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## Submission in response to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

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### Introduction

We would like to thank the Joint Select Committee for the opportunity to respond to the inquiry on social media and Australian society. Below we document our credentials, our recommendations and then provide context for those recommendations.

### Our organisation

All authors are affiliated with the [UTS Centre for Research on Education in a Digital Society \(UTS: CREDS\)](#). UTS: CREDS is a cross-faculty research group comprising researchers who explore the dynamic relationship between technology and learning – across formal, informal, and professional education contexts throughout the lifespan. UTS: CREDS research interrogates the new ways in which technologies enhance learning, and the changing learning needs of a digital society.

This submission represents the views of the authors, not the position of UTS, or any of its individual units.

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### Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** The federal government should support cross-disciplinary research into young people's use of social media, and their social media literacies (Polanco-Levicán and Salvo-Garrido, 2022) comprising media literacy, algorithmic literacy (regarding recommendation systems, privacy, and content generation/modification), and civic literacies with respect to social interaction and engagement online. Targeted funding or/and use of national priorities may act to foster such work. This research should focus on how young people learn to navigate social media, and what opportunities there are for effective teaching to enable the safe and appropriate use of social media.

Social media can foster social engagement and generate new insights into how people learn to navigate and engage with information and people. Company and national policies both shape these potentials for use, and research, and must be carefully managed. Social media fulfils some functions related to those held by newspapers, magazines and other print forms. They can support collaboration, communication, interaction, information, dissemination, entertainment, resource sharing, and socialisation (Otchie & Pedaste, 2020). The use of social media during COVID-19 was beneficial where students were able to keep in contact with their teachers and school content (Maher, 2024). Their value - in being interactive, affording creativity, facilitating the generation of ideas, etc. - should not be clouded by their relative newness and a lack of clarity regarding differences in social media tools. Work is required to foster this value towards enhancing socio-economic growth. There is a high risk if restrictions are put in place that stymie potential growth in interactive technology use, design and implementation, we will need to be prepared for the impact on future generations ability to compete on a variety of global markets.

**Recommendation 2:** The concerns raised about social media, and especially its potential to harm young people, highlight the need for more education about social media. Such education needs to be carefully designed and should be offered at a range of age-appropriate levels, in both formal and informal channels. This educational program should be closely aligned with existing Australian Curriculum materials and include a program of professional development for teachers and other educators to ameliorate the skills gap that is present amongst teachers. This professional development would provide important information for teachers about the types of apps available, and which ones could effectively support educational outcomes.

**Recommendation 3:** Government enforcement of platform governance (rather than user regulation) is recommended to ensure social media platforms are intentionally designed to adhere to rules, policies, and standards that protect all users from cyberbullying, online gender-based violence and other harms.

**Recommendation 4:** Enact comprehensive laws that mandate social media platforms to implement robust measures against online gender-based violence (GBV) and other harmful content. This includes robust requirements for content moderation, user-friendly reporting mechanisms, and data protection. This should be enforced through regular audits, and fines and penalties for non-compliance.

**Recommendation 5:** Establish and empower independent regulatory bodies, and foster collaboration between the government, social media platforms, and civil society organisations to co-develop and implement effective co-regulation models and governance practices.

### **Context for our recommendations**

#### **TOR a) the use of age verification to protect Australian children from social media;**

We understand the desire to either raise the age for the use of social media or/and to make use of age verification protocols to ensure that only young people over a certain age are accessing social media. While this might be a part of the solution, it is not sufficient in and of itself. This is because it does not remove the need for education about social media (Richards et al, 2015), and the kinds of misleading or hateful content that is present within these spaces. If young people are going to use social media (and they are very likely to do so), when they're 15, or 16, or even older, the presence of hateful content will still be confronting. The imposition of age verification or the raising of the age limit doesn't remove the questionable material and delaying the age at which students see it is only a partial solution, predicated on the hope that young people might mature and be more capable of processing this material.

The use of mechanisms to confirm age identity is problematic and has privacy implications, for it requires that large amounts of information (unrelated to age) are shared online either about the child or their guardian. This kind of parental consent requirements or age assurance technologies also impinge on young people's needs to explore their own identity and their right to access information independently of their parents' control, not to mention that it can take away parents' own discretion to determine what is best for their children.

A more complete solution would emphasise educating young people and their parents about social media and the presence of misinformation and disinformation on various platforms, and how to deal with any hateful content that they encounter (Nagle, 2018). Such an approach will require careful design of learning experiences to promote critical thinking and digital literacy, as well as the use of age-appropriate resources and materials. It should be

noted that this is an area that is not well-addressed in the current Australian curriculum or the various state versions of it. In addition, teachers are also hesitant and unsure about how best to address teaching about misinformation and disinformation on social media (Nettlefold & Williams, 2021).

This suggestion also ignores the ways that young people, sometimes with parental approval, will find ways to access social media, regardless of age verification tools (boyd et al., 2011). While age verification might limit access for some young people, others will not be prevented from accessing it and will quickly employ work arounds (Barbovschi et al, 2015), some of which might place young people at risk of illegal activity. This could potentially criminalise young people simply for seeking to make use of a tool that they have previously been able to access. Rather than potential criminalisation, continued and age-appropriate education about social media and mis and disinformation, ideally in the formal education system where the scope is greater and the likelihood of engaging a significant proportion of the population is enhanced, is required.

Another, possibly unintended consequence, is that increasing the age or using age verification tools will likely limit the ways young people make use of various social media for both personal business reasons, and for engaging in the civic sphere. Social media is increasingly used by young people as they develop social entrepreneurship tools and practices (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016), and also to learn about themselves as it is a place where they explore and express their identities, and access social connections (Cao et al, 2024). There is also evidence that young people in Australia engage with and draw upon social media to challenge existing gender inequalities and share ideas with others on preventing gender violence (Molnar, 2022). More recent research reports also situate digital social media as an integral part of young people's everyday lives that help them grow into informed and responsible members of Australian society; they want a seat at the table when it comes to how platforms handle their data and want increased transparency and accountability for users' online safety (Humphry, 2023). By limiting their access to social media, we are likely to prevent them from capitalising on these tools. In addition, recent events have shown that young people have used social media to organise and campaign about topics that they feel are important (such as the School Strike for Climate) (see Heggart & Flowers, 2023). Again, raising the age limit or employing age verification will have the effect of limiting access to social media for young people engaging in this practice, and could be seen as limiting their right to participate in civil society.

It is also worth noting that the effects of age verification, in particular, is likely to especially limit the opportunities of young people from marginalised groups. Young people from non-English speaking backgrounds, or from low socio-economic status areas are less likely to have the kinds of social or economic capital that might be required to participate in the age verification process; hence, they are less likely to undertake any such process, and therefore they will have their potential to participate limited more than their peers from other groups.

Finally, it is important to recognise that young people consume news from social media in the first place; it has replaced traditional media as the main source of information about their world. Therefore, if we limit their access to this social media, we are likely to limit their opportunity to both become informed, and active members of the community and this would be to the detriment of our civil society. In such a case, age verification and /or raising the age limit would actually work against the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration which encourages the development of 'active and informed members of the community'.

**TOR b) the decision of Meta to abandon deals under the News Media Bargaining Code;**

No comment on this.

**TOR c) the important role of Australian journalism, news and public interest media in countering mis and disinformation on digital platforms;**

There are significant concerns present in Australian media spaces regarding mis- and disinformation and its potential effect upon young people (Notley et al., 2020, Harris et al., 2022). Some of these concerns relate to the concentration of media ownership (although that is perhaps a topic for a different submission), as well as the effect that the collapse of traditional print and audio-visual media has had on the quality of journalism within existing media businesses. More broadly, though, the democratic promise of social media (see Morozov, 2011 for example) has failed to materialise; while it is true that anyone with an internet connection and a device can now lay claim to being a journalist, rather than this democratising knowledge and improving the state of civil debate, it has instead proven to be fertile ground for the spread of misinformation and disinformation (Muhammed & Matthew, 2022). In many cases, it's not necessary to prove an alternative point of view to what has been presented; instead, it is sufficient to cause confusion and doubt which can have a paralysing effect upon civil discourse.

Currently, media organisations seem ill-prepared to address the flourishing of misinformation and disinformation on social media (see Weber et al., 2020). Indeed, there are few mechanisms that allow them to do so. Various platform led initiatives, such as X's community notes features, have proven to be ineffective. As media businesses seek to compete within social media, they are often forced to publish material without due regard for the veracity of sources, which can lead to misinformation entering the public arena. This can have very serious consequences (as an example, see Channel 7's recent involvement in the Bondi stabbing attacks, as described in Molloy, 2024).

For this reason, more research into how young people engage with and consume media, especially in the Australian context and via social media, is required. While there is already an existing body of knowledge in this space, both internationally and in Australia, and there are numerous frameworks and tools that have been developed to assist in developing critical literacy, there has, to date, been only limited studies into the most effective ways to develop and implement education for different groups to combat mis- and disinformation.

One promising avenue involves 'inoculation theory' (Compton et al., 2021) and prebunking (Roozenbeek et al., 2020). These ideas suggest that young people can be prepared to deal with misinformation and disinformation by introducing them to the way that misinformation is constructed. There have been some promising studies undertaken overseas with games-based approaches. However, as yet, there has been little research into the effectiveness of these approaches with young people in Australia – or their effectiveness with other segments of the population. Moreover, while exposure to mis- and dis-information poses risks, young people must also learn to navigate other forms of public issue that are a core part of civic participation, including areas in which experts or authorities hold legitimate disagreement. Access to information, particularly via platforms including social media, has increased, requiring ability to evaluate and integrate sources of varying quality towards personal and civic decisions. In recent discussion of reasoning on social issues in the context of multiple texts, List (2023, p.244) highlights research indicating that users of social media are likely to encounter victim blaming, false hysteria, war mongering, "bothsidism", and broad status-quo bias. A focus on credibility assessment provides a limited approach in this regard.

**TOR d) the algorithms, recommender systems and corporate decision making of digital platforms in influencing what Australians see, and the impacts of this on mental health;**

We recognise concerns regarding young people's mental health, and the possible impacts of social media in this regard. Further research is required to understand both concerns. Seven recent reviews (Ferguson, 2024; Ferguson et al., 2022; Miller, et al., 2023; Odgets and Jensen, 2020; Orben, 2020; Valkenburg, Meier and Beyens, 2022; Vuorre and Przybylski, 2023) adopting different review methods and targets, conclude (broadly) that the evidence of an association between social media or screens more broadly and mental health outcomes is inconsistent or weak.

Increasingly, our research has noted that actors within social media are seeking to 'game' the algorithms to ensure that their material is promoted by the various algorithms and marketed to as many people as possible. This has a dangerous effect upon the development of civic debate, civil society, and ultimately, the formation and implementation of educational policy. Recently, research from one of the authors of this submission has examined the way that various actors have sought to build awareness and influence by harnessing digital astroturfing campaigns (Heggart et al, in press; Heggart & Flowers, in press). Other research has examined the influence of provocateurs upon educational policy, as they promoted extreme points of view through social media (Heggart et al., 2023). Again, more research is required to understand what effects these 'disaster-led' promotions are having upon mental health, especially amongst young people.

**TOR e) 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**

Of particular concern to us, and as borne out by our research in this space, is that the spread of mis and disinformation via social media has significant detrimental effect on our democratic institutions, and democracy as a whole. Social media has proven to be fertile ground for the spread of hateful misinformation. This has a deleterious effect upon civil society and social cohesion. It is also a direct challenge to the validity of democratic institutions. Furthermore, the ubiquity of social media has meant that it has become easier to share and then to organise around these cases of hateful misinformation. It is not an exaggeration to say that the spread of hateful misinformation, including violent extremist material, poses a significant threat to the health of Australian democracy.

Digital social media can enable and amplify online gender-based violence (GBV) through various affordances and mechanisms such as anonymity, rapid dissemination of gendered hate speech, flaming, outing, doxing, partner surveillance, revenge porn, non-consensual image sharing, grooming, exploitation, and targeted harassment (Suzor et al., 2019) Addressing these issues requires a combination of platform governance, user education, bystander education and empowerment, and accessible support services to create a safer and more inclusive digital space for everyone.

**TOR f) any related matters.**

No comment on this.

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