

Hello everyone, my name is Julia. I'm a 16 year old student from Ireland, and I'm so honoured to be speaking in front of you today. A brief trigger warning before I begin, this speech will include topics of self-harm, suicide, and depression.

When I was 14 years old, someone I cared about very much committed suicide. A year later, my mental health got very bad. I didn't have the coping mechanisms to deal with this, so I turned to the only thing I had been shown, which was self-harm. Content on social media is varied, and there are sources that do help people. For example, on most social media platforms, a quick search will give you access to tons of different help-lines that cater for everything, from eating disorders to suicidal thoughts, promoting young peoples' right to safety. Unfortunately, negative content got to me first. I came across clips from TV shows and other media which, in the context I was given, promoted self-harm as a coping mechanism. While I know now that that was not the case, harmful content can come in all forms and may not always seem harmful. It is important that we recognise that this type of thing happens to a lot of young people. Seeing one video portraying harmful content online can cause a lifetime of damage. Influencers promoting toxic masculinity, homophobia, racism, sexism, and harmful coping mechanisms, like Andrew Tate, Myron Gaines, and Katie Hopkins, can shift family dynamics, break apart friendships, and put young people in danger of taking on harmful ideologies and being victim to those that hold them, damaging many peoples' mental health.

Last summer, after some personal family issues while I was away, I showed signs of depression. Rather than telling my family or friends, and building a real support system for myself, I turned to social media to distract me. I found that 'doom-scrolling' wasted my day away, and delivered dopamine hits, which I didn't have the energy to get from anywhere else. I didn't need to work for this form of entertainment, not the way you have to pay attention when reading a book, or watching a film. With instant dopamine hits every few seconds, I didn't need them from social interaction, hobbies, or achieving goals. All of this enabled me to isolate myself, and ignore the people reaching out to me. Instead of recovering, I just sank more.

Social media puts so much pressure on young people to perform and change who they are. Teenagers and children, especially those aged 12-14, are now targeted by peer pressure and social expectations not only while out with their friends, but also in their homes, where they should be able to be their true selves and at the very least take a break from society. I have many younger cousins, and it has been difficult to watch them change who they are to fit in. On top of that, they are so worried about interacting with social media, from liking their friends Tiktoks to keeping up a streak on Snapchat. There is this expectation for everyone to have a busy, full life, post it online for their friends to see, and keep up with the demands of having a whole online persona. It gets competitive at that age, and isn't good for developing minds who are trying to learn who they are as people.

A huge danger of social media that can often be overlooked is how social media companies control the narrative for many young people. Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner says that around age 10 is when children start looking to their peers for guidance rather than their parents. This presents an enormous opportunity to social media companies, who use their algorithms to only show a person content it believes they will interact with, limiting young peoples' perspective of the world. When children and young teens join social media, their interests, views of social issues, beliefs, and morals are all guided by artificial intelligence, which most algorithms are.

On the other hand, social media acts as a crucial platform for connection and growth. Many young people find themselves in situations where friendships online can be really positive for their mental health. Getting an outside perspective of someone your own age who can look at everything clearly and is removed from everyone you know can be a huge relief for young people, giving them privacy from their family and friends to share their feelings with another person.

Likewise, content that young people see on social media can also have a lasting positive impact, rather than a negative one. Myself and one of my friends have both been through difficult times in our own struggles with gender identity. While we didn't know it at the time, we were both going through similar things. It can be difficult to talk about such personal topics when you don't really know how you feel, and social media was a saving grace for both of us. My friend found that exposure to the umbrella of gender identity from content creators helped them to relate to others and realise that they weren't alone. A direct quote from them is "It's really made me flourish in what I know and what I like. Who I am as a person is attested to the internet and I'm really grateful I had the internet to turn to because I was really scared." For me, social media gave me a space to remain anonymous and learn who I was without external pressure from friends or family. It has the power to validate young people in a world that is making us question everything, and does, more often than not, promote positive content that is accepting and inclusive.

Social media has its positives and its negatives. Harmful content, endless scrolling, constant pressure from society, and the algorithm are all huge issues, but they're not easily solved. I know there has been talk of pushing forward a social media ban for anyone under the age of 16. It may seem like the most clean cut option, I don't think that this is the answer.

How many people here hold a position of power and are also a teenager in 2026? I'd say not that many. I'm always saying to my mam "life is different now." Young people feel validated by social media because it prompts connection with others who have the same struggles, who feel the effects of living in today's world as a young person. Taking away social media isn't going to solve as many issues as we'd hope because the young people of today live in, and have been living in, a world that is used to social media existing.

Yes, it will remove the risk of having young peoples' data stolen online, but it will also violate our right to privacy by taking away anonymous access to information. People who can't get an education at home or can't go to school will have their access to education removed. Young people will be cut off from the support that social media offers, because most young people have learned, in their own way, how to navigate social media, but how many young people know how to live without it?

What will stop young people from somehow slipping back into social media, only to find that the safeguards put in place for them have disappeared, and their right to safety has been violated. A universal ban for anyone under the age of 16 is an ultimatum. Young people can choose their right to information, access, and connection, or they can choose their right to safety. Do you want to look out at a sea of young people and tell them that they can have one or the other, but not both? I wouldn't.

There is no perfect solution. Every choice made regarding young peoples' rights is a risk, because this world is every changing and these things have never been done before. But there are changes that can help young people without risking them. Instead of jumping into a policy that has never been properly executed, work in steps. Properly reinforce the policy that children under the age of 13 cannot be on social media. Send out periodical surveys to the schools of each member state, asking them if they have seen harmful content on social

media, and the details of how to report it. Compile these results, and then remove the harmful content that has been seen. Put out a policy that gets social media companies to mark anything that could be false information or harmful to others like fake news, or bigoted content, to try and mitigate the dangers of harmful ideologies. Ask social media companies to change their algorithms to show content that is the opposite of what a person normally likes, as well as their regular content, to give people well rounded views and information.

Something must be done to protect young people on social media, but it shouldn't violate our other rights. We are asked to trust policies made by people who don't know what it's like to live the way we live, in the world we live in. Yes, you are adults, and have more at experience at life. But do you really know what's best for us, or do you simply know what's best for the idea of us?

I hope that I have given you a lot to think about, thank you so much for listening to me today.