

Jonathan Haidt: The Anxious Generation

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Jonathan Haidt, one of today's most influential public intellectuals, has published a new book, *The Anxious Generation*, a thought-provoking work examining the negative impact of digital technologies, especially smartphones and social media, on children's mental health. Haidt originally intended to write a book on the harmful effects of social media on democracy. This subject would have been closer to the theme of his most prized work so far, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, which primarily explores political psychology, or his widely-cited academic article, 'The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment', which helped shape the discipline of political philosophy. However, the planned first chapter on mental health eventually expanded into an entire book.

In *The Anxious Generation*, Haidt argues that the online environments in which 46% of teenagers are nearly constantly engaged (Vogels, 2022), with

an average screen time of 8 hours and 39 minutes per day (Common Sense, 2022), are a major cause of the significant decline in their mental health. He presents data linking the rise of these digital technologies to notable increases in depression and anxiety, as well as other issues, including self-reported mental illnesses, self-harm and suicide among children, particularly girls. Haidt proposes that steps should be taken to reduce the use of digital technologies by minors, and suggests that the lack of an adequate response to this issue has largely been due to powerful lobbying by the companies behind the digital platforms – a scenario reminiscent of the tactics employed in the past by the tobacco and gambling industries, which also promoted addictive products.

Despite its impact, Haidt's work has faced criticism from some scholars who argue that he selectively omits studies that do not support his narrative, employs insufficiently sophisticated statistical methods, overlooks some positive

effects of digital technologies and disregards alternative explanations for children's declining mental health. Overall, these critics argue that Haidt exaggerates the negative impact of digital technologies, smartphones and social networks on young people's mental wellbeing (Lebedikova et al., 2024; Odgers, 2024).

Interestingly, these criticisms of Haidt's book bring to my mind the negative reviews faced by recent Nobel laureates in economics, Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson. Their influential book *Why Nations Fail* explores why some countries are economically prosperous while others are not, attributing much to 'inclusive political institutions' but giving minimal attention to the roles of geography, culture and other factors. Likewise, Haidt's book can be seen as an intellectual appraisal of specific aspects of the digital world's impact on children, often making considerable simplifications and not addressing the topic in full scope.

However, in this political science review, I wish to focus on an aspect of Haidt's book that has been neither contested nor criticised by other scholars: the failure of states to effectively enforce online age restrictions for children. Social networks, for example, do not verify that a user creating an account meets the minimum age requirement of 13, and similar gaps exist in age verification for accessing adult internet content.

Greater protection of children online is one objective of the European Commission's Digital Services Act, introduced under Ursula von der Leyen's first presidency. It is worth noting that dig-

ital regulation was the second-highest priority for the European Commission during its 2019-2024 term, though it has often been overshadowed in public debate by the Green Deal. Nevertheless, EU digital legislation is gradually coming into effect, and it is, in my view, likely to become increasingly prominent in public discussion in the near future.

Digital policy and digital rights have recently gained more traction within the political discourse. This is a good reason to read Haidt's book, which contains numerous recommendations for change and potential regulatory measures. Yet, the implementation of such legislative changes remains a fundamentally political decision. It appears that society's formerly optimistic attitude towards technology is shifting. For example, France has banned smartphones in all schools for children under 15 (Willsher, 2024). In the Czech Republic, the media have covered the case of Vsetín, a town attempting to restrict smartphone use in primary schools ('V šesti vsetínských základních školách', 2024), and the list goes on.

Haidt's widely read book, which has topped the *New York Times* bestseller list for several weeks, can thus also be seen as a critique of unrestrained techno-optimism. The popularity of this book reflects, to a large extent, evolving societal views on this issue, which may soon result in significant policy implications in this vitally important area.

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