

25 June 2024

Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

TERMS of REFERENCE:

- **The use of age verification to protect Australian children from social media**
- Researchers from Sydney University have asked young people and parents to have a voice about age verification and social media.
- Their (Dr Humphry, Dr Jeffrey, Dr Hutchinson, Dr Boichak) findings indicate that age verification is generally supported, but participants think that it may not work.

Instead, they recommend-

- i. More safety education
 - ii. Face to face discussions between child and parent
 - iii. Accountability from social media companies to keep the youth of Australia safe online
- i. To quote the Hon Zoe Daniel Independent MP for Goldstein “Online safety regulation cannot truly be safe unless it is systemic; it is the systems that must be made to change, not people. Platforms would instead be mandated by law to publically report on steps they [can] take to mitigate the most harmful risks their systems could foreseeably cause Australian users and society.” (The NEW Daily 2 May 2024)
 - ii. France have been testing a system to verify age based on a user intermediary after enacting a law in 2023 to restrict social media use for people under 15. The UK’s online Safety Bill is attempting to restrict young people’s access to online pornography, either through government issued documents or biometrics. The UK regulator Ofcom is set to publish guidance on age assurance compliance in early 2025. (Sydney University Opinion piece 10 Feb 2023)
 - iii. The team of academics from Sydney University also discovered that the youth and parent opinions included concerns about getting around age verification tools by accessing VPN (Very Private Networks), the age verification tools will be requesting private information and there is concern from both groups that this sensitive information may be leaked or breached. Further concerns included the evolving maturity of youth through discussions when hearing “Just switch it off” and the discussions that follow to encourage good decisions when online. But that involves the ability of parents to have these discussions and some young people do not have access to online safety advice or are unwilling to discuss a confronting situation.

- The Sydney University researchers conclude under the heading, ‘so what should be done?’
 - i. There is a growing consensus that social media companies [need] to do more
 - ii. Families can work together to develop guidelines and expectations for appropriate use
 - iii. Schools can help develop young people’s ...online safety skills
 - iv. We need to involve young people in the decisions that will affect them

- **The decision of Meta to abandon deals under the News Media bargaining Code**

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- **The important role of Australian journalism, news and public interest media in countering mis and disinformation on digital platforms**

- Firstly, the role of Australian journalism, news and public interest media in countering mis and disinformation is essential and requires the highlighting of the positive aspects of Artificial Intelligence to sift through online information and fact check “...huge quantity of content being uploaded every minute of every day... (Sergeant P, 2024)
- AI is currently doing machine learning in this space, even the tech companies do not know how it works
- Tech companies are building technology to help guide our prescriptive decision making.
- Dr Leah Ruppner, Professor of Sociology, at Melbourne University has recommended four tests for unbiased data collection
- Consider as a journalist, educator, government minister, public service advisers, librarians and writers these four tests provided by Dr Leah Ruppner
- Before any writer presses send consider these tests
 - i. The extent to which you have chosen the wrong data to answer your questions
 - ii. The extent to which the data is wrong, biased or incomplete
 - iii. The methods you are applying and whether they are right or wrong
 - iv. And the extent to which good decisions can be based on your data (Dr Leah Ruppner ANZOG’s Public Leadership Master Class May 2024)
- It is essential, in my view, the publication of journalistic material on online platforms has integrity, truth as a basis and is unbiased.
- Information on social media that incites unlawful behaviour and defames, breaches the essence of the rule of law.
- The Magna Carta is the single most important legal document ever created and it can be regarded as the forerunner of the founding documents of the United States. This historic document is a “bulwark against tyrannical rule, embodying the ideals of justice and liberty and the expression of these concepts in many forms.” (Bodleian Library 2016)

- Australia has a modern day, eSafety Commissioner who has recently acted on concerns regarding violent videos posted online that had the potential to incite violence.
- I **recommend** to the Committee and Chair of this Joint Select Committee on Social- Media in Australia, to find a well prepared, evidence- based solution to mis information and its impacts on the most successful multi-cultural society in the world.

- **The algorithms, recommender systems and corporate decision making of digital platforms in influencing what Australians see, and the impacts of this on mental health**
- The eSafety Commissioner has a go to resource titled “What to do if you see distressing content online” at eSafety.gov.au.
- I commend the work of Australia’s eSafety Commissioner

- **Other issues in relation to harmful or illegal content disseminated over social media, including scams, age restricted content, child sexual abuse and violent extremist material; and**

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- **Any related matters.**
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