

By Isabella Steele,
Age 16

If You Want Us Offline, Give Us Somewhere to Go

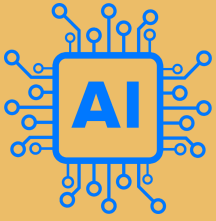
The Real Alternative to Social Media

Spring 2027, social media is to be banned in the UK for everyone under the age of 16. “To give kids their childhood back”. But what if we don’t feel it has been taken from us? At first it seemed sensible to me, but to take away what may be the root of the problem will not always provide a solution. The problem is undeniable; social media can be harmful, and is more addictive than ever, but the truth is that young people know more about it than anyone else. A petition asking for the government to rethink the ban was signed by more than 214,000 people but, along with numerous others like it, seems to have gone unnoticed. So many of the people who the ban will affect are understandably worried for a number of reasons; losing a familiar supportive network and source of political education as well as their voice in political and global matters being taken away from them, and of course, their way of communication.

I would argue that the internet can be the best source of political information if we approach it with the right mindset. **Constantly absorbing so many different viewpoints and ideas can be confusing and overwhelming but it forces us to be critical and open minded.** Of course, we can be easily swayed by algorithms and what we see online, and that can be dangerous, but doesn’t it come from a place of empathy? Of understanding?



If we approach educating ourselves – politically in particular – with our own core morals firmly in mind, we should not lose sight of what is important to us. And if we cannot educate ourselves in this way before gaining the right to vote at the age of 16, there is the risk of rushing into a very important decision, perhaps pressured by those around us to vote a certain way, without the time to gather our own thoughts and reach an individual conclusion. The votes of the youth are crucial as they provide a completely unique point of view that looks to *the future* from a more direct perspective than anyone else can. Social media seems to be the main way we hear this voice and I believe it should not be repressed, or regarded as less important than the voices of the older, more respected generations that we are so used to hearing. I think it is equally important that we can express these views and stand together with people we share them with, in a time which has split us by our moral priorities



I find it strange in all of this talk of saving young people from their phones that there is still no mention of banning or at least putting restrictions on usage of generative AI. The effects it is having on our brains are very real. A study which took place in June 2025 reported that “ChatGPT users were found to display the lowest level of brain engagement,” and “consistently underperformed at neural, linguistic, and behavioural levels.”

But this study was taken on the brains of those aged between 18-39 and I can't help but worry about the way in which the still developing brains of younger generative AI users must be affected. You would think that the facts speak for themselves, but people are not easily persuaded when AI itself is often referred to as *the future*. It is viewed as this innovative, futuristic concept and they don't want to get left behind. I think it is important that we stay grounded in the fact that what it is is in the name; artificial, and not in any way comparable to the real human beings we interact with in day-to-day life, however less common these interactions may be becoming. But how can we hold that against the people of this age, for hiding behind closed curtains, becoming more and more acquainted to the gentle humming response of these chatbots which leaves them with little to no confidence when it comes to having actual real-life conversations.

The irony is that while we worry about the damage caused by social media, we have also allowed many of the real-life spaces where people once met to disappear. If there are fewer places to gather, it becomes much easier to retreat into technology.

Town Centres

This week, I visited a Scotland's Towns Partnership event featuring a speech by the STP Chair followed by a Panel Discussion hosted by the STP Chief Executive, all covering the importance of restoring town centres as well as the impact this has on young people and *the future*.



What stood out to me was the description of town centres as social spaces that have gradually been lost. Listening to the discussion, I realised that perhaps this is part of the same conversation. If we want young people to spend less time online, we also need to think about where we expect them to go instead. A social space for community was described and has been lost from town centres, places that hold a sentimental value for bringing people together.



Personally, as a young person this idea of restoring this space is something that hasn't crossed my mind because it is something that has never been central to my life, and so I never lost it. Perhaps that's because **my generation never really experienced thriving town centres as places to meet friends and spend time and we have online to buy things at the touch of a button**. However, I believe that especially today, in-person socialising is something we should cling onto, or rather try to claw back as our social skills slip further away from us and we rely more and more on technology.

If we want people to rely less on technology, then we have to make the real world somewhere worth spending time in. Places for cultural events, social gatherings, creative industries, arts, youth centres, skills development, housing and so much more interwoven with retail shopping and coffee shops.



People should be able to be proud of their town and I now see how many people care about this, are working behind the scenes, pushing for this cause and devoting their time to it. At the event, I learned about the role that locals and the community play in helping to restore a town. Only they know what they want, what the town needs, and although they often feel overlooked, it is important to hand over the power to them. The whole process will take time, and the conclusion that was drawn from the question; **“What would make the most difference in ensuring that our towns are fit for future?”** is that longer term commitment of 10+ years would realistically move things forward and bringing these town centres back to life. Sticking to the plan for a longer period of time rather than allowing investment to lose that motivation as they often do.

Conclusion

The action that the government is choosing to take – despite how it may be presented – seems more of a punishment than a much-needed aid. AI is out of control and needs to be regulated. The leech has already latched on, but the sooner we rip it off, the less blood it'll manage to take. But taking social media away from young people without giving them another place to connect won't solve the problem. **If we are serious about helping young people spend less time online, we also need to rebuild the places where real life happens.** We need town centres where people want to spend time, where they can meet friends, talk to strangers, feel part of a community and build confidence through real conversations. Maybe that's why the discussion about restoring our town centres stayed with me. It's not just about bringing empty shops back into use or making our high streets look nicer. **It's about giving people somewhere to belong again.**

Technology will always fill a gap. If there is nowhere to go, nowhere to meet and no real alternative, then of course people will turn to their phones and, increasingly, to AI. We can't expect young people to choose the real world if we've allowed so much of it to disappear.

Perhaps the answer isn't simply taking something away.

Perhaps it's giving something back.