

Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

Questions on Notice from public hearing of 30 October for ReachOut Youth Advocates

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

LAYLA

I define social media as any interactive online platform which allows users to create, share content and connect with other users such as friends, family and like-minded individuals. I believe it fosters digital communication through both comments and engagement, as well as direct messaging through one to one direct messages and group chats. It is also a form of media which allows users to keep up with global affairs and other news sources to stay informed on events which concern us and our society.

SINA

I believe the term 'social media' now extends beyond the traditional platforms we typically associate it with. Social media, to me, includes any digital space that enables networking and content sharing. By this broad definition, almost any online platform could be considered 'social media.'

For the purposes of this discussion, however, the platforms most relevant for addressing social media's impact on users would include TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Discord, X (Twitter), and Snapchat. I've chosen these platforms because they have extensive reach and influence, particularly among young users (including myself), and I have seen firsthand the capacity for their algorithms to amplify potentially harmful content and for their moderation policies to not remove such content. Each platform's structure poses distinct risks and benefits, making them central to discussions on regulating social media's impact on mental health, privacy, and online safety. If the committee is also examining potential online harms more broadly, other areas might also be considered, such as video game lobbies, which allow for interaction and content sharing but often lack the same safety oversight.

WILL

I define social media as two distinct ideas:

- A. On one hand we have the "social" which is about communicating with friends, being part of communities and seeking connection with other people.
- B. On the other hand, there is "media", this for example is consuming content, news, politics and what influencers are up to.

For the most part, for a social media platform to be one, it needs to contain both parts, or at least a strong social and online element to it. The news isn't considered a social media platform as it doesn't have a social component to it, but a platform like Discord would be as it has a strong social element associated with it.

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

LAYLA

I do use social media to stay up to date on Australian news and what's going on in our world, but also to keep up with local events in my area and educational institution. I usually seek

information out through The Guardian and ABC accounts on Instagram. I often use Instagram because it has live streams which allows for capturing events in real time.

I also keep up with local journalists and activists/activist accounts. Something I believe people don't acknowledge is how social media is also a platform and catalyst for youth advocacy. I remember using social media to stay informed on when the next School Strike for Climate was, in addition to using a group chat on Instagram to come together and organise initiatives for this strike with other like-minded young high school activists.

SINA

I primarily use social media to stay informed across a range of topics. YouTube and Google are my go-to platforms for news, while I turn to X (formerly Twitter) for real-time updates and on-the-ground perspectives from those directly involved. Reddit helps me gauge public opinion and see a wide range of viewpoints, giving me a sense of consensus or differing opinions on an issue. Banning young people from these platforms could limit their exposure to diverse information sources. For example, a post on Instagram might prompt me to explore a topic further elsewhere or fact-check something I've seen. I also find that YouTube's algorithm keeps my feed highly relevant, helping me stay updated on topics I care about, while Reddit's user-driven comments feel relatively free from commercial bias and help me inform my opinion through a form of "community consultation".

I also rely on podcasts to stay informed, which I'm finding to be increasingly common across all age groups in my social circles. I listen to a range of shows/perspectives, from ABC and New York Times podcasts to Lex Fridman and The Diary of a CEO to name a few, often discovering new episodes through Instagram and YouTube recommendations. Podcasts are becoming a major information source, increasingly replacing the role once held by traditional mainstream media. This is particularly evident in the current U.S. election cycle, where candidates are using podcasts and social media more than ever to engage with audiences directly, bypassing conventional media channels.

WILL

Yes I do, it's one of a few different ways I stay up to date with what is happening around the world. I'm able to curate my feed to different accounts based on what I'm interested in such as tech and political news. There are also dedicated youth based news accounts such as The Daily Aus which do a great job of making news accessible for younger people. I see it as a way ordinary people can share what's happening around the world. Platforms like X also allow me to see what's happening in real time, especially in a niche field as major news outlets will only report on big issues.

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?

LAYLA

Whilst I do use social media to keep up to date with news and current affairs as it's easier to access, I also rely on their official websites and news channels to stay informed. The news is extremely important to my friends and I to stay informed on events around us, which may affect us. I believe it is also crucial to our education and understanding of the real world and current events which impact our society at a local, national and international level. Staying up to date on news is extremely important to me as a young person as it helps me navigate my transition to adulthood; it prepares us and keeps us informed.

SINA

News is extremely important to me personally. I spend a significant amount of my free time reading or watching news, primarily through platforms like Google News and YouTube, where I access videos and podcasts on various topics. For me and many of my friends, staying

informed is a priority, and we rely on a mix of social media, podcasts, and traditional sources to keep up to date with current affairs.

WILL

I rely on social media to keep up to date with what's going on in the world. One way especially is at university. My university posts a lot of social content with opportunities and events and it's one of the many ways I stay involved in university life. When it comes to mainstream news, I rely on a mix of social media and email (a bit old school for young people though). News for myself and friends is very important as it will always make up part of what we talk about and allows us to critically think and discuss ideas.

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?

LAYLA

There needs to be stronger laws surrounding the spread of misinformation on social media. I understand the Communications Legislation Amendment Bill 2024 may alleviate some harms, but I feel there needs to be more protection, especially surrounding the spread of harmful and discriminatory misinformation. I also feel that there is a lack of age verification service altogether, and that jumping to an immediate under 16 year old ban is an extreme measure when there is not even a form of verification present to compare to or criticise. I believe the government should work on enforcing a verification system for the current age restriction of 13 before jumping to a higher age margin - especially an age where you can get your license, open your own bank account and give consent.

SINA

I haven't had the chance to thoroughly review the current legal frameworks to provide specific recommendations, but it's clear that existing laws haven't been fully effective in reducing harms and protecting users.

One key issue I see is the rapid evolution of social media and technology, which outpaces the speed of legislation. This means laws are often outdated by the time they're passed, leaving users, particularly young people, vulnerable to emerging harms like deep fakes, AI misuse, or personalised misinformation, which may not be adequately addressed under current laws.

Another issue is that even with the Online Safety Act's eSafety provisions, enforcing meaningful penalties for breaches is complex and often ineffective, particularly when dealing with international tech giants. This lack of accountability mechanisms means that, despite legal frameworks, many harmful actions go unchecked.

WILL: I feel as though we should take a similar proactive stance that the EU has taken. Laws in Australia in many areas are not strong enough, especially when it comes to privacy laws. I think that companies have wide ranging powers to use our information compared to other countries and the Australian laws are just not keeping up. There are also harms from platforms not being responsible for looking after young people where they wield great power at the expense of younger people.

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?

LAYLA

I believe it should be up to the big tech companies and the government to create policies which target specific harms, in addition to highlighting certain mechanisms such as the 'not interested' button, which many young people may not be aware of. I also believe it is the responsibility of the government to enforce more education in schools about navigating social media and potential harms for young people. Simultaneously, I believe it is up to young people to manage their algorithm and the content they engage with via interacting or clicking not interested on posts, blocking harmful creators and having the agency to fact check as I understand not all harmful or misinformed posts can be filtered out. I also believe it is the responsibility of the parents to foster a caring environment for their children so young people feel safe enough to reach out to them for support without feeling like they will be judged or criticised.

SINA

I don't believe that the responsibility for managing the harms of social media should lie solely with any one group. The Government, parents, young people, and social media companies all share responsibility in this space. While it could be argued that companies should bear a larger share due to their financial interests and the influence they have over their platforms, the Government must also establish policies and regulations to create a safer digital environment. Parents play a crucial role in educating and guiding young people on responsible use, while young users themselves must take ownership of their online behaviour and learn how to navigate these spaces safely. The government can play a key role in this by establishing education guidelines on digital literacy. For example, my parents were migrants and had limited digital literacy themselves, so they relied heavily on the advice provided by my high school to manage my technology use. It would be incredibly beneficial for the Government and social media platforms to collaborate on creating a digital curriculum. This curriculum could be introduced at an early age to equip young people with the knowledge, confidence, and skills they need to navigate digital spaces, just as we empower them to navigate the physical world.

Social media companies, however, should hold greater accountability for creating and enforcing policies that prioritise user safety, transparency, and ethical use of data, given that they profit from the platforms and have the most control over their operation.

WILL

I think it's a collaboration between all, but as the social media companies are causing harm, and profiting, it should mostly rest on them. It is also up to government (to have an overarching and oversight view) and parents to protect young people and to support the work social media companies do to protect young people (hopefully when they do more so in the future).