Australia plans an algorithm off switch

LEVEL B1


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I. WARM-UP

1. How often do you change your social media settings?
2. Have you ever seen posts you did not want to see?
3. What helps you take a break from your phone?

II. KEY VOCABULARY

algorithm
A set of rules a computer uses to choose or show content

platform
A website or app where people share and view content

reform
A planned change to improve a system or law

Duty
A legal or moral responsibility to do something

critic
A person who disagrees with or speaks against something

disinformation
False information shared to mislead people

polarisation
When people split into opposing groups with stronger views

addiction
A strong, harmful need to keep doing something

III. READING

Australia has introduced new tech reforms to parliament that target social media. The plan's centrepiece is an algorithm switch that would let users turn off recommender feeds. With the switch off, people would see posts only from accounts they follow.

The laws would also place a duty of care on online services and platforms, aiming to make Australians healthier and happier. Supporters point to real cases. Varsha Yajman says she kept seeing weight loss content even with safety settings on.

Flynn Martin says misogynist influencer Andrew Tate and similar voices filled his feed. Research links heavy social media use to brain responses like gambling and addiction, finds algorithms can push harmful posts, and warns about disinformation and rising polarisation.

Critics say the reforms go too far and could threaten free speech. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government argues the rules would give users more choice.

Reading text adapted from reporting by **BBC News***: "Toxic algorithms wouldn't let them go - now...". Original article linked at theenglishwire.com.*

IV. COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What would the algorithm switch allow users to do?
2. Whose stories are used to show the problem?
3. What extra responsibility would the laws place on platforms?
4. What do critics say about the proposed reforms?
5. What harms do studies link to social media use?

V. DISCUSSION

1. Would you use a following-only feed? Why or why not?
2. Who should decide what you see online: you, platforms, or laws?
3. Are current safety tools enough on social media? Explain.
4. How can platforms reduce harm without limiting free speech?

VI. GRAMMAR FOCUS

Should have

Use should have + past participle to talk about the right action in the past (advice, regret, criticism). Use shouldn't have for a wrong action. Form: should/shouldn't have + V3.

"Platforms **should have protected** *users like Varsha better."*

"Companies **shouldn't have overlooked** *the risks for so long."*

VII. GRAMMAR EXERCISE

Complete with should have / shouldn't have + past participle.

1. The app (not push) ___ harmful posts to young users. _____
2. To help users, platforms (give) ___ clearer controls earlier. _____
3. Platforms (not fill) ___ Flynn's feed with toxic posts. _____
4. Given the risks, researchers (warn) ___ schools sooner. _____
5. In parliament, officials (explain) ___ the switch earlier. _____

Teacher's Notes

TEACHERS ONLY

These notes are designed to help you get the most out of this lesson. Please do not share this page with students.


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I. LESSON GUIDE

- Timing: 8–10 minutes warm-up, 10 minutes vocabulary, 12–15 minutes reading and comprehension, 8–10 minutes grammar, 10–12 minutes discussion.
- Pre-teach: algorithm, reform, duty of care, disinformation, polarisation. Check students know follow vs recommend.
- Run reading, then pair-check answers. Sensitivity: the text mentions eating disorders and mental health; allow opt-out and keep comments about the news, not students' lives.
- Differentiation: stronger students summarise each paragraph in one sentence; others underline evidence for each comprehension answer.

II. DISCUSSION FACILITATION TIPS

1. Poll the class first, then ask two students with opposite views to explain their reasons.
2. Have students rank the three options, then justify the top choice in pairs.
3. If answers are short, ask for one example of a tool they used and how it helped.
4. Set two-minute prep in pairs to list two harms and two protections before sharing.

III. EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Debate: In teams, prepare 3 arguments for or against a mandatory off switch; hold a 6-minute debate.

Writing: Write a 120-word post explaining how a following-only feed could help one user you invent.

IV. ANSWER KEY OVERVIEW

Comprehension questions: short factual answers from the text.

Grammar exercise: Should have

Discussion: open-ended. Accept any reasonable ideas supported by examples and reasoning.

Answer Key

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IV. COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What would the algorithm switch allow users to do?
   Turn off recommender feeds and see only followed accounts.
2. Whose stories are used to show the problem?
   Varsha Yajman and Flynn Martin.
3. What extra responsibility would the laws place on platforms?
   A duty of care for online services and platforms.
4. What do critics say about the proposed reforms?
   They go too far and could threaten free speech.
5. What harms do studies link to social media use?
   Addiction-like responses, harmful content, disinformation and polarisation.

V. DISCUSSION

Open answers. Accept any reasonable ideas supported by examples and reasoning.

VII. GRAMMAR EXERCISE

Complete with should have / shouldn't have + past participle.

1. The app ___ harmful posts to young users.
   shouldn't have pushed / should not have pushed
2. To help users, platforms ___ clearer controls earlier.
   should have given
3. Platforms ___ Flynn's feed with toxic posts.
   shouldn't have filled / should not have filled
4. Given the risks, researchers ___ schools sooner.
   should have warned
5. In parliament, officials ___ the switch earlier.
   should have explained

VI. GRAMMAR FOCUS

Key point: Use should have + past participle to talk about the right action in the past (advice, regret, criticism). Use shouldn't have for a wrong action. Form: should/shouldn't have + V3. (Examples constructed.)

*"Platforms **should have protected** users like Varsha better."*

*"Companies **shouldn't have overlooked** the risks for so long."*