

Social media, young girls and the surveillance state

by Anne Burger*

Protecting minors and online anonymity are false contradictions. It is possible both to protect children from social media and to uphold freedom of expression. Both are important.

Social media for children has become the latest bone of contention. No wonder, as most people understand *Instagram and the like* are causing great harm to young people. Yet what politicians and mainstream journalists are calling for is not about protecting children. They want to protect themselves from unwelcome free speech. No one should be able to disrupt the neat narratives on ZDF and similar channels with impunity any longer.

How convenient it would be for politicians if everyone had to identify themselves with an ID card before they could use social media! And suddenly, common sense finds itself in a difficult spot:

If you want to protect children, you should agree to the registration of all internet users with an ID. If you don't want that, you want to throw the poor children to the (anti-)social media as prey.

Surveillance instead of child protection?

Yet these are simply false alternatives. One could easily ban the sale or provision of smartphones to under-16s – that's it. Introduce push-button phones or youth phones, as in South Korea, where you have a sat-nav and a few educational apps, but no free internet access. Only: our politicians will never agree to that, because they want surveillance, not child protection. Children should be given iPhones, simply so that in future all adults will have to register.

Getting children away from mobile phones would be a brilliant thing. Awareness of how they harm boys is more widespread. Violent video games and pornography are not suitable for twelve-year-olds (in fact, they are not suitable for anyone); there is broad consensus on that.

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*Girls as a product?
(Picture ma)*

Fatal consequences

The fatal consequences social media has on girls are discussed less frequently. Yet these are massive, as a recent *study by the DAK*¹ in Rhineland-Palatinate has once again shown. Girls are affected by depression, anxiety and eating disorders. Over the last five years, depression has increased by 27 per cent and eating disorders by 56 per cent. Particularly worrying, however, is the rise in social anxiety among girls who fear being judged on social media. Hence the headline of the press release: "Panic and anxiety... girls particularly affected".

In her book "*Girls: Gen Z and the commodification of everything*",² sociologist Freya India provides a compelling account of how the situation for girls going through puberty has changed dramatically over the last two decades. The advertising industry has always tried to peddle products to teenagers for supposed self-improvement; girls have always been viewed as sex objects, their breasts barely beginning to bud. But now, girls are no longer being sold products: they are being turned into the product themselves.

By the age of twelve at the latest, most have an *Insta* account on which they present themselves for judgement. Every experience becomes social currency. A visit to the ice cream parlour, click; a

new outfit, click; a holiday, click. Acceptance from their peer group is incredibly important at this age, and that comes via “likes”. Girls market themselves and their lives; their performance is constantly measured by views and likes. When these fail to materialise, girls react with extreme insecurity and sensitivity. This is where the industry steps in.



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Freya India reports that the algorithms react to the girls’ slightest utterance – if one deletes a selfie, she is immediately offered a beauty product. If she writes the words “insecure” or “fear”, they react immediately with an advert and try to amplify that fear.

Girls going through puberty are very insecure; the self-confidence of childhood is gone. Their bodies look different every day, everything is changing, those around them react in unfamiliar ways, and the girl no longer knows exactly who she is. This is nothing new, and puberty has never been a walk in the park, but now there is no longer a break from it after a school day. The mobile phone comes home with them.

Female aggressive behaviour

Generally, girls are seen as less aggressive than boys. But this is also because female aggressive behaviour usually does not involve physical violence, but rather social nastiness, which is less tangible than a fight. Excluding others, talking badly about them, making jokes at their expense – these are typical things that adolescent girls tend to do. They form a group of friends by excluding others.

Instagram is perfect for this. You don’t have to look the victim in the eye when you hypocritically ask why she looks so fat in that outfit. You withhold likes, you leave unkind comments on a photo. But now the bully gets likes for it, the whole thing spreads – and it’s never deleted. A brutal system that no one can really escape. And yet they still must go back to school the next day, even if they’ve just had to endure terrible put-downs.

Many girls feel it’s essential to look good on *Insta*. That’s where the *Facetune app* comes in handy. These beauty filters are now very profes-

sional; there’s a “friendly AI assistant” that you tell how the photo should look, and hey presto, you’re instantly ten kilos lighter, with twice as much shiny hair and lifted cheekbones.

Or you ask the “friendly” assistant what you should change. It then has plenty of suggestions for everything that needs improving on the girl: the neck, the chin, the cheeks, the lips, the eyes, the hair – in short, everything. And, of course, especially the figure.

You need a solid sense of self-confidence not to reach straight for a bar of chocolate after seeing such a list of suggestions. Hardly any girl uploads real photos of herself anymore. Once you’ve got used to your beautiful AI image, looking in the mirror naturally becomes a nightmare. A dysphoria develops – a constant fear that someone might shatter the illusion – with a real photo or with nasty comments about the heavy filters.

Harmful advice

At the same time, internet forums are full of harmful advice for girls. At a time when girls’ anxieties are skyrocketing and they are becoming increasingly isolated, the main advice isn’t “make friends and it’ll be fine”, but rather: avoid risks. Safety above all else. The world of *TikTok* is full of “red flags” – supposedly clear warning signs. If he asks you about prehistoric time – run away, that’s dangerous. This is dangerous, that is dangerous; you shouldn’t do anything anymore because it’s simply too risky. You might be disappointed; you might get hurt. But anyone who sits at home glued to their mobile phone is bound to end up disappointed and unhappy.

Girls are warned against boys and romance everywhere and in every context. Under no circumstances should you become dependent on a boy. On *TikTok* you get short videos: “Why he’s a narcissist”; “Why he’ll cheat on you”. All of this is aimed at young girls aged twelve or thirteen who have no context whatsoever. Passionate influencers explain to them why boys are such pigs. How are they supposed to know that this is just an opinion that sells well?

Friendly advice is much rarer. Jonathan Haidt conducted a study on Reddit forums. (Jonathan Haidt: *Generation Anxiety: How We Are Losing Our Children to the Virtual World and Putting Their Mental Health at Risk*)³ When it came to relationship difficulties, the most common advice was: break up, break up immediately. The rarest advice was to find a compromise.



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Of course, it doesn't help that children are exposed to hardcore pornography from a very early age. Boys learn to view women as worthless objects available for the free satisfaction of sexual urges. Girls see how men treat women in a demeaning, brutal and contemptuous manner. They view boys as dangerous, evil

and insatiable. Should one really get involved with such a monster?

At the same time, parents are giving advice less often. When they do, they tend to minimise the physical dangers, such as avoiding a dark walk home. They seem less aware of the dangers online. Freya India sees a trend where parents want to remain neutral to give teenagers their freedom. Media companies then step into this gap, full of advice but anything but neutral. Porn Hub then replaces relationship advice and Instagram takes over the topic of self-esteem. And when problems arise (and what teenager doesn't face problems?), there are plenty of online therapy providers happy to help.

Online life coaches for self-doubt

In the UK and the US, it's almost become the norm for girls to have their own online life coach. *BetterHelp* and *Talkspace* are the biggest providers. They run their adverts whenever girls express any self-doubt. Exam anxiety and similar issues are also a reason for them to seek online "therapy". They offer their services in Germany too – officially only for adults, but you can also sign up using a "nickname". The fact that these companies advertise "school problems" or "problems with parents" as reasons for therapy for adults makes no sense whatsoever.

What young people understand by "therapy" today, however, is something quite different from what the older generation understands by it. You no longer go to a therapist, examine your feelings and grapple with your blind spots. No, now you download an app and can text it 24/7, and it always texts back. In theory, you can also book real people. You can now also read *Betterhelp* adverts in German: "Your mental health matters" and "Therapy is for everyone".

The British adverts are borderline: in one, a friend asks a girl if she wants to talk about her maths test. No, she doesn't. "Then maybe you should text your therapy app instead", the friend suggests. In another, a father tries to convince his daughter to enjoy the nice weather outside. "Not helpful" pops up as a comment. And then there's the advert for the brilliant therapy app, all from the comfort of your own home.

Therapy app instead of friends

The message is clear. You don't need friends at all. You don't need family. You need a therapy app.

The trend towards "therapy" is fuelled by the pathologisation of perfectly normal behaviour on social media. No one has normal personality traits anymore. If you worry a lot, you have an anxiety disorder. If you don't like it when your partner watches porn, you're a control freak.

If you're jealous, you have a problem with your self-esteem. If you're friendly to others, you have a saviour complex. If you're romantic, you have an ambivalent insecure attachment disorder. And so on and so forth. Nothing is normal anymore, and for everything there are therapy apps and psychotropic drugs.

Cerebral Inc. suggests to teenagers that they might have ADHD if they are "chatty". You can book therapy there, and they prescribe medication online, which is then sent to your home by post. Oh, and if you're not very chatty, you'll find other advice on *TikTok*: "Five signs that you have autism".

What you rarely find online, according to Freya India, is advice to question your feelings. To face your fears. To try things out. No influencer tells you that it's perfectly normal to feel insecure, that it's part of puberty. And even if they did, the algorithm wouldn't push that video to the top.

Panic, drama and danger are the things that generate clicks. Who would watch an influencer simply taking a bath or quietly reading a book?

Social media is undoubtedly a disaster for young girls. *Instagram* replaces real groups of friends with an online "community" that is not a community at all, but a shark tank. Today, children get their advice from *TikTok* videos rather than from their parents. Fears are amplified; normal behaviour is pathologised.

How are girls supposed to form stable relationships if, from a young age, they learn to value only their own feelings and, above all, to be

afraid? Not to compromise, never to become dependent, not to be vulnerable? On the internet, you learn nothing about being kind, caring, or making sacrifices. How are young people supposed to live fulfilling relationships if they are socialised by *Porn Hub*?

No child needs a smartphone

Right now, it is important to distinguish between two things: online surveillance – which suits politicians and the mainstream media so well – and the protection of children from social media. There is no reason why teenagers should have smartphones. They are simply harmful. A push-button phone – no problem. If it has a front-facing camera, that's fine too. But no child needs a smartphone.

When politicians, with tears in their eyes, advocate protecting young people from social media, we should take them at their word. We should ask whether they want to ban the sale of

smartphones to minors, or whether they are simply trying to shield themselves from criticism. Whether they want to monitor adults or protect children. Then we will see where the crux of the matter lies.

And for those who champion freedom of expression, it is also important not to claim now that the situation with young people and the internet isn't really that bad. We can and should protect children from social media without giving up anonymity online.

It's not an either/or situation. But "and"!

Source: <https://tkp.at/2026/03/02/social-media-junge-maedchen-und-der-ueberwachungsstaat/>, 2 March 2026

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")

¹ https://www.dak.de/presse/landesthemen/rheinland-pfalz/kinder-und-jugendgesundheit/panik-und-aengste-maedchen-in-rheinland-pfalz-besonders-betroffen_162880

² <https://amzn.to/4b46Gqp>

³ <https://amzn.to/4r7TNSm>