



By: *Harvey Morris*

UK's 'flawed' online child safety law slammed as censor's charter



New UK rules to protect children from harmful content online have **provoked** a domestic and transatlantic backlash from those who say they undermine free speech.

Opponents **range** from X's Elon Musk to privacy campaigners to Britain's Reform party leader Nigel Farage. They also include the more than half a million domestic signatories who have so far **backed** a petition to have the updated Online Safety Act repealed.

As the online world adapts to the latest measures that came into force last month, do their opponents have a point? Or is the issue being exploited for political motives as the latest potential battlefield in an ongoing culture war?

The debate will be closely monitored by internet companies and other governments, and even some US states, as they adopt and enforce their own potentially invasive online safety laws that opponents claim are equally flawed.

Few might take issue with the stated ambition of the UK legislation's framers that children should be sheltered from exposure to such online perils as violent pornography or the promotion of suicide and self-harm.

But the government has been **accused** of creating an age-verification regime that exposes all users to having their private information monitored or hacked, while imposing content controls that would exert a chilling impact on freedom of speech.

Over-zealousness in age verification compliance

Musk's **X**, **Reddit** and **Bluesky** are among the major sites that introduced age verification to comply with the new rules and began blocking access to potentially harmful posts to UK subscribers who fail to prove they are over 18.

These and other platforms face fines of up to £18 million, or ten per cent of their global

revenue, if they are deemed to have failed to block harmful content appearing on their sites.

That appears to have prompted a degree of over-zealousness from social media companies that opposed the measures. A BBC analysis **found** some were blocking general interest content, including coverage of the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, to comply with the updated act.

Musk claims that the purpose of the UK's online safety law is "suppression of the people"

In some cases, this included information, including content from parliamentary debates, that was legally available to everyone elsewhere on the internet.

Professor Sonia Livingstone, an expert on children's media use at the London School of Economics, **told** the BBC that companies might get better at the monitoring process as they adjusted to the new rules, adding that it was "possible that the companies are over-blocking to undermine the Act".

Big tech has certainly been at the forefront of a campaign to resist the new rules, with Musk **claiming** the purpose of the UK's online safety law was "suppression of the people".

A "borderline dystopian state"

Opposition to the measures, first mapped out in the 2023 Online Safety Act under the previous Conservative government, has crossed the political divide.

Liberal Democrat Voice, a forum for grassroots Liberal Democrat supporters, **said** the legislation was poorly drafted and called on its own party to hold previous Conservative and current Labour governments accountable for a gross violation of civil liberties.

Free speech campaigners at the Index on Censorship, meanwhile, **claimed** the new

safety rules would make everyone less safe. An article on its website argued that privacy was essential to freedom of expression and that, if people felt they were being monitored, they would change how they spoke and behaved.

Domestically, there is a party political aspect to the current debate, with Farage's Reform positioning itself as the party of free speech, having played no role in framing the legislation.

Farage has pledged to repeal the Act should his party come to power, while his senior aide Zia Yusuf **described** the legislation as a massive overreach that plunges this country into a "borderline dystopian state".



This is not a moment for everyone to throw their toys out of the pram and walk backwards - Baroness Beeban Kidron

Ruling Labour has hit back with an online campaign of its own, while deputy prime minister Angela Rayner **said** Farage's threat to scrap the act would fail a generation of young women by removing protections from threats such as so-called revenge porn.

The headline spat prompted an appeal to cool the debate from House of Lords' member and child safety campaigner Baroness Beeban Kidron, who **told** the Financial Times: "This is not a moment for everyone to throw their toys out of the pram and walk backwards."

Kidron, who has helped frame child protection rules, nevertheless urged the UK regulator Ofcom to take privacy more seriously when it came to age verification, cautioning that the issue would "become a culture war if not done properly".

Ofcom has **listed** no less than seven options for online users to verify their age, ranging from uploading a photo to providing ID.

Not just the young and innocent under threat

With many unwilling to reveal their identities or concerned such information might be abused, the UK has **seen** a surge in downloads of virtual private network (VPN) apps, which allow users to disguise their online location.

Such downloads were reported to be up 18-fold within days of the new rules coming into force. At the same time, traffic to adult content sites such as Pornhub dropped by almost half.

One criticism of the legislation that has been somewhat overlooked is that, whatever its benefits in protecting children, it fails to tackle the pernicious spread of misinformation online

One criticism of the legislation that has been somewhat overlooked is that, whatever its benefits in protecting children, it fails to tackle the pernicious spread of misinformation online.

This was raised last month by UK parliamentarians on the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, who otherwise welcomed the Online Safety Act as a 'first step' towards tackling online harm.

The MPs noted that last year's anti-immigrant riots in the UK were driven in part by misinformation and hateful content that was **amplified** on social media platforms by recommender algorithms.

The committee suggested social media companies often enabled or even encouraged this viral spread and may have profited from it due to their advertisement and engagement-

based business models, thereby endangering the public.

As impressionable consumers navigate a sometimes toxic online world, it seems that not just the young and innocent are under threat.