

ReachOut Australia

Submission to the House Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety

12 January 2022

Overview

All young people deserve to be safe online.

ReachOut provides young people and their parents with the tools and information they need to navigate social media platforms in safe ways, and in ways that promote connection and wellbeing.

ReachOut has been, and remains, vocal in advocating for social media companies to make their platforms safe spaces for young people, particularly in regards to bullying and other key issues.

Social media can be a very positive, important part of young people's lives. It is an environment where young people spend a lot of their time. For many young people it reduces isolation, increases connection, is an outlet for creativity, and can have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing.

For too many though, their social media experience can have serious, negative impacts.

Banning teenagers from social media isn't the solution. There are, however, many things that can be done to minimise potential harms and make social media safer for young people in Australia.

For young people it's about education, as throughout their lives they will inevitably need to know how to use online platforms safely. We need to ensure parents and carers are equipped and empowered to have effective conversations with their teens about online safety. And, ultimately, social media companies need to do more to ensure their platforms are safe for young people.

About us

ReachOut is Australia's most accessed online mental health service for young people and their parents. We offer young people aged 12–25 a range of ways to support their mental health and wellbeing, with a focus on everyday issues and tough times, including:

- information and resources to enable young people to be well and stay well
- online peer support to help young people connect, find hope and share their stories in a safe place
- pathways through to professional help, if required.

ReachOut is co-created with young people to help them explore and learn how to manage and improve their mental health and wellbeing in ways that make sense to them. ReachOut is proven to help young people:

- relieve distress
- get well, be well and stay well
- provide connection, hope and a safe place to share stories
- build confidence to seek professional help
- provide support between treatment sessions
- support ongoing healthy behaviours.

ReachOut also supports the people that young people turn to for support, including friends, parents and carers, and schools and educators.

ReachOut Parents offers a range of support options to parents of teenagers (aged 12–18), with a focus on encouraging effective communication and relationships, including:

- digital information and resources on parenting teenagers
- online peer support, providing a safe and supportive environment for parents to discuss issues that are on their mind
- free professional phone-based coaching with a parenting expert to build confidence, skills and a toolkit for parenting teenagers.

ReachOut Schools supports teachers to build young people's wellbeing and resilience by taking a whole-of-school approach to student wellbeing. The service features easy-to-understand information on a full range of mental health and wellbeing issues to help school staff support students. Teachers can also access engaging and flexible classroom activities that enable students to take control of their mental health. Additionally, ReachOut Schools offers information for parents and carers, referral options for students, and wellbeing tips to help teachers take care of themselves.

ReachOut leverages insights and content across its three services – youth, parents and schools – to maximise reach and engagement.

ReachOut has more than 20 years' experience of delivering digital mental health and wellbeing programs, and has its own in-house research and digital teams. Our data and research-driven delivery model combines analytics from our digital products with contextual quantitative and qualitative research to inform the design and delivery of our service. This enables us to deliver a highly responsive service that reflects current events and issues, and to target specific audiences with the information that is most relevant to them.

Using a strengths-based prevention and early intervention model, ReachOut is trusted and able to communicate and engage with young people (and parents) in ways and places that other mental health services can't. Accessed by more than 2 million people in Australia each year, ReachOut is a free service that's available anytime and pretty much anywhere.

About the inquiry

The House Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety was established by a resolution of appointment that passed the House of Representatives on 1 December 2021.

ReachOut welcomes the Parliament's interest in this critical area, however, given the short timeline provided to stakeholders to make a submission, we are not able to provide a comprehensive submission that fully addresses the complex, multifaceted issues at play.

Nonetheless, this submission will outline our views and experience of these issues at a high level. As a leading digital youth mental health service that actively operates at the intersection of youth, mental health and social media, we hope our views are useful to the Committee.

Online safety, social media and the mental health and wellbeing of young Australians

Social media and the online world are not necessarily harmful to young people and, in fact, for many are a significant and positive part of their lives. Far from old stereotypes of zombie-like children glued to the screen as the world goes by outside, the online world can be a joyful, creative, social place for young people that helps them feel better and even has the capacity to build skills and offer experiences that lead to rewarding careers.

In Australia, teens spend 14.4 hours online each week and, encouragingly, 9 in 10 teens engage in at least one type of positive online behaviour, such as posting positive comments, being inclusive and supporting friends.¹

For many though, social media can also be harmful to their mental health and wellbeing. This divergence in experience can be thought of as a scale, and for many young people their relationship with social media, and the role and impact it has on their lives, may move up and down the scale and evolve over time. Where once social media was a positive, rewarding experience it may become a darker, negative influence – and vice versa.

Young people have told us about a broad range of negative behaviours or experiences online including bullying, exposure to body image and self harm content, unwanted contact from strangers, receiving inappropriate material, reputational damage and others.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found that in 2020, 44% of young people aged 12–17 had at least one negative online experience in the last 6 months.² When asked about all of their experiences online, 90% of young people reported being a victim of bad behaviour online at some point, with nearly 60% reporting emotional or psychological impacts associated with encountering risks online.³

Gender also appears to play a large part in the perception of concern and risk online. 76 per cent of Australian women under 30 report having been harassed online⁴, while Mission

¹ eSafety Commissioner 2021 'Digital Lives of Aussie Teens' <https://www.esafety.gov.au/research/digital-lives-aussie-teens>

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2021 'Bullying and negative online experiences' <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/negative-online-experiences>

³ Monash 2021 'Australian Youth Barometer: Understanding Young People in Australia Today' https://www.monash.edu/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/2754267/understanding-young-people-cypep-nov-2021.pdf

⁴ PLAN International 'Free To Be Online 2020' <https://www.plan.org.au/publications/free-to-be-online/>

Australia⁵ found that the majority of female (71.6%) and gender diverse (68%) young people reported being concerned about social media, compared to only 48% of males.

Banning social media is unlikely to be an effective response to the potentially harmful aspects – or even a fair one to the millions of young people for whom it is overwhelmingly positive. Education of young people on risks in the online world, how to keep themselves safe, how to recognise when things are going wrong and where to seek help is vital. For instance, ReachOut Schools offers teachers a range of [resources](#) to help improve students' understanding of online safety.

While education is important, it is obvious that social media companies can do more to make their platforms safer for all young people.

Recommender systems and algorithms

The personalised algorithms and recommender systems that control what content young people see when they are online can be – like social media itself – a positive or negative. There is little transparency around how these systems work in practice, but we know that young people's data is used to develop and train them and that, as a result, they can maintain the focus of their users for extended periods of time. As outlined in our joint submission (attached) to the *Privacy Legislation Amendment (Enhancing Online Privacy and Other Measures) Bill 2021* consultation with our sector partners as the *Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing Coalition*, these algorithms amplify a number of known risks:

- *Social media platforms are a key site of cyberbullying. One in five young Australians reports being abused, threatened or excluded online⁶. Social media recommender algorithms, which train on young people's data, are involved in escalating or promoting cyberbullying content. Social media recommender systems are known to privilege and promote incendiary content⁷ including content that falls under the definition of bullying and abuse.*
- *Social media use can have a maladaptive effect on young people's body image, and is associated with unrealistic body ideals⁸. Social media recommender algorithms have been documented recommending Pro-Anorexia content⁹ and Anorexia Community*

⁵ Mission Australia 2021 '2021 Youth Survey'

<https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/youth-survey>

⁶ eSafety Commissioner 2017 'Cyberbullying' <https://www.esafety.gov.au/key-issues/cyberbullying>

⁷ Luke Munn 2020 'Angry by design: toxic communication and technical architectures'

Humanities and Social Sciences Communications <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-00550-7>

⁸ Grace Holland & Marika Tiggemann 2016 "A systematic review of the impact of the use of social networking sites on body image and disordered eating outcomes" *Body Image* 17, pp.110-110

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2016.02.008>

⁹ Ysabel Gerrard 2018 'Beyond the hashtag: Circumventing content moderation on social media' *New Media & Society* 20(12):4492-4511. [doi:10.1177/1461444818776611](https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818776611)

including AnaCoaches as ‘friends’ to children’s accounts¹⁰. This has the effect of ‘normalising’ eating disorders and can lead to self justification and escalation¹¹.

- *The ability of recommender algorithms to normalise harms also applies to other disorders and extreme behaviours such as self harm. For example, in the UK the Coroners Office is investigating the role of social media algorithms in the suicide of a 14 year old, after ‘addictive features’ kept her hooked and the algorithm fed her more and more extreme self harm materials¹². A recent experiment in Australia found that it took TikTok’s recommender algorithm only 7 hours and 42 minutes to ‘learn’ that a child was interested in content that promoted harmful gender stereotypes and began to recommend this content at such a frequency that it would take only 5-6 days of regular use before their social media feed was completely filled with this content¹³.*

While the risks of these algorithms are becoming increasingly well known, they can also be used for good. The targeting opportunities provided by algorithms mean that we can be more nuanced in the way we reach people, providing them with relevant information and support and connecting them to help. They allow services like ReachOut to efficiently reach users based on their interests, or issues of concern, by recommending our content to people who may be interested in us or require support for certain issues. This increases both our efficiency and effectiveness in reaching young people in need of support, and when our high quality content goes ‘viral’, algorithms extend the reach well beyond what could be achieved through paid promotion.

Another key aspect of social media that the Children and Young People’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Coalition would like to see reform of is the use of ‘sticky’ features. The Coalition’s view is that:

Platforms deliberately design addictive and ‘sticky’ features that are risky. Big data platforms such as social media platforms and freemium games have addictive features and facilitate a ‘flow state’. Marketing researchers optimise flow with salient features because they create market value. This currently applies platform-wide to all consumers including vulnerable children and young people. Children are vulnerable to addiction due to underdeveloped cognitive control. While rates are still low ‘gaming addiction’ is a recognised disorder that affects young people. Further heavy use of social media

¹⁰Suku Sukunesan 2021 ‘Anorexia coach’: sexual predators online are targeting teens wanting to lose weight. Platforms are looking the other way
<https://theconversation.com/anorexia-coach-sexual-predators-online-are-targeting-teens-wanting-to-lose-weight-platforms-are-looking-the-other-way-162938>

¹¹ Giuseppe Logrieco, Maria Marchili, Marco Roversi, & Alberto Villani 2021 ‘The Paradox of Tik Tok Anti-Pro-Anorexia Videos: How Social Media Can Promote Non-Suicidal Self-Injury and Anorexia.’ *International Journal Of Environmental Research And Public Health*, 18(3), 1041.
[doi:10.3390/ijerph1803104](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph1803104)

¹² Tom Knowles 2021 ‘Molly Russel: Coroner Voices Alarm Over Delays to Inquest’ *The Times*
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/molly-russell-coroner-voices-alarm-delays-inquest-gmfmk7bwp>

¹³ Dylan Williams, Alex McIntosh & Rys Farthing 2021 *Surveilling young people online* Reset Australia
https://au.reset.tech/uploads/resettechaustralia_policymemo_tiktok_final_online.pdf

platforms correlates with poor sleeping patterns among young people, which is known to affect their mental health and wellbeing. Sticky and addictive features are often cited as one reason young people are unable to 'put down' their phones and sleep. This creates a vicious cycle: the more data collected about individual children facilitates more effective behavioural predictions, and therefore allows for greater optimisation of the platform to keep each child engaged on the site longer, which facilitates more data collection again. This is not in a child's best interest in itself, and leaves them vulnerable to targeted advertising, poor sleep and mental health outcomes, cyberbullying, family tensions, and more.

ReachOut also notes that in some specific instances some 'sticky' features can be used for beneficial purposes. For instance, ReachOut is currently in the early stages of investigating how 'smart nudges' could be utilised in our service as an effective way of keeping young people engaged with their mental health recovery journey.

The data and technology that underpins algorithms and powers sticky features should also be able to be used by social media companies to recognise when users are going down rabbit holes. Nudges, different content types and, where the content being viewed is potentially harmful, pathways to trusted information and support could be used to help users out of the rabbit hole.

It is clear that social media, and many of its current operating practices or features, can have both positive and negative outcomes for young people. ReachOut suggests that a 'best interests principle' be considered as a way to ensure that the positive aspects are retained, and the negatives curtailed.

A 'best interests principle' would require that the collection, use or disclosure of a young person's personal information is fair and reasonable in the circumstances, with the best interests of the child being the primary consideration when determining what is fair and reasonable and that platform features (like algorithms, recommender systems, commercial profiling and sticky features) are only used when likely to benefit young people.

Parents, carers and social media

We know that for many young people in Australia, their parents and carers play an important role in helping them be happy and well. Young people will often turn to their parents and carers for advice and support. In addition, parents and carers are usually best placed to notice a change in their teen. This is why ReachOut Parents was created and why the service remains so important.

Parents and carers have been telling us for some time that they're concerned about the impacts of their teens' social media use and want more support in this area. In June 2021, ReachOut released new [data](#) on the concerns of Australian parents when it comes to their teens' use of social media. The nationally representative survey of over 500 parents and caregivers found:

- 36% of parents indicated that they felt unsure about the role they can play in keeping their teens safe on social media.
- 32% of parents weren't quite sure how to use the safety controls on social media.
- Almost 40% of parents weren't quite sure what to do if their teen had a safety issue on social media.
- 40% of parents said they needed more support to understand social media in order to talk to their teen about it.
- Parents' top five concerns about their teens' use of social media were: bullying, exposure to inappropriate content, unwanted contact or grooming, sexting or sharing nudes, and privacy concerns.

Empowering and equipping parents and carers with the information and tools they need to help their teens stay safe on social media is an important harm reduction technique. ReachOut encourages all social media companies to consider what advice is available to parents in relation to safe use of their platforms by teenagers.

ReachOut has worked in partnership with Instagram to produce two versions of the 'Parents Guide to Instagram'. The guide (attached) is a practical handbook which parents and carers can download from [ReachOut Parents](#) for free, along with a number of other resources to help parents manage their teens' use of social media. They provide parents and carers with information about the platform's safety features. Experts from ReachOut Parents have contributed tips for parents, such as how to start a conversation with teens about staying safe when using Instagram.

Information, education and support for parents is important and will go a long way to helping young people stay safe on social media. However, this is just one risk mitigation strategy which needs to be employed in a robust manner across social media platforms, along with a range of other strategies. While parents have an important role to play in helping their teens be safe online, at the heart of this issue is ensuring platforms are inherently designed to be safe for the young people who use them.

Social media companies' responsibility

To ensure we are best able to provide the resources young people need, and to advocate for their interests, ReachOut actively engages with social media companies, including as a member of the Facebook Online Safety Roundtable and the Twitter Trust and Safety Council.

We welcome and value the opportunity to engage with social media companies in these forums to improve our understanding of their systems and procedures, provide views on issues and features and, importantly, ensure social media companies understand what young people are telling us about online safety and mental health.

It is our strongly held view that social media companies must act responsibly and have a duty to ensure any platform they operate is safe for its users. We recognise that social media platforms will never be perfect, but providers should be striving for continuous improvement and the safest online environment possible for their users.

ReachOut shares the concerns of many in the community regarding recent reports of the impact that social media can have on young people's mental health and wellbeing. As highlighted above, we have a number of concerns, including around the impact of recommender systems and algorithms, and the design and use of sticky features. We encourage all social media companies to be open and transparent as they seek to address these important issues.

While some social media companies do constructively engage and are seeking to improve safety, other platforms have, to date, not been as engaged or forthcoming in sharing meaningful information around their safety features. We strongly encourage all social media companies to engage meaningfully and in good faith with youth safety stakeholders.

Resetting how we think about keeping young people safe online is vital. ReachOut believes that more can and must be done to embed safety by design as services are built – safety for young people online shouldn't be an afterthought. We welcome many of the significant safety features that have been retrofitted to increase protections for young people on social media platforms, and support continual improvement and uplift of safety features, but know much more can be done if safety is prioritised throughout the product design process.

ReachOut recommends that social media companies should, when considering online safety and data privacy matters for young people, follow the best interests principle.

Attachments

1. Parents Guide to Instagram
2. Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing Coalition's submission in response to the Privacy Legislation Amendment (Enhancing Online Privacy and Other Measures) Bill 2021 consultation

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