

Newhounds and Squiz Kids do some important work, as do formal and community educators when it comes to media literacy and citizenship education.

But do you accept that the responsibility doesn't just sit with educators and parents?

Yes, absolutely. We've always maintained that solving the problem of mis- and disinformation, and improving rates of media literacy among the Australian population is not going to be solved by one institution, organisation or any one stakeholder. It will require a whole of civil society approach - and that includes tech companies and social media platforms playing an active role. The bigger question is why the government doesn't see this as a vital role for it to play. It seems odd to me that any responsible government in the modern era would be content to outsource the media literacy skilling up of its population to the private sector.

Should the government consider mandating that social media platforms include tools that promote digital well-being (e.g., screen time tracking, mental health resources)?

The short answer is yes. The longer answer is: you're kidding yourself if you think that's going to solve the problem. All of the measures you mention are important, but none of them on their own are going to work. Moreover, international experience tells us when it comes to age verification and platforms being compelled to include 'tools that promote digital well-being' are useful as box-ticking exercises, but have little to no real impact. They generally require users to opt-in. Or, in the case of mental health resources, they sit on static websites and require users to find them. The difference with a program like Newhounds is we've already solved the discoverability problem. Thanks to the Squiz Kids daily news podcast - which reaches some 160,000 Australian kids and their families each month, including some 5,000 primary school classrooms - we have an in-built promotion and distribution platform for Newhounds. If the government mandated media literacy education in the national curriculum - as has been done in many jurisdictions around the world - and freed up educators' time to teach media literacy in the classroom - at an age while kids are still impressionable, and crucially, before they have a smartphone in their hands - then we will be much better able to inoculate the Australian population against the worst excesses of social media and the mis- and disinformation that flourishes there.

Should the government consider an industry-funded model, where companies foot the bill for countering harm, instead of taxpayers?

Yes, I believe industry should absolutely be compelled to play its part.

You mention the need to refresh Newshounds content annually to keep pace with emerging trends, including AI and deep fakes. What specific mechanisms or frameworks should the government put in place to ensure media literacy education remains up-to-date with rapidly evolving technologies?

Excellent question. We've submitted to the government a proposal for a National Centre of Excellence for Media Literacy - which would bring together all of the different players in this space. It could be overseen by the eSafety Commissioner, incorporate the work of leading academics in the space, and support the work of organisations like Squiz Kids and its Newshounds media literacy program for primary school kids. With proper, ongoing funding, Newshounds could not only be updated every year to take account of rapidly evolving technologies - but it could be evolved from its current 'one-size-fits-all' model into a resource that is specific to every primary school year level (from Grades 3-6), translated into different languages (to reach non-English speaking backgrounds) and a program developed to target Newshounds at vulnerable communities whom research shows are more susceptible to fake news and misinformation. Thereafter, there's no reason why the Newshounds model could not also be adapted for adults and seniors - two other parts of our community for whom media literacy education is increasingly important.