



Dr Marjorie O'Neill MP

MEMBER FOR COOGEE

Social Media Inquiry

1. Introduction

Children, adolescents and young adults have or are growing up in a world where the internet is an essential part of their daily lives. The use of the internet can have both positive and negative effects on individuals and on society. Parents worry that their children spend too much time in front of screens and are concerned about the impact that exposure may be having on their development, learning and socialisation. Teens also are wary of the negative effects of their use of the internet to access social media.

Social media refers to the various internet-based platforms that allow individuals to interact with others, share photographs, videos, text messages and so on. It is used by a broad spectrum of society for both entertainment and social interaction. Because of its widespread use it has also become a major medium of public communication for advertisers, governments, NGOs and political actors. This has led to concerns about the negative impacts on the public sphere and upon individuals, in particular children and teenagers.

2. Teens and Social Media Use

According to the latest research from the US based Pew Research Centreⁱ US teens use of social is almost constant. You Tube is the most used platform, followed by Tik Tok, Snapchat and Instagram. Use of Facebook and Twitter by teens has declined dramatically in the last decade.

In Australia the e-Safety Commissioner undertook research in 2021ⁱⁱ that showed that Australian teens most used social media platforms were You Tube, Instagram, Snapchat, Tik Tok and Facebook. In that study 44% of respondents reported a negative online experience, including unwanted contact from someone they did not know, receiving inappropriate content and being deliberately excluded from a social group. Most respondents took some form of action after such an event, but most wanted more e-safety information delivered through a trusted channel such as schools and parents.

More recently a study partly funded by the e-Safety Commissionerⁱⁱⁱ by researchers at the University of Sydney found that 75% of teens had used You Tube or Instagram and 70% had used Snapchat or Tik Tok. The researchers reported that:

Common negative experiences include wasting time (54 percent), seeing unwanted ads/content (51 percent), sleep deprivation (27 percent), app overuse (37 percent) as well as cyberbullying (17 percent). Images or videos targeting groups or individuals based on gender, race or sexual identity, and violent or abhorrent materials are seen as particularly problematic.^{iv}

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Parents reported feeling ill equipped to manage their children's online safety, even when there were household rules established. There was also a significant gender difference, with girls feeling less safe online than boys.

3. Mental Health Effects of Social Media on Adolescents

Numerous studies link excessive social media use to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and body dissatisfaction, especially in adolescents. Systematic reviews of the literature have found that social media use is associated with mental health problems in young people, particularly due to social comparison and exposure to idealized images. While heavy social media use increased the likelihood of psychological distress in teenagers.

3.1 Cyberbullying:

Bullying is a significant health risk factor in the physical and mental health of teenagers, which has been exacerbated by the advent of digital technology that facilitates cyberbullying, particularly through social media platforms. It is estimated that over half of young people in Australia have experienced cyberbullying, often not reporting it. The harmful health effects include depression, suicide ideation and suicide. It differs from personal bullying in that the bully often does not see the effect that their behaviour is having on their victims and thus become dissociated from their actions.

Social media addiction and gender are predictive of whether a person engages in cyberbullying, with males more likely to undertake cyberbullying.^{vi}

Dunduru and Hanna recommend strategies such as "... tailored, culturally sensitive interventions, inclusive educational strategies, protective support networks, and comprehensive awareness programs about cyberbullying".^{vii}

This is also not just about teenagers – for we are seeing this across our broader community as well.

3.2 Impact on Attention and Cognitive Ability

When use of social media is added to children and teenagers use of television and there is significant concern about the impact of digital media use on adolescents' ability to focus and engage in cognitive tasks.^{viii} There are concerns also about a negative correlation between smartphone use in school and academic performance, with some studies showing that students who frequently used their phones during class time scored lower on tests and assignments.

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3.3 Effect on Social Skills

Increased digital communication and social media use in adolescence can reduce opportunities for face-to-face interactions, which are crucial for the development of empathy and interpersonal social skills. Limiting access to smartphones and social media during school hours could improve in-person social interactions, which are essential for emotional and social development.

4. Accountability of Social Media Platforms for Harmful Content

Engagement-driven algorithms on social media platforms can drive attention to content that is sponsored by advertisers, which is the business model on which platforms like Google, X, and Meta are based. But they can also prioritize sensational and polarizing content, which often includes misinformation, hate speech, and extremist ideologies. These algorithms amplify harmful content, making it more likely to go viral.

Unlike other forms of media that are subject to regulation or forms of self-regulation, such as radio and television, where there are opportunities for the public to complain about harmful content, social media platforms lack this level of accountability and seem reluctant to take responsibility for such content.

Hate speech and extremism can spread more easily on platforms that fail to regulate user-generated content adequately. This leads to call for stronger enforcement of community guidelines and more transparency in platform moderation processes.

There is also evidence that misinformation and false conspiracy theories have been spread far more effectively on social media platforms than was the case before they existed, which provides challenges for public health campaigns, such as those around vaccination and body image, as well as for social cohesion.

5. Policy and Regulation for Social Media Accountability

5.1 Regulating Content and Algorithm Transparency:

Social media platforms use algorithms to determine what users see, most often based on their previous use and “likes”. They can also be used to regulate and remove harmful and offensive content, A 2022 paper in The Regulatory Review ^{ix}discusses the need for regulatory frameworks to hold social media companies accountable for the harmful content spread on their platforms and surveys some of the technical and regulatory complexities of doing this.

In 2023 the Senate Standing Committee on Economics completed a review of the influence of international digital platforms. In a chapter of their report, they discussed algorithmic transparency^x stating that:

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The committee received concerns that algorithms used by digital platforms do not operate in a way that adequately supports community values, such as fairness, accuracy, privacy and user safety. At the heart of concerns around the emerging risks and harms is a lack of transparency around the information and user behaviour that influences the algorithmic operation and an algorithm's intended outcome.^{xi}

The Committee argues for greater transparency in how algorithms function and states that despite their size and influence social media platforms are not regulated in the same way as similar industries like banks, airlines and telecommunications providers. It recommends that the current fragmentary approach to regulation must be remedied by better co-ordination between policy makers and regulators.^{xii}

5.2 Restricting Access to Social Media based on Age

The Commonwealth has announced that it will introduce legislation to restrict access to social media by children and early teens. This is subject to trial of age verification technology currently being undertaken by the Commonwealth. Announced 10 September 2024.

In the May 2024 Budget, the Commonwealth committed \$6.5 million to conduct a trial of age verification technologies. That trial is being conducted by the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts.

On 8 September 2024 the former Chief Justice of the High Court, Robert French delivered his report to the South Australian Government on the legal, regulatory and technological pathways for the State Government to impose a ban on access to social media by children 13 and under and introduce parental consent requirements for children aged 14 and 15.^{xiii}

5.3 Privacy

On 12 September 2024 the Commonwealth Attorney General presented to Parliament legislation that would amend the Privacy Act and 7 other acts to:

...introduce a range of measures to protect the privacy of individuals with respect to their personal information, including expanding the Information Commissioner's powers, facilitating information sharing in emergency situations or following eligible data breaches, requiring the development of a Children's Online Privacy Code, providing protections for overseas disclosures of personal information, introducing new civil penalties, and increasing transparency about automated decisions which use personal information^{xiv}

5.3 Action by the European Union

The European Union (EU) has enacted the Digital Markets Act (DMA) and the Digital Services Act (DSA) with these goals:

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1. To create a safer digital space in which the fundamental rights of all users of digital services are protected
2. To establish a level playing field to foster innovation, growth, and competitiveness, both in the European Single Market and globally.^{xv}

The DMA applies to companies that own large digital platforms, such as Amazon and Meta, and aims to foster a fair and competitive digital market. The DSA applies to a wider range of online platforms and digital services, in particular Very Large Online Platforms (VLOP) and Very Large Online Search Engines (VLOSE) with an average of 45 million users monthly in the EU.

The DSA imposes obligations on these businesses which include the moderation of content, removing harmful and illegal content, providing algorithm transparency and instituting complaints handling procedures.

6. Conclusion

All technologies are socially constructed as well as being material manifestations of the underlying scientific competence that makes them possible. They are constructed by the use that their developers imagined they could be put to and the use that they ultimately are put to by the users and often the two are not the same.

Social media platforms started with the promise of a highly connected world where communication between individuals and organisations would be positive and beneficial to all. To some extent that ambition still exists. However, what we have also witnessed is some of the worst aspects of human behaviours, including severe threats to physical and mental health, invasions of privacy, the spread of misinformation and disinformation, as well as acts of outright criminality.

It is for these reasons that there have been increasing calls for government to act in support harm minimisation, to protect privacy and to support fair competition in the market.

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