

## **Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society**

### **Questions on Notice from public hearing of 30 October**

- 1. How do you define social media? Are there particular platforms you believe are social media and those that you don't?**

**Arjun:** Social media must be split into 2 different categories:

- **Sharing-focused social media**

Encompasses apps like Facebook, X, and Instagram. Platforms such that: anyone can access content posted onto the shared network, as content is posted to the general public.

- **Communication-focused social media**

Encompasses apps like Messenger, iMessage, Discord, WhatsApp, and WeChat. These are platforms where any content posted is done so with a direct, intended and known recipient(s).

Communication-focused apps are much less harmful, given that it is much more difficult to interact with strangers, given that only people on a list known to the user prior can directly interact with the content and users of these platforms. That is: any stranger would first need to be approved by the user before they can start accessing and interacting with the user and/or their content (i.e. through a mechanism to “add friend” or “add contact” etc).

This is why they must be defined very differently, given that many of the harms of social media are associated with the former, and that sharing-focused platforms often use the communication-focused mechanisms to defend themselves. By isolating them like this, we can isolate the harmful from the harmless.

- 2. How do you use social media to stay informed? For example, are there particular channels that you seek out information on social media platforms?**

**Arjun:**

- **On sharing-focused platforms**

I mainly use it to stay informed on the lives of my peers (such as finding out that their exams ended recently).

- **On communication-focused platforms**

I use social media to make plans, and stay informed on a more personal level on what my friends and family are doing, as well as making plans to go out (the latter has not been as possible lately given that it is exam season for all of us, but it will become commonplace once exams finish). I use social media primarily for these purposes.

- 3. Do you rely on social media to keep up to date with news and current affairs? Are there other ways you keep up to date on news? How important is news to you and your friends?**

**Arjun:** I do not use communication-focused platforms to keep up to date with current events. In terms of sharing-focused social media, I use that to keep up with a few news sources, but this is not my primary use of social media (it makes up about 5-10% of my use overall). I really only follow channels

like “The Daily AUS” (TDA) and the “Australian Broadcasting Corporation” (ABC). This is just because I tend to get important news faster like this, especially now that I have been watching TV less as we move closer towards exams. The exception to this is watching Media Watch by the ABC (this is my main source of news).

This news is usually un-important to me and my friends, with the exception of some major news stories like the US election, or when there is something from the news that is useful to us (such as creative language use that we can talk about in our English essays to score marks).

Other than through programs like Media Watch, Apple has a decent news platform; which allows for the same story to be reported on by multiple news outlets. This is important to me because I don’t like seeing only one side of a given news story.

**4. Currently, online harms are regulated under a range of laws in Australia, including the Online Safety Act, Privacy Act, and others. Do you have any views or perspectives on where you feel like laws aren’t protecting you where they should?**

**Arjun:**

- **Limited Scope of Content Coverage**

The Australian Online Safety Act 2021 appears to be designed for specific types of online content, such as cyberbullying, image-based abuse (like revenge porn), as well as content targeting children. But this focus means that other potentially harmful content types are not sufficiently addressed under the current legislative framework. These are examples below.

- **Misinformation and Disinformation**

The Act does not explicitly mention or address misinformation or disinformation. This can have significant impacts, like during critical times such as elections (both now in the US and the upcoming election in 2025), public health crises (e.g., COVID-19), or other emergencies. This false information, if spread can lead to widespread public confusion, panic, and even real-world harm (as seen on Jan 6 2021 in Washington). All this would need is a few clauses outlawing the intentional spread of mis/dis information for personal gain.

- **Hate Speech and Extremism**

While there are general provisions for harmful content, the Act does not explicitly target hate speech or the promotion of extremist ideologies; these can be further worsened by the fact that algorithms for sharing-focused social media promote echo-chambering. These forms of content can incite violence, deepen social divides, and contribute to the radicalization of individuals. In a society like Australia, which is very multicultural, maintaining this social harmony is essential to keep the country moving. When this is fixed by the government (I hope so) it won’t take the high-court 2 years to prove that saying “Piss off back to Pakistan” (Pauline Hanson) is racist and is considered hate speech. This is why we need these laws. This would require some clauses in the Online Safety Act which explicitly outlaw the things that were said, allowing anyone wanting to emulate Ms. Hanson to be dealt with far quicker.

- **Harassment Beyond Cyberbullying**

The Act’s focus on cyberbullying is largely aimed at protecting minors, which is necessary but insufficient. The act forgets that Adults also face harassment online (just because their over 18, doesn't mean they are immune to bullying). This harassment includes workplace harassment, doxxing

(publishing private information online), and targeted harassment campaigns that may not fall under the traditional definition of cyberbullying. The need for such provisions is exemplified by the example provided prior. Broadening the measures of the Online Safety Act to adults would fix this issue, given that it is the “online safety act” not the “children’s online safety act”, and should thus protect ALL Australians, not just young people.

- **Content Encouraging Self-Harm or Suicide**

While the Act covers some aspects of content related to self-harm or suicide, there could be more specific provisions and a more focused approach to quickly identify and remove this type of content, given its highly sensitive and dangerous nature.

**Raghu:** There are a few areas where protections could be strengthened in terms of online safety.

- **The general scope of regulation**

Currently, there are laws that cover online harm, but may fail to adequately cover all platforms and up and coming technologies such as AI or Virtual reality. Even online video game party chats are a common area to find harassment and cyberbullying. Expanding regulations to include these new platforms and technologies would further protect young Australians from online harms.

- **Enforcement efficiency**

Even with the Online Safety Act, enforcement of these laws can be inconsistent. There might be a lack of clear resources or even procedures for reporting online harms. The eSafety Commissioner and the investigative department were unknown to us before joining the Council. Enforcement also needs to be seen in a better light. Reporting someone on social media often has a stigma that it is the “cowardly” thing to do. This makes it difficult for individuals to feel secure when they are reporting issues like cyberbullying or harassment.

**5. You have spoken a lot about some of the impacts of social media. Who do you think should ultimately be responsible for managing the harms? The companies? Government? Parents? Young people themselves?**

**Arjun:** We feel the analogy given by Raghu and I ring true here: of social media representing a car with a driver’s licence. Where it is the corporation’s responsibility to make a safe platform for its users that is “safe by its very design” and does not in any way present anything that could lead to dependence on these platforms. But it is also the user’s responsibility to demonstrate self-control, and not “go off the rails” once these safety measures have been put in place. Right now, though, the platforms are ignoring their responsibility, by trying to make constant changes to their platform to keep users on for longer, such as the addition of direct messages to Instagram to “increase user engagement” or having the default page on Facebook be the infinite scroll.

Just like it became the driver’s responsibility to ensure everyone was wearing seatbelts in 1970, it was first the car maker’s responsibility to produce the seatbelts. Those seatbelts were only mandated once the government signed them into law. The same is true for social media: where it is the government’s responsibility to mandate these safety by design and age verification reforms to manage these harms, so that these large corporations can carry out their responsibility to make safe platforms and that users can then take responsibility for their own actions. But the latter is not possible without the first 2

upholding their responsibility. This is because a driver cannot be expected to use seat belts that don't exist, just as car makers cannot be expected to add seat belts if they are not legislated to do so.