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A smarter ban.

A blueprint for safe, fair, innovative European social media.

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A smarter ban: a blueprint for safe, fair, innovative European social media

Summary

Two urgent questions dominate European tech policy today. How can Europe rapidly build and fund its own sovereign, competitive tech sector? And how can policymakers respond to the clear demand, across all political persuasions, to shield children from the harmful effects of monopoly social media? Most treat these issues separately. Competitiveness advocates rarely speak about child safety; safety advocates seldom articulate an economic case for change.

But the two issues are deeply linked. **The best policy to protect minors is to reshape the social media market itself.**

Rather than a blanket ban on under-16s, the EU should **restrict toxic features** for children and **build families a bridge out** by requiring major social media tools and services to interoperate. Together, these measures will protect children, weaken the lock-in power that has trapped families in monopoly platforms, and create space for safer European alternatives to scale.

Simple policy interventions, using existing European standards, can both protect children and meet untapped consumer demand for safer social media. There is no trade-off between safety and boosting European business; this remedy can achieve both.

The Problem: People trapped in toxic platforms

European society is struggling to cope with the impacts of broken social media – to kids, to communities, and to democracy. Two features of dominant social media sit behind this harm.

The first is design. Dominant platforms' business models maximise engagement to generate extraordinary profits. This designing for addiction has been shown to harm children, stoke division, spread falsehoods, and erode social trust. The second is market structure. A small number of firms have cornered the social media market so completely that meaningful competition barely exists. European developers have built safer services and tools that curb addictive use and improve wellbeing, but these challengers struggle to scale because users cannot leave dominant platforms without losing the audiences and content they spent years building. Many users may want to leave, but market dominance traps them there.

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These problems cannot be solved separately. Restricting harmful features without opening closed services risks consolidating monopoly power. Opening the market without restricting harmful features could allow the same harms to replicate elsewhere. Europe needs a combined response.

A Two-Pronged Policy Framework

Policymakers should pursue a two-pronged strategy: first, prohibit the harmful features monopoly firms exploit, and second, build users a bridge to safer social media via interoperability. Only by addressing both issues together can Europe fuel its own social economy, defend its tech sovereignty, and create a safe, democratic digital public sphere.

The Smarter Ban: Target Harmful Features at the EU Level

Rather than a blanket ban - which leaves intact the toxic design that has harmed millions of children and adults - Europe should enact a smarter ban, which would prohibit platforms from deploying harmful features to users under 16.[1] This approach is already gaining momentum, as countries that moved to ban early - notably, Australia - pivoted their legislationto target harmful features.

Regulation would thus target the established drivers of harm:

- Addictive design features, e.g., infinite scroll, nudges and push notifications, and autoplay
- Algorithmic recommender systems optimised for engagement
- Targeted advertising to minors
- Disappearing messages and unsafe contact features
- Biometric and emotional tracking
- Public-by-default child accounts

The Commission does not need to start from scratch. The October 2025 DSA Guidelines on protecting minors already specify harmful design features - a ready-made basis for new law. The French Senate has proposed features-based bans, while in Germany, proposals by parties and parliamentary groups are seeking mandatory youth versions without toxic features.

Beyond making dominant firms clean up dangerous products, a features-based ban will reshape the market. Platforms geared for harmful engagement would face stricter obligations and the burden of age verification, while safe-by-design platforms stay open to all. A features ban would constrain those who have repeatedly harmed children, and open space for challengers to scale.

[1] Social networks that meet the 'safe by default' tests could be accessible to users under 16. Those who don't would need to restrict youth users by privacy-respecting age verification.

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Crucially, this would also satisfy Member States whose leaders and constituents are demanding swift action to reform social media, and who will otherwise take matters into their own hands. [2] Recent polling shows an approach like this can win popular support – in May 2026, 84% of the UK public agreed that requiring companies to prove their products are designed to be safe would keep everyone safe on social media platforms.

Boost safer social by mandating interoperability

A features ban would clean up the market, but it would still leave a handful of firms with excessive control over Europe's social media market. Interoperability – requiring dominant firms to open their networks – addresses this problem, and does something that features restrictions alone cannot: it creates a new market.

By mandating interoperability alongside a features ban, Europe could unleash a new wave of innovation in the social media market. Social media platforms would be forced to compete on quality (including safety) to attract and keep users, rather than simply relying on network lock-in. Social media experiences would improve for everyone, not just for children.

Market demand is already there. Apps like No Scroll, One Sec, Opal, and more help curb social media's addictive features, and have already attracted millions of downloads. Brick, a device that blocks social media on one's phone, has sold over 60,000 units for £54 each. This growing list shows how European consumers are spending time, money, and effort to make social media safer.

This is a market primed to scale - but it currently cannot. Dominant firms can shut down challenger safety tools with impunity. Interoperability would provide challengers with stable, guaranteed access and – for the first time – a genuine market to build in. It would also create major opportunities for European innovation: startups, scaleups, public interest technologists and more could build new safety tools, recommenders, and moderation tools to keep users safer, without needing to recreate entire social networks from scratch. Such a move could pave the way for safer social to grow, and European innovation to thrive.

But the ultimate beneficiaries of interoperability would be people - including children. In this reformed market, the platforms most likely to harm young users will face commercial pressure to change, and the tools parents and children are reaching for can reach the scale they need to make a difference and protect young people for the long term.

[2] A report from Interface says that as of May 2026, 23 of 27 EU Member States were contemplating national legislation to restrict or forbid access to social media services for minors.

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Conclusion

For too long, value – from European ideas, citizens' data, and attention – has drained away from the continent to a handful of foreign firms. Children have paid a heavy price. This policy is a chance to reset that. Safe-by-design social media is an emerging market with genuine organic demand. Millions of downloads show a public ready and waiting for better services.

By enacting a smarter ban and opening the market, Europeans won't have to choose between safety and freedom, or protection and innovation. Instead Europe can lead a 'race to the top' - where safer products face the least burden, and where innovators compete on quality and safety - and leave all of us better off.

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ANNEX 1: Safe-social apps in Google Play Store[3]

NAME	FUNCTION	DOWNLOADS	LINK
NoScroll	Block Reels and Shorts	1M+	Google Play
Scroll Guard	Adds friction before opening social apps.	50K+	Google Play
One Sec	Adds a pause before app access.	1M+	Google Play
AdBlocker Ultimate	Blocks ads in browsers, including on social media.	2M+	Google Play
Beeper	Isolates messaging from feeds.	1M+	Google Play
ScreenZen	Adds limits and enforced breaks.	500K+	Google Play
Ascent	Offers schedules and focus modes.	100K+	Google Play
Opal	Screen time and focus app	500K+	Google Play
AppBlock	Blocks selected apps on schedule.	5M+	Google Play
Aisloplist	Removes AI content from YouTube.	5K+	Website
Stands	Blocks ads in browsers, including on social media.	3M+	Chrome Web Store
Antigram	Hides Reels and redirects "For you" feed to "Following".	40K+	Chrome Web Store
YouTube Shorts Block	Hides YouTube Shorts.	400K+	Chrome Web Store
Brick	A device that removes apps and notifications.	60K+	Website

[3] This table lists safe social applications and plug-ins available on the Google Play and Chrome Web Store. These tools, downloaded millions of times, allow users to block addictive features, introduce friction, and limit use. They demonstrate clear demand for safer social media, including for paid services. The policy challenge is to replace adversarial interoperability with legal interoperability, unlocking safe social functionality while creating space for innovation. Apple does not publish equivalent figures, preventing comparison with the App Store. Browser extensions and plug-ins could also be offered in mobile environments, if gatekeepers permitted it.

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