

ARTICLES

State Primary Socialization Indoctrination: A Libertarian Critique of Youth Digital Regulation

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This article explores the growing trend of state regulation targeting social media addiction among young people, offering a libertarian assessment of its legitimacy, consequences, and alternatives. The article introduces the concept of *state primary socialization indoctrination*, a novel contribution to Austro-libertarian literature, to describe how the state conditions citizens in the earlier part of their lives (from day care to university)—through education, media, and crisis management—to accept interventionist authority as natural. Drawing from Ludwig von Mises, Murray Rothbard, and Friedrich Hayek, the article critiques international regulatory responses—specifically those of China, the US, Spain, Australia, and South Korea—highlighting their impact on individual autonomy, parental authority, and economic efficiency. It argues that overregulation fosters dependence, erodes family responsibility, and imposes significant social and financial costs. In place of coercive mandates, the article advocates for voluntary solutions rooted in parental guidance, market innovation, and decentralized education. By grounding the debate in libertarian ethics and praxeology, it offers an alternative framework for addressing digital addiction while preserving freedom and personal responsibility.

The rise of social media addiction among young people has sparked widespread concern, particularly regarding its impact on mental health, academic performance, and social development (Al-Samarraie et al. 2022; Bezáková, Madleňák, and Švec 2021; Bozzola et al. 2022). Governments, advocacy groups, and even private corporations have proposed or implemented various regulations, such as screen-time limits, stricter content moderation, and age-based restrictions, to protect vulnerable users (Koo, Wati, and Lee 2011). While these measures are often well intentioned, they



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raise important questions about the role of the state, individual autonomy, and the rights of parents (Anderson, Faverio, and Park 2024; Decter 1975; Cohen and Hall 2022; Dominiak 2015; Lipson and Vallentyne 1991). This new societal control needs to be analyzed in the broader context of increased economic and social regulation and more government control and surveillance (Zuboff 2019; Holloway 2019; Andrejevic 2007; Lyon 2018).

Despite the growing prominence of this issue, there is a notable gap in libertarian scholarship addressing the regulation of social media, especially as it pertains to youth (Perry 2017; Dahlberg 2010). Existing literature often focuses on broader critiques of censorship or market dynamics but rarely considers the unique implications of state intervention in this specific context (Busch, Theiner, and Breindl 2018; Peterson 2013; Slutskiy 2020). This lack presents an opportunity to provide a fresh, libertarian perspective on a pressing contemporary debate (Palmer 2014; Vallentyne and Steiner 2000).

This article introduces the concept of *state primary socialization indoctrination* as a novel contribution to Austro-libertarian literature. This concept describes how the state systematically conditions individuals from childhood to adulthood,¹ shaping their beliefs, behaviors, and values to perceive government authority as natural and necessary. Through compulsory education, media influence, bureaucratic intervention, and regulatory oversight, individuals are gradually habituated to interventionist policies and discouraged from independent thought (Pennington 2025; Mises 2011). This process fosters a citizenry that is increasingly passive and dependent on state directives rather than one that values self-determination and liberty. By linking this framework to the debate on social media addiction and state intervention, we highlight how contemporary regulatory efforts, particularly those accelerated by crises like COVID-19, reinforce this broader pattern of state control. Instead of addressing the root causes of addiction, such measures expand government influence over private life, further entrenching reliance on state-driven solutions at the expense of individual agency and voluntary alternatives.

¹ In classical sociology, *primary socialization* refers to the initial phase of social learning that occurs during early childhood, typically within the family, where individuals first acquire language, values, and norms. *Secondary socialization* occurs later through institutions such as schools, workplaces, and the media, where individuals learn to function within broader societal contexts. See Berger and Luckmann (2016), "The Social Construction of Reality." The term *primary* is retained in the concept of state primary socialization indoctrination to highlight how the state increasingly intervenes from the earliest stages of development, effectively supplanting the family as the main agent of socialization.

State Primary Socialization Indoctrination

The term *state primary socialization indoctrination*² describes the systematic conditioning of individuals by the state from childhood through adulthood, shaping their beliefs, behaviors, and values to accept state authority as both natural and necessary (Oetting et al. 1998; Whitbeck 1999). Through compulsory education, media influence, bureaucratic intervention, and regulatory oversight, individuals are gradually habituated to interventionist policies and restricted in their capacity for independent thought; this fosters a passive citizenry that relies on government directives rather than valuing self-determination and liberty (Mises 1956, 2011; Ikeda 2002). Appeals to security, economic growth, social equity, public health, and the fight against extremism or terrorism are consistently used to justify this process. Whether through antipoverty programs, crisis management, or regulatory measures, state intervention is framed as an essential safeguard against societal risks.

More recently, the justification for government overreach has expanded to include behavioral regulation under the guise of public health concerns, including addiction (Illich 2003; Zhan and Chan 2012; Kolodny and Frieden 2017; Bakke and Endal 2010). Yet, in some cases, these addictions appear to be artificially induced by the state itself.³ A striking example is the social media dependency exacerbated by pandemic lockdowns. Governments restricted physical movement and reshaped social interactions by confining individuals to their homes, effectively coercing people into increased screen time as their primary means of communication and engagement. In this way, state policies amplified reliance on digital platforms (Amankwah-Amoah et al. 2021; Floetgen et al. 2021) and reinforced the role of the state as overseer of acceptable discourse and behavior, creating both the conditions for addiction and the rationale for further regulation.

Tools of Indoctrination

The public school system is one of the most potent tools of state habituation. As Murray Rothbard (1999) highlights in *Education: Free and Compulsory*, government-controlled education instructs and inculcates obedience to state authority. The modern curriculum often emphasizes collectivist values, suppressing individualism and critical thinking in favor of compliance.

2 While this article focuses on primary socialization, the process of secondary socialization—through labor markets, political associations, media, sports clubs, and welfare systems—also serves as a powerful vector of state indoctrination in adulthood (see Maccoby 2015; Grusec and Hastings 2015; and Darmon 2024). A full Austro-libertarian analysis of this phenomenon remains a promising avenue for future research.

3 Examples of state-induced addictions include the increased screen dependency resulting from COVID-19 lockdown policies and mandatory remote schooling; behavioral reliance on government welfare programs that disincentivize autonomy; the widespread adoption of state-sponsored educational technologies that normalize constant digital exposure; and even monetary policies—such as ultralow interest rates—that fuel long-term dependence on consumer debt. In each case, state action creates or reinforces the conditions for addictive behavior while presenting itself as the solution.

Introducing ideological training—whether in progressive social policies, environmental alarmism, or economic interventionism—further ensures that students are socialized to view state control as legitimate and necessary.

From childhood, individuals interact with bureaucracies that regulate nearly every aspect of their lives—from education to healthcare to employment. These constant interactions reinforce the perception that the government is an indispensable problem solver rather than a coercive force. As Friedrich Hayek (1972) warns in *The Road to Serfdom* (first published in 1944), once centralized authority is accepted as a standard and benevolent force, it becomes exceedingly difficult to resist its expansion.

The welfare state plays a crucial role in habituating individuals to government intervention. The state cultivates a sense of dependency that undermines the appeal of personal responsibility and free-market solutions by making vast portions of the population reliant on social programs, subsidies, and state-funded benefits. Rothbard (2011, 235) argues that such intervention distorts natural economic incentives, reinforcing the belief that only government, not voluntary cooperation or entrepreneurship, can provide security and stability.

The rise of digital platforms has further extended state influence. Shoshana Zuboff (2019) explains in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* that governments and significant tech companies collaborate to track and regulate online behavior, normalizing surveillance and conditioning individuals to self-censor. Social credit systems, widespread data collection, and algorithmic content moderation enforce ideological conformity while subtly eroding resistance to state overreach.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an unprecedented opportunity for governments to reinforce state authority while fostering behavioral addiction to digital environments. The imposition of mask mandates, lockdowns, and vaccine passports—often without robust debate or legislative oversight—accustomed populations to high levels of control over personal behavior. Walter Block (2020) and Mark Pennington (2023) highlight how these measures expanded the Overton window, making once-unthinkable levels of state intervention appear reasonable, if not necessary. Furthermore, lockdown policies accelerated the shift toward digital addiction, particularly among youth, reinforcing dependence on state-mediated socialization through screens, online schooling, and government-monitored digital interactions (Gupta, Swami, and Nebhinani 2020; Gregersen et al. 2023). This phenomenon relates directly to the themes explored in this article.

In recent years, the promotion of identity politics, critical race theory, and radical gender ideologies within educational institutions and public policy has further entrenched state intervention. As Hans-Hermann Hoppe (2001) argues, collectivist ideologies serve as ideological justifications for increased state control by framing all social disparities as systemic injustices requiring

government correction. This shift discourages self-reliance and promotes an expectation that the state should engineer equality, further solidifying bureaucratic oversight of daily life.

State-aligned media reinforces these narratives by shaping public perception of government actions. Whether through state-funded news outlets or regulatory controls over private media, dissenting perspectives are marginalized while pro-state narratives are amplified. As Alexis de Tocqueville (1840, chap. 6) warns in *Democracy in America*, this “soft despotism” ensures that individuals, even in democratic societies, gradually accept state influence not through overt coercion but through subtle manipulation of public discourse.

Erosion of Individual Freedom and Influence

Over time, repeated exposure to state intervention leads to desensitization. Each incremental loss of freedom—speech restrictions, financial surveillance, or heightened taxation—becomes easier to accept as individuals grow accustomed to government control. This process mirrors the psychological adaptation seen in abusive relationships, where victims become conditioned to accept coercion as a regular part of life. By positioning itself as the primary caregiver, educator, and moral authority, the state gradually erodes the influence of families and local communities. Parental rights are increasingly subordinated to government mandates in education, healthcare, and child welfare policies. This shift weakens family autonomy and consolidates the state’s role as the ultimate arbiter of societal values.

As Rothbard (1998) notes in *The Ethics of Liberty*, the most effective form of control is one where individuals no longer question its legitimacy. When people internalize the belief that the state is necessary for order and progress, opposition to its growth is framed as irrational or extremist. This ideological entrenchment ensures that resistance remains minimal even as government power expands.

Countering state habituation requires a multipronged approach rooted in voluntary education, decentralization, and independent thought. Alternative schooling models, such as homeschooling and private education, offer avenues for developing critical thinking skills outside state indoctrination. Decentralized media and independent publishing can challenge state narratives, fostering intellectual diversity (Brunetti and Weder 2003; Guseva et al. 2008). Finally, advocating for free-market solutions over government intervention strengthens economic independence, reducing reliance on state programs.

State primary socialization indoctrination represents a new theoretical framework within Austro-libertarian thought that highlights the mechanisms by which state influence becomes deeply ingrained in society. Its connection to digital addiction, particularly during and after the COVID-19 crisis,

underscores the state's role beyond political and economic intervention in fostering dependence. Recognizing these mechanisms is the first step toward resisting their influence and fostering a culture that values liberty, self-reliance, and voluntary cooperation over coercion and dependence.

[Table 1](#) presents the core mechanisms of state primary socialization indoctrination: the systematic conditioning of individuals by the state through education, media, welfare, and digital regulation in order to normalize obedience and dependency. By mapping out these mechanisms and their psychological, social, and political effects, this framework aims to explain how the modern state subtly erodes personal responsibility and family authority while fostering a culture of conformity and surveillance.

Table 1. Mechanisms and effects of state primary socialization indoctrination

Mechanism	Description	Effect on individuals
Compulsory education	State-controlled schooling imposes a uniform curriculum emphasizing obedience, collectivism, and ideological conformity.	Internalization of state legitimacy; suppression of critical thinking and individualism
Media influence and narrative control	State-funded media and algorithmic regulation of online content shape public perception and marginalize dissent.	Acceptance of dominant narratives; normalization of surveillance and censorship
Bureaucratic socialization	Citizens interact with bureaucracies from childhood on in health, education, and employment, reinforcing dependence on public institutions.	Reduced self-reliance; habituation to external problem-solving mechanisms
Welfare dependency	Social programs and subsidies foster long-term economic reliance on government redistribution mechanisms.	Undermining of entrepreneurial spirit and voluntary cooperation
Behavioral regulation via crises	Crises (e.g., pandemics) justify intrusive behavioral controls (lockdowns, passports, mandates), reshaping social habits and increasing digital dependence.	Increased acceptance of coercive norms; digital addiction and state-mediated interaction normalized
Digital surveillance and tech collusion	Tech platforms and states collaborate to track behavior, enforce norms, and moderate discourse (Zuboff 2019).	Erosion of privacy and autonomy; encouragement of passive acceptance of surveillance capitalism
Ideological indoctrination	Progressive identity politics and egalitarian narratives are institutionalized to justify state redistribution and intervention.	Discouragement of personal accountability; increased tolerance for coercive egalitarianism
Desensitization to control	Incremental expansion of state power through taxation, censorship, and mandates leads to normalization of control.	Psychological habituation to coercion; resistance framed as irrational
Erosion of family and community authority	Parental rights are overridden by state mandates in education, healthcare, and digital behavior.	Weakening of organic structures of moral and social guidance; centralization of social authority

The Ideology of Control: Risks and Repercussions

Beyond the immediate intentions of protecting youth, the broader ideological implications of social media regulation reveal a deeper trend toward normalizing state control. This section critically examines the unintended consequences and structural risks of such interventions, particularly how they affect individual autonomy, family authority, and societal resilience (see [table 2](#) for a summary). Drawing from libertarian theory, the section highlights the ways in which state-led approaches often backfire—fostering dependency, undermining parental responsibility, and expanding bureaucratic overreach.

Impact on Socialization and Independence

Excessive regulation of social media risks conditioning children to rely on external controls rather than fostering their ability to self-regulate (Xiao 1999).⁴ By restricting access to platforms that offer both risks and opportunities for growth, such regulations inhibit the natural process through which young people develop independence and critical thinking skills (Bylund 2015). Social media, despite its drawbacks, provides a space for youth to explore diverse viewpoints, connect with peers globally, and express themselves creatively. Overregulation stifles these benefits, fostering dependence on state-imposed rules instead of personal decision-making (Bylund 2015; Mises 1949, 307, 310). As Rothbard (2011, 353) notes, human beings thrive in environments where they can act freely and align their choices with reason and values.

By curtailing access, regulation inadvertently limits opportunities for adolescents to practice autonomy in a digital context (Van der Hof and Koops 2011; J. K. Park et al. 2024). Adolescence is a critical developmental phase during which individuals learn to navigate complex social realities. Overregulation risks halting this process, replacing a chance for growth with dependence on top-down mandates. For instance, blanket bans on social media often disregard the varying levels of maturity and responsibility among youth, thereby homogenizing them in a way that stifles individuality and self-governance.

A secondary concern is the acculturation of young individuals to invasive identity verification systems (Chin, Jin, and Ling 2006; Labati et al. 2017; Wang, Tan, and Jain 2003). Policies requiring frequent identity checks to access online spaces could normalize constant surveillance, conditioning children to accept such intrusions as a societal norm. This could lay the groundwork for future systems resembling social credit models, where individuals must disclose personal information in order to participate in fundamental societal activities. These measures undermine the principle of privacy as a cornerstone of liberty.

Moreover, requiring children to share personal data in order to access platforms raises concerns about the proportionality of such measures. Data minimization principles, as emphasized in privacy law frameworks, are often overlooked in favor of broad data collection practices. In attempting to enforce regulations, platforms may overreach by gathering extensive personal

⁴ This is what I call a *coercive equilibrium*, which is a societal condition in which interventionism is normalized and widely accepted—not through overt coercion but through a tacit pact between state authority and public acquiescence (Sémanne 2025, 8). This equilibrium is sustained by institutional mechanisms such as public education and dominant cultural narratives, which serve to legitimize centralized power. As Klaus Schwab and Thierry Malleret (2020) note, political elites often maintain this balance by invoking a constant sense of risk—be it of war, terrorism, or pandemics—thereby justifying ongoing intervention without provoking mass resistance. The concept complements the theory of state primary socialization indoctrination developed in this article by highlighting the macro social stability that allows such indoctrination to remain largely uncontested.

information, eroding not just privacy but also freedom of expression and communication. This dynamic creates a chilling effect, where young users may self-censor to avoid potential repercussions.

Ultimately, these measures do not address the root causes of social media addiction but instead create a superficial solution that could have lasting consequences. By failing to instill a sense of responsibility and autonomy in youth, excessive regulation risks producing a generation unprepared to manage digital freedoms. Empowering⁵ families rather than imposing state mandates aligns with Rothbard's (1998) view of fostering liberty through self-ownership and voluntary association.

In this sense, Hans-Hermann Hoppe highlights that in modern Western societies, children are often exposed to collectivist ideologies and state-driven institutions for nearly two decades, from day care through primary school, high school, and even university. Even private institutions are typically subject to heavy state regulation, which shapes curricula to align with specific ideological frameworks. As he notes, "The longer the time a person has spent within the system of public education, the more he is committed to leftist-egalitarian ideas and has swallowed and wholeheartedly internalized the official doctrine and agenda of 'political correctness'" (Hoppe 2018, 96–97). This systemic indoctrination, spanning decades, undermines the foundation of individualism and reinforces a culture of conformity and dependency.

This prolonged exposure conditions young minds to accept state authority as a natural and inevitable part of life.⁶ The growing intervention in areas like digital behavior, as seen in the cases of South Korea, China, the United States, Spain, and Australia, further extends this dynamic, accustoming children to the idea that the state should dictate their personal choices.

In South Korea, the government's "digital detox camps" are a clear example of this overreach (BBC 2019; Koo, Wati, and Lee 2011). Designed to address perceived digital addiction, these camps remove children from their families and environments to enforce behavioral corrections. While ostensibly aimed at protecting youth, these programs can be seen as conditioning them to

5 As I understand it, empowerment, from a libertarian perspective rooted in Rothbardian thought, is not something granted by the state but something that emerges naturally in a free society where individuals can act on their own initiative. It is the product of uncoerced action within a framework of voluntary exchange and property rights. In such a system, individuals gain power through ownership, entrepreneurship, education, reputation, and innovation—without the distortions of state favoritism or coercive redistribution. Unlike top-down "promotion" or state-sponsored "encouragement," market-based empowerment arises when institutions and actors compete to serve others, enabling individuals to improve their condition by merit and mutual benefit rather than state dependency. As Rothbard (2006b, 885) reminds us, "Libertarians don't believe in ever taking moral lessons from the State; *we* believe that the only proper moral teachers are individuals and voluntary groups such as private schools, families, and churches." True empowerment, then, cannot originate from the very institution that thrives on subjugation.

6 I developed the concept of *educationally programmed demand*, which refers to forms of demand that would not naturally emerge in a free and decentralized society but instead arise through sustained state influence, primarily via the education system (Sémanne 2025, 8). This includes demand for specific political systems, welfare services, public-sector careers, regulated professions, or academic disciplines that are institutionally promoted through compulsory schooling, subsidized higher education, and ideological curricula. The state thus engineers public preferences by shaping what individuals believe is valuable, necessary, or legitimate. Related terms include *state-conditioned demand*, *state-induced preference distortion*, *public demand engineering*, and *educational demand engineering*.

accept intrusive state control as a legitimate solution to personal challenges, delegating the issue of addiction to the state. Such initiatives also undermine parental authority, replacing family-based guidance with government-driven reeducation (even though those camps involved the approbation of the parents and the family in the first place). The long-term consequence is a normalization of institutionalized intervention that echoes the authoritarian practice of reeducation camps, raising profound concerns about liberty and autonomy.

China provides another stark case of state overreach, with strict regulations limiting young people to just forty minutes of daily social media access on Douyin (the name of TikTok in China). As Gao (2023, 3) explains, “In terms of safety mechanism for youth using Douyin, Douyin also launched Douyin teenager mode, the default length of use is 40 minutes; unable to publish content, watch and open live; unable to use private messages, comments, recharge reward function; the same city and hot search portal is closed, the content is selected by the platform, and only selected content can be searched.” The government also imposes mandatory filters and curfews, reinforcing its role as the ultimate arbiter of acceptable behavior. While these measures may appear effective in combating addiction, they further entrench the idea that the state—not families or individuals—should manage digital habits. This top-down approach risks habituating children to extensive surveillance and control, paving the way for future acceptance of more invasive measures like social credit systems. The emphasis on external enforcement over personal responsibility stifles the development of self-regulation and critical thinking, essential components of individual liberty.

In Western democracies like the United States and Spain, state intervention takes subtler but equally problematic forms. In the US, government-driven “nudge” policies encourage platforms to implement features like notifications and usage trackers, subtly manipulating user behavior (Rizzo and Whitman 2020). These nudges create the illusion of voluntary compliance while subtly enforcing state preferences. In Spain, age limits for social media access are set arbitrarily, imposing one-size-fits-all restrictions that disregard individual maturity and parental discretion. Both cases demonstrate how state involvement in digital behavior regulation diminishes family autonomy and sets precedents for future interventions, however well intentioned they may seem.

The COVID-19 pandemic offers a broader context for understanding the societal impact of such measures (Block 2020; Cato and Inoue 2022; Pennington 2023). The widespread use of masks and lockdown policies conditioned entire populations, including children, to accept significant limitations on personal freedoms in the name of public safety (Thomson 2022; Kahn 2020). This shift expanded the Overton window—the range of acceptable public discourse—making intrusive measures seem reasonable

or even necessary. When children grow up accustomed to state-imposed restrictions on everything from digital habits to physical movements, their tolerance for future interventions inevitably increases. This dynamic threatens the long-term preservation of liberty, as successive generations become more willing to sacrifice autonomy in exchange for state-promised security.

These case studies make it evident that excessive regulation risks normalizing state control over individual lives (Hayek 1972; Vaz and Bruno 2003). This trend not only undermines personal responsibility and family autonomy but also fosters a culture of dependence on government interventions. As Rothbard and Hoppe warn, such patterns erode the foundational principles of liberty, making it imperative to resist the encroachment of state power in the lives of young individuals. In contrast, empowering families and communities to address these challenges preserves freedom and fosters the resilience necessary for navigating the complexities of modern life.

Contrary to the widespread belief that empowerment must be delivered top-down through public programs, markets empower individuals by decentralizing opportunity. Entrepreneurs, content creators, and communities thrive in competitive digital ecosystems where success depends on merit, innovation, and voluntary association—not state permission (Andrieu 2010; Bylund and McCaffrey 2017; Huerta de Soto 2008). In a free market, empowerment is emergent: platforms compete to meet user needs, educators tailor products to families' values, and youth gain access to diverse ideas and audiences.

Interventionist policies, by contrast, often impose uniform standards, stifling diversity and initiative. As Ludwig von Mises (1944, 48) notes, true empowerment arises from the individual's capacity to act purposefully within a system of property rights and voluntary exchange. Thus, empowerment, promotion, and encouragement are not gifts from the state but natural consequences of liberty and entrepreneurship.

Addiction as a Political Tool: A Servile Society by Design

From a libertarian perspective, state interventions are never neutral—they ineluctably serve the underlying interests of social control and psychological dependency. The rise of digital addiction, particularly among youth, should be seen not merely as an unintended consequence of innovation but rather as a politically convenient development. A population that is distracted, emotionally fragile, and socially isolated is far less likely to question authority or assert personal autonomy.⁷

⁷ As Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988) argue in *Manufacturing Consent*, mass media in liberal democracies often function less as independent watchdogs and more as ideological instruments of state-corporate power, subtly engineering public consent and reinforcing passivity—particularly among younger, media-saturated generations.

This vulnerability is compounded by deeper systemic forces (see Mises 1951, 44). High taxation, regulatory overload, inflationary monetary policy,⁸ and the disintegration of family and spiritual life all contribute to a weakened citizenry. As the state undermines the institutions that traditionally foster resilience—marriage, parenthood, religion—it facilitates loneliness and disorientation. A society without bonds or meaning becomes fertile ground for addiction. The COVID-19 lockdowns intensified this trend as individuals, cut off from community and purpose, turned en masse to digital devices as their only social outlet (Schwab and Malleret 2020).

Rothbard (1998) notes that the modern state often flourishes by fostering dependency and docility,⁹ whether through welfare systems, compulsory schooling, or overregulated markets. Today, this dynamic is reinforced by the state’s implicit alliance with surveillance-capitalist platforms (Zuboff 2019; Sémanne 2025). These tech giants—frequently subsidized, protected from true competition, or bailed out during crises—offer hyperstimulating but mentally numbing content that conditions behavior in ways beneficial to both commercial and political elites (Lyons 2009; Lazonick 2009).

This system eerily resembles the world depicted in Aldous Huxley’s (2007) *Brave New World*, where individuals are pacified not through coercion but through pleasure. In Huxley’s dystopia, citizens are numbed by entertainment, casual sex, and the drug soma, a symbol of engineered contentment.¹⁰ The state’s role is not to command with an iron fist but to seduce and domesticate through gratification (Kedzie 2014; Keisman 2016; Marks 2002). In our reality, the equivalent might be universal basic income, algorithmically optimized dopamine loops, and immersive virtual realities—all subtly aligned with a broader logic of pacification.

As historian Yuval Harari has observed, future governance may rest on a simple formula that I would call, if I summarize his ideas, “drugs, video games, and universal income.” In such a vision, addiction ceases to be a societal failure and becomes a policy tool. It justifies paternalistic expansion in the name of “public health” while fostering a population acclimated to

8 On the connection between inflation, monetary policy, and the weakening of family life, see Jeffery L. Degner (2025), *Inflation and the Family: Monetary Policy’s Impact on Household Life*, particularly his analysis of how inflation undermines traditional family structures. See also Jörg Guido Hülsmann (2004), *How Inflation Destroys Civilization*, for a broader Austrian perspective on the corrosive social effects of fiat money, including its impact on time preferences, savings, and family cohesion.

9 The rhetoric of digital “well-being” and therapeutic paternalism often masks more insidious dynamics of control. As Carl Cederström and André Spicer (2015) observe, modern regimes of wellness and positivity displace critical reflection, recoding submission to authority as personal growth (Degner 2025).

10 This echoes Neil Postman’s (1985) thesis that in advanced societies, authoritarianism relies no longer on fear but on pleasure: entertainment replaces debate, and seduction replaces force.

control, surveillance, and dependence. As he foretells it in *Homo Deus*, talking about the future of work, the people will not be able to be integrated to the labor market:¹¹

Of course, by 2033 many new professions are likely to appear, for example, virtual-world designers. But such professions will probably require much more creativity and flexibility than your run-of-the-mill job, and it is unclear whether forty-year-old cashiers or insurance agents will be able to reinvent themselves as virtual-world designers (just try to imagine a virtual world created by an insurance agent!). And even if they do so, the pace of progress is such that within another decade they might have to reinvent themselves yet again. After all, algorithms might well outperform humans in designing virtual worlds too. The crucial problem isn't creating new jobs. The crucial problem is creating new jobs that humans perform better than algorithms.

The technological bonanza will probably make it feasible to feed and support the useless masses even without any effort on their side. But what will keep them occupied and content? People must do something, or they will go crazy. What will they do all day? One solution might be offered by drugs and computer games. Unnecessary people might spend increasing amounts of time within 3D virtual-reality worlds, which would provide them with far more excitement and emotional engagement than the drab reality outside. Yet such a development would deal a mortal blow to the liberal belief in the sacredness of human life and of human experiences. What's so sacred in useless bums who pass their days devouring artificial experiences in La La Land? (Harari 2023, 149)

This is not merely the unintended by-product of bad policy—it is the deliberate logic of modern governance masked by therapeutic rhetoric. It marginalizes virtues like self-discipline, voluntary cooperation, and entrepreneurial initiative, replacing them with docility and digital sedation. A servile society is not simply tolerated—it is engineered.

¹¹ Yuval Noah Harari (2017) discusses the role of psychedelics and their relationship to the human search for meaning in a well-known interview with Dan Ariely.

False Sense of Security and Perverse Effects

Government-imposed regulatory limits often create a misleading sense of security for parents and users, suggesting that risks are adequately mitigated when, in reality, such measures are often superficial.¹² For instance, setting a maximum screen time of six hours a day could unintentionally normalize excessive use, as children might interpret the limit as a socially acceptable standard. Without understanding the nuances of moderation, youth might rely on these limits rather than developing intrinsic self-control. Rothbard's (2011, 235) critique of government intervention highlights this paradox, where state actions often produce outcomes contrary to their intentions.

Moreover, enforcing these regulations is fraught with logistical challenges. Identity verification, for instance, presents significant ethical and technical hurdles. Platforms may require official documents to confirm users' ages, yet such measures often fail to achieve the desired accuracy. Additionally, artificial intelligence-driven age estimation technologies, while innovative, are prone to error and bias, leading to potential exclusion or wrongful targeting of users. These shortcomings reveal the limitations of state-led interventions in a dynamic digital landscape.

These measures also risk exacerbating inequities among users. For example, marginalized groups may face disproportionate barriers to complying with verification protocols due to limited access to required documentation. Similarly, small businesses and individual creators relying on these platforms may find their operations disrupted by overzealous content moderation or restrictive algorithms. Far from protecting users, such measures may inadvertently harm those they seek to shield.

Another unintended consequence is the complacency fostered by these rules. Parents, believing that regulations ensure a safe environment, may become less vigilant about monitoring their children's online activities. This misplaced trust undermines the critical role of family oversight and engagement in addressing digital challenges. By shifting responsibility from parents to the state, these measures dilute the sense of accountability necessary for effective guardianship.

Finally, the illusion of safety created by regulations diverts attention from the development of practical, voluntary solutions. Educational initiatives that encourage digital literacy, self-awareness, and critical thinking are sidelined in favor of enforcement-heavy approaches. This focus on coercive measures

¹² This false sense of safety is part of a broader phenomenon that I call *interventionist surveillance capitalism*, whereby governments and dominant tech firms collaborate to create infrastructures of control under the guise of protection (Sémanne 2025, 8). As Zuboff (2019, 2015) argues, personal data are systematically harvested not merely for profit but for behavioral prediction, manipulation, and political leverage. Regulatory limits—such as screen-time caps or identity checks—may appear protective but often serve to entrench state-corporate surveillance while pacifying public concern. These superficial safeguards can obscure deeper power asymmetries and normalize continuous data extraction and behavioral conditioning under a veil of safety and care.

neglects the potential of empowering individuals to navigate social media responsibly, fostering dependence on external authority rather than cultivating resilience.

Circumvention of Regulations

One of the most persistent challenges of government regulations is their susceptibility to circumvention, especially by tech-savvy youth (Samuelson 1999). Virtual private networks (VPNs), fake accounts, and alternative platforms enable users to bypass restrictions, rendering many regulatory efforts ineffective. This cycle of enforcement and evasion not only undermines the credibility of these measures but also fosters a culture of distrust between users and authorities.

As circumvention efforts intensify, they often prompt a corresponding escalation in enforcement mechanisms, which can further erode individual freedoms. For instance, advanced age verification systems or real-time monitoring tools may be introduced to counter evasion tactics. Such measures not only increase surveillance but also set a dangerous precedent for state overreach in personal and digital spaces. These developments align with Mises's warning about the incremental encroachment of state power (Mises 1998, 2011).

Circumvention also highlights the adaptability of digital ecosystems in comparison to the rigidity of state regulations. Social media platforms, driven by market incentives, rapidly evolve to address user demands, whereas state measures are often slow to adapt. This disparity leaves governments perpetually one step behind, creating a regulatory framework that is neither comprehensive nor effective.

Moreover, attempts to enforce stricter controls disproportionately impact law-abiding users while leaving determined violators unaffected. For instance, measures designed to identify underage users may inadvertently flag legitimate accounts, disrupting user experiences without achieving meaningful results. This imbalance undermines the principle of proportionality in regulation, raising ethical concerns about fairness and effectiveness.

To take the example of one of the countries evoked earlier, the concept of detox camps, as seen in South Korea, raises significant ethical and practical concerns. These camps, ostensibly designed to combat social media addiction among youth, represent a troubling precedent (Varma 2018; Dossey 2014). By placing young individuals in camps based on the recommendation of so-called educational experts—sometimes against the will of the parents—governments risk normalizing a system where personal autonomy and family authority are overridden by state mandates. This practice evokes disturbing historical parallels to state-run reeducation camps, which are infamous for suppressing individual liberties in the name of societal control.

Moreover, the assumption that these camps inherently “protect” children is questionable. Their actual effectiveness remains unclear, and even if they do succeed in reducing addiction, the broader implications of conditioning youth to accept such institutionalized interventions are alarming. By habituating them to being placed in camps for behavioral or health-related issues, the state creates a dangerous precedent for normalizing collective confinement as a solution to social challenges. As another example, during the COVID-19 crisis, some countries discussed isolating individuals who tested positive for the virus in specialized camps. While framed as a public health measure, these proposals mirrored the same troubling logic: coercive confinement is an acceptable remedy for complex societal issues. Protecting children from social media addiction should not come at the cost of instilling compliance with state-enforced institutionalization. This practice undermines individual liberty, family autonomy, and trust in voluntary, community-driven solutions.

Ultimately, the futility of circumventable regulations underscores the need to employ voluntary solutions that empower users rather than applying coercive mandates. By promoting education, parental engagement, and market-driven innovations, societies can address the root causes of social media addiction without resorting to invasive enforcement strategies.

Economic and Administrative Costs

Implementing and enforcing social media regulations undeniably imposes significant costs on public administrations, businesses, and individuals (Hahn and Hird 1991; Marneffe and Vereck 2011; Hahn 1998). These costs stem from governments’ additional responsibilities when regulating digital behavior, particularly among youth. For example, hiring specialized staff, such as educators and psychologists, in schools to assess and monitor each child’s potential addictive behavior would represent a considerable financial burden. This would require recruiting more public-sector employees in countries already struggling with inflated bureaucracies, further exacerbating existing inefficiencies.

Additionally, if the state becomes responsible for managing issues like social media addiction, there is a risk of legal liability. Families could sue the government for perceived failure to protect their children or for unintended harm from interventions. This legal exposure would add to the financial strain, requiring governments to allocate litigation and risk management resources. The example of South Korea’s digital detox camps illustrates another costly dimension: funding the infrastructure for these camps, along with the staff required to run them. Even if such initiatives were delegated to private entities, identifying and processing eligible children would necessitate integrating administrative systems, such as by linking identification cards or banking information to individual users, further increasing costs.

The administrative burden of compliance would be equally significant for businesses. Social media platforms would need to adapt algorithms, employ moderators, and implement robust age verification systems (Fagan 2018; Balkin 2021–2022). Such measures would require integrating state-controlled identification systems with private digital platforms, forcing collaboration between governments, financial institutions, and tech companies. This integration raises administrative and ethical challenges while creating new vulnerabilities, such as to data breaches or the misuse of sensitive user information.

Moreover, the financial impact of these regulations on private companies could ripple through to consumers. Social media platforms, which rely heavily on advertising revenue, might increase advertising fees or introduce paid subscription models to offset the cost of compliance. Smaller firms, already struggling to compete with larger corporations, might find these additional costs unsustainable, leading to reduced competition and innovation. Ultimately, either the consumer would bear the cost through higher fees, or platforms would sacrifice profitability, potentially compromising the quality of their services.

Finally, the administrative complexity of these measures would necessitate a significant expansion of public and private bureaucracies. Governments would have to hire additional staff to oversee compliance, monitor platforms, and enforce regulations. Meanwhile, private companies would have to invest in regulatory compliance and data management teams. Both sectors would pass these costs on to taxpayers or consumers, further straining public resources and household budgets.

In the long term, such measures' economic and administrative costs far outweigh their perceived benefits. A libertarian approach—emphasizing voluntary compliance, parental involvement, and market-driven solutions—offers a more sustainable and efficient alternative. By reducing reliance on state intervention and avoiding expanding public bureaucracies, societies can allocate resources more effectively, foster innovation, and preserve individual freedoms without resorting to costly and intrusive regulatory frameworks.

Erosion of Parental Responsibility

State overregulation of social media usage diminishes parental authority by shifting responsibility for children's digital behavior to the government (Ziegler, Eichner, and Cahn 2023; Campbell 2000; Schube 2009). This shift undermines the natural role of parents as primary caregivers and decision-makers in their children's lives. Rothbard (1998) emphasizes the sanctity of family autonomy, arguing that parents are best equipped to guide their children's moral and intellectual development.

Parents possess a nuanced understanding of their children’s needs and capacities, allowing them to tailor guidance accordingly (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2016; Grolnick, Caruso, and Levitt 2019). Overregulation disrupts this dynamic by imposing one-size-fits-all solutions that disregard individual circumstances. For example, blanket screen-time limits fail to account for variations in maturity, interest, or productive use of technology among children.

The reliance on state-enforced rules fosters a culture of deresponsibilization among parents. Believing that regulations ensure a safe environment, some parents may abdicate their role in actively monitoring and guiding their children’s digital interactions. This erosion of accountability weakens the family unit, shifting societal bonds from organic relationships to bureaucratic mechanisms.

Furthermore, the state’s encroachment into parental responsibilities sets a troubling precedent for broader interventions in family life. If governments can dictate children’s access to social media, this raises questions about the limits of governments’ authority in other aspects of upbringing, including education and healthcare decisions.

Empowering parents with tools and resources rather than imposing mandates, aligns more closely with libertarian principles. Digital literacy programs, parental control apps, and community-led initiatives offer effective alternatives to state intervention. These solutions preserve family autonomy while equipping parents to address challenges in a manner consistent with their values and priorities.

[Table 2](#) identifies the key risks and unintended consequences of state-led social media regulation. Drawing from libertarian theory, it critiques how such interventions often undermine autonomy, parental authority, and economic efficiency. For each issue, voluntary and decentralized alternatives are proposed as more ethical and sustainable responses.

Table 2. The perils of social media regulation

Aspect	Key issues	Libertarian critique	Proposed alternatives
Impact on socialization and independence	Stifles autonomy, fosters dependence on state-imposed rules, normalizes surveillance	State regulation undermines self-regulation, restricts individual freedoms (Rothbard 2011, 353).	Empower families; encourage digital literacy; foster voluntary solutions.
False sense of security and perverse effects	Creates complacency, undermines parental vigilance, misallocates resources	Government intervention often produces perverse effects (Rothbard 2011, 421--22).	Promote education; encourage self-awareness and critical thinking over coercion.
Circumvention of regulations	Encourages evasive tactics (VPNs, fake accounts), undermines enforcement	State overreach erodes freedom, fails to adapt to dynamic digital landscapes (Rothbard 1998, 52).	Adopt voluntary measures; prioritize education and parental engagement.
Economic and administrative costs	Brings high costs for governments and businesses, stifles innovation, risks data breaches	State inefficiency diverts resources, undermines market competition (Rothbard 2008, 913).	Minimize regulation; encourage market-driven solutions, protect privacy.
Erosion of parental	Weakens parental authority, promotes reliance on state	Shifts family responsibilities to the state, erodes self-ownership	Support family autonomy; provide

Aspect	Key issues	Libertarian critique	Proposed alternatives
responsibility	mandates, sets a dangerous precedent	(Rothbard 1998, 58--59).	resources for parental oversight.

In sum, state intervention in youth digital behavior reflects more than a concern for public health—it exemplifies a broader ideology of control that undermines the natural structures of personal responsibility, family autonomy, and voluntary association. As the final section will explore, resisting this expansion requires more than critique—it demands articulating alternative frameworks rooted in liberty, decentralization, and market-driven solutions.

International Models of Control: Comparative Cases

This section offers a simplified typology of national approaches to illustrate the diversity of public responses to youth social media addiction (see [table 3](#) for a summary). The case study for each country lays out a dominant regulatory strategy distilled from existing literature and emblematic policy initiatives. While these models are neither mutually exclusive nor fully representative of local complexities, they provide a valuable framework for understanding the prevailing logics of control and their implications from a libertarian perspective.

China: The Command-and-Control Model

China’s regulatory framework to combat digital addiction among youth stands out globally as one of the most comprehensive and restrictive (Chi, Lin, and Zhang 2016; Guo et al. 2012; Han 2024). Key measures include mandatory time restrictions, such as a curfew preventing individuals under eighteen from using social media between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m., and daily limits of forty minutes for children under fourteen on platforms like Douyin. These initiatives aim to curb excessive screen time and mitigate the adverse effects of overexposure to digital content, such as reduced attention spans and declining mental health.

Additionally, the government imposes stringent content regulations, requiring platforms to remove materials deemed inappropriate or addictive (Szablewicz 2010). This dual focus on time restriction and content control underscores a paternalistic approach prioritizing collective well-being over individual autonomy. While these measures may effectively reduce social media dependency, they have significant trade-offs regarding personal freedoms and parental authority (Tong 2010).

From a libertarian perspective, such regulations represent an overreach of state power that undermines the principle of self-ownership (Lipson and Vallentyne 1991; Cohen and Hall 2022). By dictating how young people access technology, the government infringes on the natural rights of families to make decisions for their children. As Rothbard (2000, 146–47; 2006a,

155) highlights, parental authority is a cornerstone of liberty, and state intervention disrupts the voluntary associations that enable families to guide their children's behavior. The broader implications of China's approach are equally concerning. Normalizing government control over private behavior sets a precedent for extensive surveillance and enforcement mechanisms, which may extend beyond digital habits to other areas of life. This risks creating a society where individual freedoms are continually subordinated to state-defined priorities, eroding the foundational values of personal autonomy and responsibility. While China's policies may provide immediate solutions to digital addiction, they fail to address the root causes or foster long-term behavioral change. A more ethical and sustainable alternative would involve empowering families to manage their children's digital habits through education and voluntary tools, rather than relying on coercive state mandates.

United States: Accountability through Markets

In the United States, regulatory efforts focus on holding technology companies accountable for fostering addictive behaviors rather than on imposing direct restrictions on users (Tang, Koh, and Gan 2017; Oksanen et al. 2021). For instance, California has introduced measures to limit notifications and encourage "do not disturb" modes. Companies then developed tools to monitor and limit screen time (Jarupreechachan, Kitchat, and Surasak 2023). These initiatives emphasize transparency and user empowerment, offering individuals greater control over their digital consumption.

The legislation also targets deceptive practices by penalizing algorithms that exploit cognitive biases, such as infinite scrolling web designs or variable reward mechanisms (Hankel 2024; Michel and Gandon 2024). By addressing the structural causes of addiction, these measures aim to create a more ethical digital environment. This approach aligns with libertarian values by emphasizing corporate accountability and market-driven solutions rather than heavy-handed state intervention.

However, challenges persist in balancing innovation with accountability. Mandating algorithmic changes or transparency tools can impose significant compliance costs on technology companies, particularly smaller firms, potentially stifling competition and innovation (Bradford 2024–2025; Hagemann, Skees, and Thierer 2018). Furthermore, the imposition of uniform standards may fail to account for users' diverse needs and preferences, limiting platforms' flexibility to adapt to different market segments.

Examined from a libertarian standpoint, these measures balance between promoting accountability and introducing state coercion (Dwyer 2000; Vallentyne 2007). While transparency and voluntary user education are laudable, overly prescriptive regulations risk undermining the voluntary

nature of interactions between consumers and companies. Rothbard (2008, chap. 12) argues that government-imposed burdens often divert resources from innovation and market responsiveness. Encouraging market-driven incentives, such as consumer demand for ethical practices, could offer a more effective path forward. By fostering competition and innovation within the private sector, such approaches respect individual choice and empower users to make informed decisions about their digital habits.

Spain: Paternalism in the Name of Protection

Spain has proposed one of the most comprehensive legislative efforts to address the risks of social media use among youth (Casaló and Escario 2019; Oksanen et al. 2021; Wilson 2024). The bill, proposed in 2024 and called the Organic Law for the Protection of Minors in Digital Environments, includes measures such as raising the minimum age for social media accounts from fourteen to sixteen and introducing virtual restraining orders for sexual offenders. These initiatives reflect a holistic strategy that combines prevention, protection, and punitive actions.

Educational and preventive measures are central to Spain's approach. The government seeks to equip families and educators with the tools to navigate the digital landscape by integrating digital safety training into school curricula and launching public awareness campaigns. This dual focus on education and regulation underscores the importance of fostering responsible technology use alongside legal safeguards.

Despite these positive aspects, the mandatory nature of the bill raises libertarian concerns about state overreach. Age restrictions and other blanket measures risk undermining parental authority and individual autonomy. Parents, as primary caregivers, are often better positioned than the state to assess their children's readiness for social media and to guide their usage based on individual maturity and needs.

The criminalization of certain online behaviors, such as the creation of deepfakes or online grooming, also poses enforcement challenges. Monitoring and prosecuting offenders require significant resources, diverting funds from other social priorities. These inefficiencies highlight the limitations of state intervention in addressing complex digital issues.

A libertarian alternative would emphasize voluntary solutions, such as self-regulation by platforms¹³ and digital literacy initiatives for families (Krupan and Urbaník 2024). By minimizing coercion and promoting personal responsibility, Spain could achieve its goals while preserving fundamental liberties and respecting the autonomy of families.

¹³ More research needs to be done by libertarian scholars on this issue.

Australia: Prohibition as Policy

Australia has implemented one of the strictest social media regulations globally, banning access for individuals under sixteen, with no parental exceptions permitted. This policy aims to reduce the harmful effects of social media, including addiction, cyberbullying, and toxic social comparisons. Backed by studies linking social media to cognitive decline and mental health issues, the legislation positions itself as a global model for protecting youth (Australian Communications and Media Authority, and eSafety Commissioner 2024; Australian Psychological Society 2024; Heim 2024; Holloway 2019).

However, the blanket nature of the ban raises ethical and practical concerns. By treating all individuals under sixteen uniformly, the policy disregards differences in maturity, responsibility, and digital literacy. This one-size-fits-all approach risks stifling personal growth opportunities for digitally savvy adolescents who use these platforms for learning or entrepreneurship.

Enforcement poses additional challenges, requiring significant administrative resources to monitor compliance and penalize violations. Marginalized communities may face barriers in accessing previous parental exceptions or alternative platforms, exacerbating existing inequalities. These inefficiencies highlight the limitations of state-led solutions compared to more flexible, community-driven approaches.

Furthermore, the ban normalizes the idea of restricting freedoms to address societal issues, setting a precedent for broader government control over digital access. While the law is framed as a protective measure, it risks creating a slippery slope where future policies further erode personal autonomy. Rothbard's (1998) warnings about the incremental expansion of state power resonate strongly in this context.

Instead of imposing outright bans, Australia could focus on promoting digital literacy and parental engagement. Market-driven innovations, such as customizable content filters and screen-time trackers, offer more nuanced solutions that empower families while preserving individual freedoms and fostering responsible digital habits.

South Korea: Therapeutic Statism with Voluntary Tools

South Korea has adopted a unique and thoughtful approach to combating digital addiction, centering its efforts on education and therapy rather than punitive measures (M. Park et al. 2022; Koo, Wati, and Lee 2011). Schools play a critical role in this strategy by conducting awareness programs designed to inform students about the risks associated with excessive social media use. These programs aim to foster a culture of responsible technology use among adolescents by equipping them with the knowledge and tools needed to balance their digital and offline lives. Furthermore, the country has

introduced digital detox camps, providing structured environments where young people can disconnect from their devices and rebuild their connection with offline activities.

Another essential element of South Korea's strategy is its emphasis on psychological support (Choi and Lim 2016). The government funds counseling services to assist individuals struggling with digital dependency, offering tailored interventions to address each person's specific needs. This focus on psychological well-being demonstrates a commitment to tackling the root causes of addiction rather than simply restricting access to technology. By addressing underlying issues such as anxiety or social isolation, these programs provide a foundation for sustainable behavioral change.

From a libertarian perspective, South Korea's approach aligns well with principles of voluntary association and individual empowerment. Rather than imposing top-down mandates, these initiatives encourage families and communities to take active roles in fostering healthier digital habits. As Rothbard (2011) emphasizes, noncoercive measures that empower individuals to take responsibility for their choices are preferable to state-imposed restrictions. In this light, South Korea's model offers a practical framework that respects personal autonomy while addressing societal challenges.

However, even voluntary initiatives carry potential risks of overreach if they become overly dependent on state mandates or excessive public funding. If such programs are not implemented with care, they could evolve into coercive systems, inadvertently undermining the very freedoms they aim to protect. To preserve their libertarian integrity, these efforts must remain community-driven and optional, ensuring that they do not inadvertently encroach on individual or family autonomy.

Overall, South Korea's focus on education and therapy provides a compelling alternative to the heavy-handed regulatory approaches seen in other countries. By prioritizing empowerment over enforcement, this strategy not only respects individual liberty but also offers a more sustainable and effective means of addressing digital addiction. This model demonstrates how societal challenges can be tackled through voluntary and decentralized initiatives that align with libertarian values.

[Table 3](#) compares five national approaches to regulating youth social media use, each reflecting distinct philosophies of control. For each case, a libertarian critique highlights the ethical, practical, and institutional risks of state intervention. Proposed alternatives emphasize decentralized, voluntary solutions rooted in family autonomy, market responsiveness, and individual liberty.

Table 3. Selected international approaches to social media regulation with libertarian critiques and proposed alternatives

Country	Key measures	Libertarian critique	Proposed alternatives
China	Mandatory curfews, time limits (e.g., 40 minutes per day for children under 14), content filtering to remove addictive materials	Regulation undermines self-ownership and parental authority, and fosters state surveillance (Rothbard 1998, 58--59).	Empower families through education and voluntary tools rather than coercive mandates.
United States	Transparency tools, limiting notifications, penalties for deceptive algorithms (e.g., infinite scrolling)	Overregulation risks stifling innovation; company mandates come with potential coercion (Rothbard 2008, 913).	Encourage market-driven solutions and consumer demand for ethical practices; focus on innovation.
Spain	Raising social media age limits (14 to 16), virtual restraining orders, emotional disorder screenings	Mandatory measures infringe on parental rights; enforcement costs divert resources from priorities.	Promote self-regulation by platforms and digital literacy initiatives for families.
Australia	Banning social media access for those under 16 without parental exceptions	Blanket bans disregard individual maturity and normalize state control over personal choices (Rothbard 1998, 52).	Encourage parental engagement and market-driven content management tools.
South Korea	Education programs, digital detox camps, government-funded counseling services	Programs align with voluntary association but risk overreach if overly dependent on state mandates (Rothbard 2011, 353).	Ensure programs remain community-driven and optional to preserve personal and family autonomy.

These national case studies reveal that despite variations in tools—ranging from outright bans to corporate accountability or therapeutic outreach—the underlying trend is a growing expansion of the state’s role into private and family life. Even when framed as protective or educational, such interventions normalize surveillance and erode personal autonomy, laying the groundwork for a culture of dependence and state-managed behavior.

Market Solutions to Youth Digital Dependency

Rather than relying on government intervention to regulate youth behavior, libertarian thought emphasizes voluntary and market-based solutions that preserve individual liberty, respect family autonomy, and promote innovation (Hoppe 2018; Palmer 2014; Vallentyne 2007; Cohen and Hall 2022). Excessive screen time and digital addiction are indeed modern concerns—but top-down regulations tend to disempower parents and treat all children as the same, ignoring individual maturity, context, and family values. A more effective and ethical approach is to decentralize responsibility and empower those closest to the children—namely, the family and the community—while encouraging private innovation (Anderson, Faverio, and Park 2024; Berk 2004; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2016; Campbell 2000).

Parents are the natural guardians of their children and possess the moral authority and intimate understanding needed to guide them toward responsible digital habits (Rothbard 1999, 10–13).¹⁴ State-imposed mandates—such as screen-time bans, algorithmic restrictions, or detox camps—override this authority and homogenize solutions. In contrast, libertarianism affirms the legitimacy of parents’ tailoring their guidance to the unique maturity and values of their children (Lipson and Vallentyne 1991; Cohen and Hall 2022).¹⁵ Digital education programs can support this, equipping families with the tools to foster autonomy, self-regulation, and critical thinking in the online world without coercion.

The market also provides dynamic tools for digital well-being through innovation and competition (Bradford 2024–2025; Hadfield 2007–2008; Kiessling 2004). Screen-time monitors, content filters, and customizable parental controls are already offered by private companies responding to consumer demand.¹⁶ In a competitive environment, platforms can differentiate themselves through ethical standards, privacy protection, and youth-friendly interfaces—without state mandates. Firms may adopt voluntary corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies, offering ad-free models or digital wellness tools as part of their business model, demonstrating how private enterprise can address social concerns without compulsion (Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2010; Jamali and Mirshak 2007; Fatima and Elbanna 2023).

Furthermore, third-party rating agencies could emerge to evaluate platforms based on transparency, privacy, and user protection, offering families informed choices through decentralized accountability mechanisms. These voluntary institutions would encourage competition not just for profit but also for virtue. By contrast, state-led evaluations risk data capture, political bias, and centralization of authority. Only in a market governed by consumer choice and independent standards can meaningful, adaptive, and respectful solutions to youth digital dependency flourish.

Decentralized community initiatives also play a vital role in cultivating responsible digital behavior (Jieli 2024; Jieli and Ying 2023). Churches, schools, and peer-led youth groups can create culturally relevant programs

¹⁴ Rothbard (1999, 10–13) argues that in a free society, the responsibility for a child’s upbringing and education rests with the parents, not the state. He warns that state control of education undermines both parental rights and individual liberty, fostering conformity, obedience to authority, and intellectual stagnation. State intervention is only justified to protect children from active aggression—not from neglect or lack of instruction. For Rothbard, failure to educate is not a rights violation, as it does not actively infringe upon the child’s liberty to develop.

¹⁵ Rothbard (1999, 1–9) insists that every child is unique in talents, interests, and learning pace. He argues that standardized education imposed by the state violates this natural diversity, forcing children into uniform molds that hinder both the gifted and the less able. True education, he contends, must be individualized—best achieved through parental instruction or private tutoring—so that each child’s distinct potential can fully develop.

¹⁶ Examples of market-based parental control applications include Qustodio, Bark, Net Nanny, and Canopy. These tools allow parents to monitor screen time, filter inappropriate content, receive alerts about risky messages, and restrict access to specific apps or websites—without any need for state involvement.

that reflect the diversity of backgrounds, values, and local contexts. Workshops, mentorship, and support networks can help young people navigate online challenges in ways that feel relatable and trustworthy. Drawing on the libertarian principle of spontaneous/natural order, these grassroots efforts offer adaptive, pluralistic solutions that are more efficient and legitimate than centralized mandates.

Ultimately, market-based and community-led approaches are superior to coercive state interventions. They allow for flexibility, preserve family sovereignty, and support innovation in addressing digital addiction. By grounding the response in personal responsibility and voluntary association, societies can foster resilience in young people while upholding the foundations of a free and dignified life. The goal is not to escape the digital world through compulsion but to engage with it wisely—through freedom, not force.

[Table 4](#) outlines three core libertarian alternatives to state-led digital regulation. Each approach—parental empowerment, market innovation, and community engagement—offers voluntary, decentralized solutions to address youth digital dependency while preserving individual freedom and family autonomy.

Table 4. Voluntary and market-based solutions to social media challenges

Aspect	Key elements	Libertarian principles	Advantages
Parental tools and education	Digital literacy programs, self-regulation techniques, and tools to manage social media use	Focus should be on individual responsibility and voluntary action; families are best suited to guide children (Rothbard 2011, 353).	Promotes family autonomy; reduces reliance on state intervention; fosters critical engagement with technology
Market-driven innovations	Screen-time trackers, content filters, and CSR initiatives promoting ethical practices by tech companies	Voluntary market solutions align with personal freedoms, avoiding coercion while addressing societal concerns.	Encourages innovation; addresses user needs without mandates; reflects free-market adaptability
Community and peer initiatives	Grassroots movements, peer education programs, and community-driven efforts fostering collective responsibility	Decentralized approaches respect individual autonomy and promote spontaneous order (Rothbard 1998, 17).	Builds collective accountability; reduces dependence on top-down directives; respects community dynamics

Conclusion

This article has argued that youth-centered digital regulation, though often justified in the name of public health and safety, represents a broader and more troubling pattern of state expansion into private and family life. Through the lens of state primary socialization indoctrination, we have shown how addiction is not merely a social pathology but a politically convenient condition that reinforces dependence, docility, and centralized authority. Whether through overt bans, behavioral nudges, or therapeutic statism, government responses to digital addiction increasingly normalize surveillance, undermine parental authority, and erode individual autonomy.

Drawing from Austrian and libertarian insights—especially those of Mises, Rothbard, and Hayek—we find that true empowerment does not stem from top-down intervention but from decentralized mechanisms of voluntary association, entrepreneurial innovation, and family stewardship. In contrast, state-imposed uniformity stifles the diversity and spontaneity necessary for genuine human flourishing.

Ultimately, resisting digital authoritarianism requires more than critique; it demands the articulation of credible libertarian alternatives. Parental empowerment, market-based solutions, and community-driven digital education provide viable paths that protect youth without restricting their freedom. If we are to foster a generation capable of responsible engagement in the digital age, we must reject coercive governance in favor of liberty, accountability, and spontaneous social order.

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