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Why we must shield our children from social media

di Pedro Sánchez

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In 1910, the photographer Lewis Hine infiltrated a cotton mill in Vermont and snapped a girl standing at a spinning frame. As a caption, under the photo, he wrote the words “anaemic little spinner”. The girl was 12 and she was working 12-hour days for a wage so low that it barely covered her food.

Being a child back then was hard. Illness and malnutrition were compounded by terrible working conditions in fields, mines, and factories. In the 1800s, some progressive leaders tried to regulate this situation but industrialists lobbied against it, arguing that the evidence of harm was inconclusive, that the enforcement would be imperfect, that the families needed the income. Some even claimed that banning child labour infringed on children’s fundamental rights because the state couldn’t deny them the freedom to work.

History has not been kind to those arguments. Today, children’s rights are accepted as a central pillar of our democracies. Protecting them is not optional. It is a legal and moral duty. And yet, when my government announced our intention to ban social media access for minors under 16 and prosecute the tech billionaires who fail to comply, those same flawed arguments returned.

Some may argue that the harm children endured in factories has nothing to do with the harm they suffer in the digital space. But they are wrong. There is a growing body of research showing that nearly two in five teens spend excessive time on social media and that each hour increases their risk of suffering depression by 13 per cent. Research also suggests that a majority of children have seen unsolicited sexual content online; more than 3 million fake nudes were published on X alone in the first 11 days after Grok’s launch.

Social media companies were aware of these harms. Internal reports, brought to light through legal proceedings, show not only knowledge of the damage, but a degree of complicity.

So far, governments have struggled to regulate the social media space, allowing it to become a ‘wild west’ where laws are barely enforced and crimes are rarely prosecuted. But we can no longer afford to fail because the health, security and dignity of our kids is at stake. All our national and international regulations operate under the same principle: no product can go to market before being thoroughly tested. No drug reaches patients without clinical trials. No car leaves the factory without mandatory safety features. In the toy industry, a single proven choking hazard is enough to pull an

entire product line from every shelf. When it comes to social media, by contrast, we have normalised something we would never tolerate elsewhere: children growing up in an environment where harm is not speculative but documented.

This must end now. We must ban social media for children, a measure supported by more than 70 per cent of adults in the UK and the EU's five largest countries. Spain is not alone in this. This week, together with France and 12 other countries, we are advancing a co-ordinated push at the EU level. In Spain, we have taken the final step to bring to a vote a child protection law that will include this ban, alongside broader measures. We must force companies like X, Instagram and TikTok to remove from their algorithms all the elements that are fostering addiction, anxiety and hate. And we must ensure that those who do not comply are held accountable under the law.

My government is fully aware of the complexities such a ban entails. It will not be easy to enforce and there will be attempts to circumvent it. But none of these challenges outweigh our responsibility to protect children, and to show our citizens that techno-oligarchs such as Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg are not above the law or the public interest. Regardless of how rich and powerful these billionaires are, they are not in control. Democracies are.