

Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

PUBLIC HEARING

Monday 30 September 2024

Andrew Wallace MP

Question on Notice to Toni Hassan

Sent 15/10/2025

- **Do you think that Social Media Companies owe their users, participants, partners, and content creators a duty of care?**

Yes, social media companies owe their users a duty of care (they must live up to higher standards that can be formalised in a Duty of Care Act) but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the problem with social media is that it exists at all.

The platforms are advertisement-driven. They were never developed for children. Children intuitively know this, even if they are compulsive users, being socialised in these spaces that reward extreme emotion and behaviour.

Surveys reveal young users would pay money NOT to be on social media (See this study by Leonardo Bursztyn of Chicago University -

<https://economics.yale.edu/sites/default/files/2024-04/CollectiveTraps.pdf> and summary: <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/product-market-traps-case-social-media>)

I think about the enormous power imbalance of a young person subject to the pull and push factors of these sites designed to be addictive. The platforms have shifted and distorted how young people and adults communicate with each other. Language that once lived only online—sarcastic, cruel, and often anonymous—has crept into face-to-face interactions. Without the non-verbal cues that come with in-person communication, children and young people are less able to empathise. Trolling has become normalised, and many don't even realise when they've crossed a line.

The results are everywhere; as described in the committee hearing by Ali Halkic whose son took his own life and more recently in this week's Australian Story, which I urge you to see, on the devastating effects of deep fake porn shared on social media. Find the broadcast here:

<https://iview.abc.net.au/video/NC2402Q027S00>.

One of our challenges is that there are multiple players on social media, visible and hidden, and they operate in the intangible economy (not tangible like most products and services where a Duty of Care compact is more common).

Social media companies have been exempt from prosecution over harms because of an enabling US law - Section 230 (originally part of the Communications Decency Act), that protects North Americans' freedom of expression online. Companies like Meta can't be sued successfully for content they did not create. Meta operates like a coffee mug. It shrugs off being responsible for what liquid is in the mug.

Australian legislators need to establish what product and service guarantees social media companies should provide users/consumers/participants and how those guarantees are implemented and protected given Section 230 legally distances them from harmful content created and shared by others. For there to be change there would need to be an incentive for companies to change.

Before any Duty of Care provision, Australia would need greater transparency by social media companies. Transparency reports ought to be regular and comprehensive to understand the social harms and their frequency. Frances Haugen told the Social Media Summit in Sydney this month that, "All we get from Meta is profit and loss metrics, not social costs associated with their products." Australia (and the rest of the world) should require companies to publish how algorithms work and outcome data to understand inputs.

Transparency reports and the Duty of Care Act might shift the dial to provide strong protections for minors.

You have recommended that the Government require platforms to turn off the 'autoplay' function. I expect you mean specifically for 'reels' and 'stories' on Meta, Snapchat and TikTok, and for video-sharing platforms like YouTube.

- **Do you think that removing this 'positive action' of clicking play has increased the addictive nature of social media use?**

Yes, definitely. Most children don't know how to actively find disturbing content. The most vulnerable children that social media most affect rely on the passive/lazy nature of the reels. They are assailed by content with often disturbing themes and are more impressionable than adults. They can be there for hours, in a semi-conscious state.

Turning off this function is something governments can do, especially in the absence of a cultural shift and norms that limit social media access to children and the fact that parents are unwilling or unable to monitor their children's exposure and usage (Frankly, parents don't have the tools to manage social media and many use the technology willingly or unwillingly as a babysitter).

The autoplay feature drives compulsive and habitual use. Young (and older) people feel trapped by algorithms that amplify their vulnerabilities and worst impulses. I published an article about it here for the Canberra Times:

<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8763759/minimum-age-for-social-media-proposed-in-australia>

Let me give you two examples, relatively mundane, but examples of the insidious practice.

A university student I know who has been diagnosed with ADHD told me he is bombarded with text and AI-voiced content, sponsored ads, targetting him about his condition. "Take this quiz and sign up for this course to cure your ADHD" stuff. If a platform picks up from a personal post that suggests he is depressed, worried or simply inquisitive about his condition, weight or sexual identity, then the social media platform sends him down a rabbit hole with detrimental and reinforcing content that can be harmful.

My son tells me about how the autoplay function has captured him with shocking videos (car crashes, content of a sexual nature). He says the nature of the content, not only hooks users in, it also provokes them to develop their own loud and provocative content for likes.

My son, who gave evidence at the hearing on Monday when we met, has an app (called Opal) that stops him from being on a site for more than 5 minutes. The app also offers a leader table so he can see what his friends do. Each of them uses the app to keep each other accountable. Other users, namely those younger and more impressionable, are not aware of apps like this to modulate their social media use so they can be more disciplined online.

- You talk a lot about the role of the ‘school’ in relation to reducing smartphone use and screen time. You mention low-tech schools, a return to play-based learning and physical activity, and the need to better integrate technology ethics into school decision-making.
 - **Do you think these are decisions for local schools, or for State and Territory Governments and their Education Departments?**

Expectations should be set at the Education Department level with support from the Commonwealth. If individual schools show leadership in the area, terrific, but that will not create system-wide change for all students.

The increased use of devices in the classroom from as early as Grade 4 with 1:1 devices (tablets, iPads and then laptops) is not leading to improved educational outcomes, but quite the opposite. Results are decreasing, and students are taking longer to learn basic concepts.

Handwriting is being affected, particularly for boys.

My views are informed by what teachers tell me.

On handwriting, a teacher wrote to me:

I have taught VCE Biology. I have had some very bright students whose handwriting I cannot decipher, meaning they are likely to score lower on their final exams than they should due to examiners not being able to understand their answers. Yes, some kids just struggle in this area, but students are getting much less practice in handwriting now than 10 years ago, and it is negatively affecting them.

Handwriting is how we have evolved to remember information. I can understand why a teenager would prefer taking notes on his laptop with autocorrect spelling rather than writing in longhand. But research shows students are more likely to multitask with a laptop and their capacity to focus is compromised. This is what’s called ‘shallow processing’. New Jersey and California University studies have found students who took notes on laptops performed worse on conceptual questions than students who took notes longhand. Whereas taking more notes can be beneficial, laptop note-takers' tendency to transcribe lectures verbatim rather than processing information and reframing it in their own words, is detrimental to learning.

Some universities have moved to implementing a no-laptop, no-tablet policy in their lecture theatres as a result.

Another reason to delay personal laptops in schools is the development of AI which means students will need to sit more real-time exams on paper to avoid cheating. They will need to practice and maintain handwriting (and spelling and grammar) from a young age.

Teachers observe that 1:1 devices are causing a huge amount of distraction.

Another teacher writes:

I believe that it is pretty unreasonable to ask young teenagers to be focused on the work they are supposed to be doing on a device when they can play games, shop online, look up sports scores or watch videos at the click of a button. Especially when we are often asking our students to maintain this level of restraint over the course of an entire day. It is not fair to them.

The overuse of technology in schools has taken away the magic of it for students. There are some amazing things we can use technology for, but if students have their own devices on them at all times, and are often using them at all times, the excitement and awe of what these devices can do for good is often lost.

If I could design my perfect school, it would be one where computer labs are reintroduced. A classroom that can be booked for occasional use. (should have italics if it is part of the quote)

I recommend primary schools and early high schools (Years 7 and 8) provide only learning aids or tech tools used by the teacher for the whole class, but not screens for individual use.

There is so much change for early high school students, getting to know new peers and belonging in a new setting, delaying technology will facilitate better pro-social outcomes.

In these years, tech ethics would be taught as part of a civics course.

My children have told me how distracted they became when the ACT Directorate told students from Year 7 to bring their own devices (BYOD policy). The policy was popular because, under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, the program was fully funded. It has been a disaster. In families where there are low levels of stress, parents are better able to manage the device but in families where there is more chaos, the devices are unchecked and have become de facto televisions and phones. That is why instituting a higher age restriction to access social media is good for equity. It would help those families (less wealthy) where establishing boundaries is harder.

Chromebooks, iPads and other screens for personal use have been rolled out in primary schools to poor effect. What tends to happen is teachers use screens as a 'reward' at the end of the day after all other tasks have been done. This reinforces the idea that screens are a special treat, a zone-out zone; an unhelpful framing.

We could have pilot/charter schools that are low-technology or technology-free. They would need authority from the local state Education Directorate to enforce this.

I have flagged this idea with a local high school principal who wrote back saying:

The only way low-tech schools would work is for either 100% engagement from families or additional funding to support staffing of parallel teaching and learning. Enrolment policies, such as Primary Enrolment Areas and acceptance of out-of-area enrolments would also have to be reevaluated according to state policies.

I have learnt from experience in the ACT, where individual schools have a lot of autonomy, that settings (and culture) don't change fast enough without directorate-level support. It wasn't until the Directorate said phones should be off and away from the first to last bell (as I [lobbied](#) to get over many years) that schools began to take the proposition seriously.

- **How do you think we should balance digital literacy and skill-building, with the need to 'detox' from digital and emerging technologies?**

The argument that students and children need to use screens and devices in order to learn about them is simply not true. I often think about the drug and alcohol education schools deliver in health subjects, usually in years 9 and 10. We provide very important information on these issues without handing out beers to the students so they can see what it actually feels like.

Without a foundation of good literacy and numeracy learnt and applied offline, then digital literacy and skill-building are shallow.

Another teacher I spoke to in preparing my answers to your Questions on Notice told me about what he called the 'Myth of the "Digital Native"'.

The idea that today's youth are "digital natives" is deeply flawed. Sure, students can swipe and download apps like pros, but that doesn't equate to meaningful digital literacy. Many of them struggle with basic skills such as saving a file or even naming documents, let alone research skills where they have difficulty discerning reliable from

unreliable information, and are easily distracted by the constant barrage of notifications and entertainment options. The assumption that they're naturally good with technology leads to an overestimation of their abilities. In reality, they're just as overwhelmed by the complexities of the digital world as anyone else—and perhaps even more so because they lack the life experience to manage it.

- I particularly appreciate your point about the need for mental health interventions for youth with problematic social media use. A big struggle with this inquiry has been to nail social media companies down on: (a) whether they believe in problematic social media use, and (b) where the threshold between appropriate and problematic lands. I want to run a few ideas by you which have been put to me by members in my community or by contributors to similar inquiries:
 - **Do you think it would be useful if the Government were to mandate pop-up mental health warnings on social media platforms, to alert users about the risks of excessive use?**

It would be part of a suite of actions. It could act as a prompt or reminder and be useful, but can be like a band-aid without tackling the anonymity and profit-making algorithms that make the technology addictive. I am more in favour of raising the minimum age of access. Banks require age verification without too much fuss. Lots of firms require age and identity verification. The firms are responsible for it. It's for them to solve, not the government.

- **What do you think about mandatory curfews for children under 18 years of age?**

It's a good idea In principle, but enforcement would have to be strict and across the board. As mentioned, it would need the support and engagement of parents. There are many examples of children stealing adults' phones/computers to stay up to the early hours without their parents' knowledge.

- **Do you think social media companies should be required to impose broader time-limits and/or cooling off periods for their programs – e.g. after 2 hours, a message pops up preventing access to the app or platform for a minimum period of 30 minutes?**

That could work but with the conditions explored above. Two hours is a long time. Children should be encouraged to quit after 10-15 minutes, or 30 minutes tops.

Keep in mind that one-third of all 7-9-year-olds in the US (where usage is similar to Australia) are on social media, being turned into products. Primary school girls are in tears over body image issues, as they are constantly comparing themselves to influencers on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. This incessant comparison often leads to feelings of inadequacy when they fail to meet the unrealistic standards of beauty and lifestyle portrayed online. Body dysmorphia is prevalent among adolescents who spend one to three hours daily on social media and is directly linked to mental health issues like anxiety and depression.

There are relatively unknown apps that create better rhythms for users and generate cooling-off periods for those who want to be more disciplined. What matters more is turning off the suggested or automatic reels function, and giving users more control.