Porn sites would have to verify users are over 18 under federal online safety plans

Ottawa is planning to introduce an online safety bill later this year and it is expected the bill will impose a duty of care on platforms to protect children from harm

Marie Woolf

Ottawa - Porn sites would have a legal duty to verify their users are 18 or older, under plans being studied by the federal government.

Ottawa is expected to take steps in its forthcoming online safety bill to ensure sites showing sexually explicit material have valid "age verification" for users, amid fears that children and teenagers are now easily getting access to porn online.

Child-protection experts have warned that children are watching adult explicit material that is warping their sex education and understanding of relationships.

Lianna McDonald, executive director of the Canadian Centre for Child Protection, said there's a "generation of boys and girls whose understanding of sexual relationships is being shaped by unfettered access to violent and misogynistic violent adult content."

Ms. McDonald, a member of an expert panel appointed by Heritage Minister Pablo Rodriguez to look at the parameters of the online safety bill, said the over-18 rule on buying adult magazines in a store should apply to accessing porn online.

"We agreed long ago that bricks and mortar retailers should be prohibited from making age-restricted material available to children, but we've not applied these same set of values and restrictions in digital spaces," she said. "Age verification is desperately needed, particularly on user-generated platforms if we hope to reverse the damage occurring online to children."

Ottawa is planning to introduce an online safety bill later this year. It is expected to impose a duty of care on platforms to protect children from harm, as well as forcing them to remove abusive comments, including racist slurs on social media, more swiftly.

A source said age verification to protect children from sexually explicit material would be tackled by the bill. The Globe and Mail is not naming the source because they were not authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

Laura Scaffidi, spokeswoman for Mr. Rodriguez, said: "It's clear that the status quo is unacceptable. We'll propose our own made in Canada approach to online safety. We can all agree that what happens online doesn't stay online, and our government is committed to ensuring that social-media platforms are safer for our children, and for all Canadians."

The system would likely require those accessing sexually explicit sites to produce an official ID, possibly through an age verification company.

Michael Geist, the University of Ottawa's Canada Research Chair in internet law, said requiring age verification to access internet sites raises questions about privacy.

He said some companies that verify people's ages use facial recognition technology to do so.

"Everybody recognizes that you want to ensure that kids are safe online. But if you have to produce ID to be able to use the internet, which is where this could ultimately go, this raises enormous concerns," he said.

Take It Down tool allows teenagers to
remove explicit images from internet

Last year, the Senate voted for age verification for sexually explicit material to be included in the online streaming bill, which modernizes Canada's broadcast laws. Senators voted for the amendment tabled by Senator Julie Miville-Dechene, who has been pushing for such a law change for years, including through a private member's bill.

Mr. Rodriguez decided not to keep Ms. Miville-Dechene's amendment to Bill C-11. Last month, Chris Bittle, parliamentary secretary to Mr. Rodriguez, said the government had only rejected Ms. Miville-Dechene's amendment because it was beyond the online streaming bill's "policy intent."

He said the government understands "the importance of this issue" and he hoped the forthcoming online safety bill would address it.

The government’s representative in the Senate, Marc Gold, told senators in December that the forthcoming online safety bill would have "the goal of keeping all Canadians safe online, including being safe from the kind of harm that this amendment would propose."

He said the online safety bill "would be the most appropriate forum, in the context of that legislation, to discuss this important issue."

Ms. Miville-Dechene warned that teenagers are now able to access sexually explicit videos by faking their birth dates to access adult sites, or on social media platforms. "Studies show that the first encounter of kids with porn is on social media," she said.

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