a hashtag

Whilst a more convenient system may reduce human mental load, it also opens the door for the integration of new features, which are described as *affordances*. Affordances come from the interaction of a user with a specific goal and technology, and have both intended and unintended consequences.

Social media affordances might take the form of a hashtag, the ability to tag other users, or the use of notifications to tell users about activity on the app. On the surface, these affordances are features that help to find similar posts of interest, signal content to a friend or ensure we reply to mentions in a timely manner. On the other hand, they provide ample opportunity to harvest user data, harass users and create addictive patterns of use. Visualising these layered affordances and features for a single platform based on Latour's delegation model and Chan et al.'s affordances perspective might look like Figure 1. Once clearly visualised, a parent can decide which affordances and features they can accept and assess the potential risks for their child.
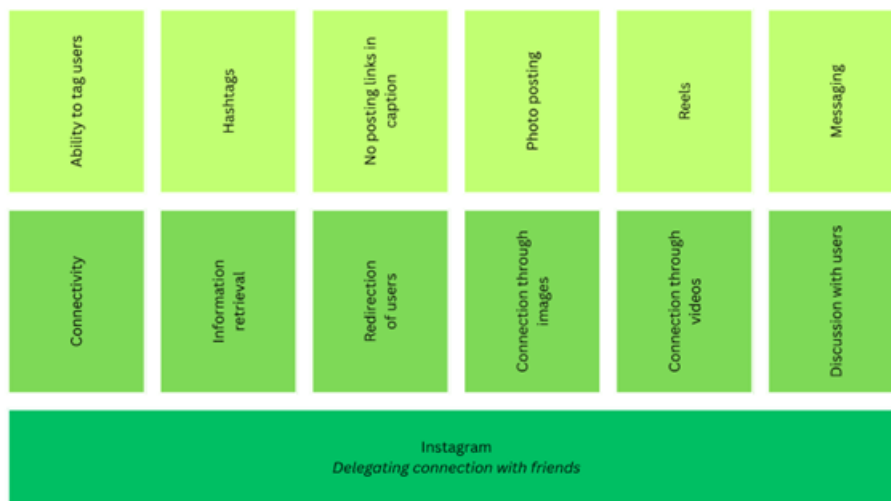
Figure 1: Affordances Model for Instagram

Shoshana Zuboff touches on an important example of social media affordances: her theory of surveillance capitalism describes the effects of the information gathering affordance, which is pivotal for many social media platforms. The information gathering completed by automated processes contributes to the production of new knowledge and the imposition of new ordering mechanisms, which in turn have their own consequences. One such consequence has been the extended accumulation of information by companies, who use 'big data' to create profit.

Delegation can be seen as the base building block of social media, with each platform providing its own opportunity to delegate human activity. When platforms are capable of substituting complex social interactions, more affordances are introduced, and more consequences. To deconstruct this process, a delegation-affordance-consequence model helps to understand the interaction between these elements in digestible bites.

What does this mean for parents of young children?

Understanding this structure enables parents to make informed decisions about how much they want their children to delegate activities to non-human systems, and which platform risks they can tolerate. Given that social media use is a key challenge in their child's developmental story, a more complex approach could offer more nuanced and practical guidance than an all-out ban.

Before allowing platform use, parents might ask:

- How does this platform make my child's life easier?

- Which features concern me most?

- How might these features harm a child, and by whom?

While no platform offers entirely safe engagement, these questions can begin to guide regulation in the currently unregulated environment. Future regulation should empower informed parents to demand limits on harmful aspects while preserving social media's embedded role in modern life, potentially allowing parents to control which affordances are developmentally appropriate for their children.

About the author

Alexandra Ross

Alexandra holds a BA in Politics, International Studies and French from the University of Warwick and is currently studying for an MSc in Social and Cultural Psychology at LSE. Her experience spans social media management, real estate NGOs, and behavioural science startups. She is passionate about the behavioural impact, management and regulation of both emergent and established technology.

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