

Winner

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Jonathan Tinker
Age 14
Hillcrest Middle School
Mrs. Alford

Social Networking Websites Require Ratings

Relationships are the basic element of society as we know it. They are a part of life that is impossible to live without. They are what allows companies to run, and governments to govern. Today, many relationships are conducted over social networking websites, some of which are used by, and intended for use by kids. There are different kinds of social networking sites with different target audiences. Most networks designed for kids already censor themselves, and there are many adult websites that contain adult-rated material with no age restrictions. The government should regulate social networking sites by providing a ratings system to help parents and guardians discern the appropriateness of these websites for various age groups.

A ratings system would connect social networking sites with appropriate target audiences. Currently, it is nearly impossible for young people to be sure if sites are safe. There are many different varieties of social networks, ranging from interactive children's sites such as Club Penguin and Poptropica, to Twitter and Facebook. Those such as Club Penguin and Poptropica are clearly intended for young kids and have been designed as such. Customizable, playable characters offer young ones with the possibility of entering a world free of the normal rules of life, where they are free to frolic and play with no thought of unpleasant things, such as work or school. If the government were to instigate the proposed law of regulating social networking, these would likely be in the general range of ages 2-18. This would clearly allow safety for the children while also keeping them safe from predators. Some websites that would not be in this general age group would be Facebook and Twitter. Networks such as these would clearly be meant for teenagers and adults, perhaps in the general age group of ages 15 and up. These networks clearly have a target audience close to this range, and it seems like common sense to simply prohibit anyone younger who has most likely not reached the appropriate level of maturity required to handle oneself in such an environment. In terms of maturity, it seems unlikely that there has been any well known website created to suit the purposes of both young and old. Why then, are there so many Twitter and Facebook accounts with owners who have yet to hit 13? A ratings system might encourage sites to create teen versions that are safer and more appropriate.

The ratings system should reward those social networking sites that do a good job with self-censorship. The ratings and the built-in protections would attempt to meet the same goal and would assist each other. For example, social networking sites designed for children contain censors to block bad language. Algorithms wired into the website's mainframe are programmed to automatically block the message sent by a user if it holds content not approved. What seems troubling about this is that it should not be needed at all. It is very rare that kids of the target audience age for this kind of website know any inappropriate language at all. If people above the target audience age are using the social website designed for young children, then children could be in danger. This is another

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reason we need the government to regulate social networking sites, because if kids are exposed to mature language posted by older people as kids, then they are more likely to keep using it as they grow, and that sort of speech only leads to worse bad behavior. By ignoring this issue, we may encourage misbehavior and create a new generation of future criminals. Is this what we want for our children? The government should regulate sites by providing ratings to keep the right people in the right age groups online. To look at the cinema for instance, there are maturity ratings for films: G for General Audiences, PG for Parental Guidance Suggested, and so on. I suggest that the government provide similar ratings for social networking websites, to encourage web users to find the right audiences. In comparison to children's network, websites like Facebook that are intended for use by adults do not censor much, if anything. Kids are not capable of making decisions of important magnitude, like whether or not to repeat whatever bad language they might have recently heard, the way adults are. Why doesn't the government provide maturity ratings to make everything simpler?

Finally, a ratings system for social networking sites would protect children from very real dangers, such as predatory adults and inappropriate material. Many adult websites contain violent and mature material with no underage bars. Children's websites, such as the previously mentioned Club Penguin and Poptropica, have been created simply to provide a fun, safe thing for young children to do when they are bored, which is why kids are allowed on the site. Players can create a fun character who exists in a fun, child-friendly, virtual world, to play games and earn points. The reason for the creator's work is to create a kid-friendly environment, like in the case of Poptropica creator (and bestselling children's author) Jeff Kinney. He made his website to be a fun place for kids. However, there are certain other websites that contain inappropriate material that is not suitable for kids, and yet has nothing in place that prohibits anyone under the appropriate age from viewing it. It is unclear why this is so, and obviously seems to not make sense. If there is an issue with young children viewing forbidden material, then the government should regulate it, and provide ratings to allow the proper ages to enjoy proper material. And the ratings would need to be clear, and distinctive, like the ones used in the cinematic world to divide the proper age groups for the distinction of specific movies. Movies that contain nudity, bad language, or other inappropriate material are placed in the R category, while movies with some scenes involving gore and blood are put in the PG-13 category, and movies with none of that are put in the PG or G category. I believe that there should be similar distinctions on social networking websites because there are many social websites that allow nude photographs and other material that should be confined to a certain age group that have no age restrictions on its users. Why hasn't anyone ever thought to restrict this by way of a government law that everyone must follow, with no exceptions?

In conclusion, I believe that the government should regulate social networking sites, and it should do this by providing ratings for the various levels of maturity by discerning the appropriateness of the website for various age groups. Since there are many different varieties of social websites with different target audiences, the social networks designed for kids can utilize censors to maintain appropriate language, and there are many adult websites that contain child-inappropriate material with no age restrictions. I urge you to think of the children, to protect their youthful innocence, and make sure that their future remains untainted by material that should be kept with the adults.