Statutory Review of the Online Safety Act 2021

Formal Submission

Submitter details:

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Submission made in my capacity as a private citizen

Who am I?

My name is Greg Tannahill. I have held a long-term interest in privacy, censorship, and the regulation of online spaces. I spoke prominently in the campaign to amend Australia's classification system in 2008 to allow a wider range of videogame categories, and I have been vocal since about how Australia should engage with the policy challenges presented by online spaces.

Wider background to this submission – age verification

I note that since the Statutory Review of the Online Safety Act was announced, there has been significant public debate about the idea of age verification to access online content, both in the context of minors accessing social media, and in the context of regulating pornography and adult content. Since it is likely that some or all of any such response would ultimately involve the Online Safety Act and the eSafety Commissioner, I will address it in this submission.

The shadow of difficult tech moguls

I would also like to acknowledge the current negative sentiment towards certain tech moguls who run certain large social platforms, who may be seen as having acted in a particularly aggravating and provocative way towards concepts of user safety and content moderation.

I acknowledge it is infuriating to see very rich men in leadership positions using their power and platforms to actively reject attempts to collaborate on a safer, healthier internet – and, in some cases, to actively promote and promulgate exactly the worst kind of content through their own personal accounts.

There is a strong temptation to feel that these tech moguls need to be "taken down a peg", or that they should suffer consequences for their behaviour and statements, and I fully understand that. Holding them to account is an important goal.

However, I would urge makers of policy and law to not let a desire for revenge and accountability lead them into making bad decisions that will ultimately harm Australians. Giving these platform owners the middle finger is not sufficient reason to justify bad policy.

The global context of censorship policy

In discussing issues of censorship, and access to media – including age verification - we must acknowledge the elephant in the room…

… which is that the loudest, most vocal, best funded proponents of online censorship and age verification are right-wing extremists, most notably fundamentalist churches and the so-called "manosphere" of misogynist extremism.

The jurisdictions around the world that are implementing censorship and age verification schemes are the most conservative jurisdictions in western democracies. And while passing these laws may be done under the rhetoric of "protecting the children", they have almost immediately gone hand-in-hand with laws to ban or criminalise:

- Information on LGBTIQA+ topics, and particularly on trans healthcare;
- Information on sexual and reproductive health and abortion;
- Discussion of systemic racism; and
- Sex workers and adult content producers, including their civilian non-sexual accounts.

The goal of those pushing these laws is not, ultimately, to protect children, but rather to control them, and prevent them from accessing information about their body, their sexuality, their rights, and the history of their country, and to the extent that we adopt their ideas and their rhetoric we are doing a disservice to the rights and freedoms of Australians.

The qualifications of the eSafety Commissioner

I would first like to address the position of eSafety Commissioner, and I would advise the government to seriously consider whether the current Commissioner, Ms Julie Inman Grant, is qualified to hold the position.

When this position was first established – as the Children's eSafety Commissioner - it was envisaged as a kind of helpdesk and advocacy position, helping Australians interface with tech companies, and providing them assistance in enforcing their rights and protecting their safety against large corporations.

Julie Inman-Grant was hired for this position, and it was a position that, on her resume, she was well-qualified for.

However, since that appointment, the role has been significantly expanded, and it now has quite powerful and sweeping regulatory, classification, and law enforcement powers.

I note that prior to her appointment, Ms Inman-Grant had no specific experience in classification, censorship, digital rights, or law enforcement.

I further note that Ms Inman Grant has previously advised parliamentary committees, under privilege, that she has received no training or qualification in censorship or media classification, did not intend to acquire such training, and that she would not know where to get it. (For reference, the Australian Classification Board provides such training, as it is required to under its Act.)

And I further note that recently released FOI information shows that Ms Inman-Grant has received no training or education in this area since she was appointed in 2017, and in fact very little training or education of any kind, and substantially less than the average public servant would be expected to undertake in seven years.

(See here:
https://www.righttoknow.org.au/request/training_professional_developmen
Noting that, at the time of this submission, the request has not been fully answered and portions of the response are overdue.)

A further FOI request relating to the classification qualifications of delegates under the Online Safety Act has not been answered as at the time of this submission.

(See here:
https://www.righttoknow.org.au/request/classification_training_of_esafe)

In addition to the above, Ms Inman Grant has made a number of professional errors in the course of her appointment that suggest she is deeply underinformed about the space she is trusted to regulate.

In September 2021, Ms Inman Grant appeared on a podcast hosted by the National Centre on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE) to discuss online safety. Ms Inman Grant was apparently aware that, contrary to their name, NCOSE are a fundamentalist religious organisation, previously known as Morality in Media, and that they were auspiced by the International House of Prayer – Kansas City (IHOPKC), an

internationally recognised hate group. NCOSE are an anti-sex, anti-LGBTIQA+, anti-abortion organisation who are well known throughout the censorship space as religious fundamentalist extremists.

FOI documents show that no due diligence was done on this organisation prior to the podcast, and the podcast is still up and viewable on NCOSE's social media channels, featuring Ms Inman Grant. More troubling is that Ms Inman Grant did not herself know who NCOSE were – given that they are infamous in the space she is employed to regulate, and even more troubling is that she dismissed criticism of her appearance on an extremist podcast as the work of bad actors and trolls.

(See:
https://www.righttoknow.org.au/request/information_about_ncose
and also:
https://www.righttoknow.org.au/request/historical_ncose_documents
)

The disorganisation and lack of insight into engagement with NCOSE is perhaps not surprising, though, as further FOIs have revealed that eSafety – the foremost regulator of social media in Australia – in fact had no formal internal policies whatsoever regarding social media, in relation to either the Office's official use of social media channels, or the use of social media by individual staff.

(See:
https://www.righttoknow.org.au/request/information_re_social_media_annu
and also:
https://www.righttoknow.org.au/request/social_media_policies)

Throughout her tenure, Ms Inman Grant has repeatedly refused to adequately and properly consult with marginalised groups whose safety and rights are impacted by her decisions under the Online Safety Act, including the LBGTIQA+ community, young people, and sex workers and adult content creators.

Finally, there is the recent matter of her court case in the Federal Court against X, relating to footage of the Wakeley Church Stabbing, in which she attempted to argue that X was obliged to remove the footage worldwide because it remained accessible by Australians using a VPN. In the preliminary hearings, Justice Kennet expressed extreme concern about the Commissioner's proposition, and foreshadowed that he had worries it was beyond power and could have international repercussions.

That case also raised the question of whether the eSafety Commissioner's classification of the stabbing video material as class 1 (refused classification) was valid. That question will be further debated in other litigation later this year, but that decision also seems shaky, and brings the question of the Commissioner's lack of classification qualifications into sharp relief.

Ultimately the eSafety Commissioner discontinued her Federal Court litigation against X – which can only be understood as an admission she felt she was unlikely to be successful – which raises the question of why the litigation was brought in the first place, and what advice she received that suggested to her that such a dubious argument ever had a chance of success.

My submission would be that Julie Inman Grant is not qualified for the role of eSafety Commissioner as currently constituted, and that the government should seek to replace her with a more qualified applicant, with relevant experience in some combination of law, media censorship/classification, and human rights.

Two media classification systems is one too many

The Online Safety Act is quite unusual in that it establishes a scheme for the classification of media which sits adjacent to, but entirely unconnected to, Australia's *existing* classification scheme, the Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995 (the Classification Act), which is administered by the Classification Board.

The Classification Act sets out a quite detailed process for the classification of media, and provides for a broad community board to oversee that classification. It makes provision for training in various fields of classification, and includes provisions for transparency of decisions, and clear appeal rights.

The Online Safety Act, meanwhile, allows the Commissioner (or her delegate) to decide that material *would* receive a certain classification, were it to be classified by the Classification Board. However, there is no specific guidance in the act as to how she is to make such a decision, nor a requirement to liaise and keep in touch with the Classification Board to ensure her perspective and attitudes are in line with theirs. Nor is there any mechanism for providers, users, or citizens generally to appeal such decisions without launching formal litigation under the AD(JR) Act, which is costly, and rarely delivers a result in a timely manner.

I would urge the government to amend the Online Safety Act to:

(a) require that delegates exercising classification powers are required to have appropriate training and qualifications;
(b) provide a cost-free mode of internal appeal of classification decisions before the formal litigation step, which is open to providers, individual users of websites, and interested members of the public;
(c) require that delegates exercising classification powers under the Online Safety Act are closely connected to the Classification Board to ensure consistency of decision making and ensure that decisions are in line with community expectations;
(d) explicitly provide a "public interest" test to prevent the censorship of material whose availability is in the public interest, regardless of what classification it might receive.

Offloading censorship onto third parties is undesirable

The Online Safety Act provided a requirement for industries to develop codes of conduct relating to what content they would, or would not, censor, and a range of other safety provisions.

This was well meaning, but I believe it is ultimately bad policy.

Censorship decisions made at the behest of the government should be seen to be done by the government. They should be public, transparent, allow for clear rights of appeal, and be able to be debated in the public sphere, with clear consequences for government if the wrong decisions are made.

Encouraging corporations to engage in censorship at the behest of government violates all these principles. It encourages corporations to over-censor, and remove content that people may have a right to post, in order to minimise their compliance risks. Corporate censorship decisions are rarely transparent, and are often made algorithmically. Appealing such decisions can be difficult, bureaucratic, and frustrating – when the company even allows such appeals at all.

The people most likely to be inequitably affected by this over-censorship are marginalised groups, including women, the LGBTIQA+ community, young people, and sex workers and adult content creators.

This kind of policy has the effect of creating government-directed censorship of material that the public would never have wanted censored, had the debate been had openly.

I would encourage the government to amend the Online Safety Act to:

(a) require tech companies to have a clear avenue of appeal for censorship decisions, bans, and shadowbans;
(b) require tech companies to produce clear content guidelines, specifically including their stance on male and female nudity, sexual content and sexual activity, sex work, queer content, sex education, breastfeeding, and abortion and reproductive health information, and abide by those guidelines;
(c) require companies to disclose their guidelines for "shadowbanning" accounts, or hiding them, or demoting them algorithmically to other users;
(d) require tech companies to provide clear decisions, with reasons, upon request, for decisions to ban, shadowban, or censor accounts.
(e) provide penalties for companies that recklessly over-censor, or who create discrimination against protected individuals or groups as a result of their censorship.

The powers of the eSafety Commissioner

Just generally, I would say that the Office of the eSafety Commissioner does not require more enforcement and compliance powers. To date, it has never successfully levied a fine against any tech company. The powers that it already has are largely unused.

In addition, the powers of the eSafety Commissioner largely replicate powers already held by police, which are also underused. We have existing crimes, and enforcement powers, relating to intimate image abuse, online harassment and threats, online hate speech, and coordinated online bullying. However, police seem reluctant to use these powers or enforce these crimes.

It is difficult to see how the eSafety Commissioner, with no background in law enforcement, is better qualified to hold or use these powers – particularly given that she has *not* used the powers she already has.

I would generally advise the government to avoid handing out quite significant criminal and enforcement powers, that impact the privacy and free speech of Australians, to civilian agencies, and instead ask why the police are not using the powers they already have.

The Office of the eSafety Commissioner would work best by being wound back to its helpdesk/advocacy role, with the classification powers returned to the Classification Board and the policing powers returned to the police.

The harms – or rather, lack of harms – of pornography

One of the assumptions underpinning much discussion of censorship law, and age verification, is that pornography is, in some way, harmful.

The suggestions that are often made are:

(a) pornography is inherently harmful in some fashion;
(b) pornography is addictive;
(c) pornography promotes harmful attitudes to women or increases incidence of domestic violence;
(d) pornography promotes poor body image in women;

(e) there is some kind of epidemic of pornography use; and
(f) pornography is harmful to children.

These suggestions, however, simply do not have any evidentiary basis.

Many of these suggestions, it must be said, are grounded in a belief that pornography users are solely or overwhelmingly men, and that pornography overwhelmingly depicts women with a certain body type engaged in heterosexual sex, which is not correct and fails to represent the depth and range of pornographic content enjoyed by people of all sexualities and genders. A 2024 Australian study found 14% of women aged 15-29 reported weekly pornography use, for example.

(See:
https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1326020024000104
and also:
https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/bitstream/10453/48993/3/2-s2.0-84978517067%20am.pdf)

Pornography is not generically harmful. Multiple studies have shown that use of pornography only correlates with identifiable harms in users who have been culturally pre-conditioned to feel shame around pornography use. There is no evidence of harm in users from sex-positive backgrounds. That is to say, the harm arises from the repressed cultural background, not from the pornography.

(See:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334164737_Development_and_implications_of_pornography_use_a_narrative_review
and:
https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10508-018-1248-x
and:
https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29377724/)

Pornography is not addictive. Multiple studies have shown that even pornography users who self-identify their usage as "problematic" suffer no withdrawal-like symptoms when deprived of pornography. There has been a very deliberate decision to NOT include "pornography addiction" (or "sex addiction") as a diagnosis in the DSM-V, and evidence shows it does not share mechanisms with (for example) gambling addiction, which *does* appear in the DSM-V.

(See:
https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/02/140212153252.htm
and the Wikipedia article on "pornography addiction" for a higher-level discussion of the topic generally:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pornography_addiction)

Excessive pornography use can be a symptom of certain other, diagnosable conditions, such as compulsive sexual behaviour disorder, but the relationship is not causative. Pornography use doesn't cause the condition – it is a symptom of it.

Studies have also shown no correlation between pornography use and domestic violence, or disrespectful attitudes to women. In fact a recent study showed that men with the highest tier of pornography consumption held significantly better attitudes related to respect, gender equity and consent than the population average, while men with strongly *negative* attitudes towards pornography were likely to perform lower than the average on these same markers.

(See:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342685895_Does_pornography_consumption_lead_to_intimate_partner_violence_perpetration_Little_evidence_for_temporal_precedence
and:
https://eprints.qut.edu.au/14567/1/14567.pdf
and:
https://www.jstor.org/stable/48558741)

Studies also showed that women who regularly consume pornography have, on average, a significantly better body image than those who do not, and feel more comfortable with their own bodies and with the range of difference in female body types.

(See:
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0092623X.2024.2302375
and:
https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1359105320967085
and:
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0167482X.2016.1233172
and:
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00224499.2018.1475546)

There is no epidemic of pornography use. Pornography consumption by men has stayed largely stable since at least 1973. However, consumption by women has more than tripled since 1999, likely related to the wider variety and diversity of content in the digital era, and the increased safety and anonymity of women in accessing it.

And finally, there is absolutely no evidence that children of any age are harmed by exposure to pornography when they seek it out of their own volition. And indeed, most Australians do encounter pornography before the age of 16, largely in circumstances where they have chosen to seek it out themselves, and this has been the case since at least the 70s, and it is obvious that no large-scale harm has occurred as a result.

(See:
https://eprints.qut.edu.au/41858/)

Harm to children from pornography comes when they are introduced to it by others, and particularly adults or those older than them, because this is where grooming behaviour occurs. And the harm here is not the pornography, but rather the grooming.

In that context, the government should reconsider the wisdom of any policy that prevents young people engaging with the internet in a self-directed way, and which incentivises them to instead interact with unrelated adults to obtain their porn.

A note on research relating to pornography

In citing research above, I'd note the wide range of contrary "research" that appears on a Google search for these topics. However, research in the pornography field is a fraught endeavour, and is complicated by the following factors:

(a) Much of the existing "research" is undertaken by, or commissioned by, religious or moral advocacy and pressure groups with a pre-existing opinion on the topic, and largely conforms to those pre-existing opinions.

(b) Much research conflates safe and consensual kink and BDSM practices with "violent sex" or "non-consent".
(c) Much research conflates sex work that is fully consensual and, in many cases, legal, with non-consensual sex and/or "sex trafficking".
(d) Much research assumes that the consumers of pornography are exclusively male and that the pornography exclusively depicts largely heterosexual relationships for the benefit of the male gaze.
(e) Much research fails to identify the pre-existing attitudes of participants and falls afoul of the issue identified by other research, that those with existing sex-negative cultural backgrounds will report "harms" of pornography that are not experienced by comparable sex-positive users.
(f) Much research conflates self-directed and consensual exposure to pornography with accidental exposure or introduction to pornography by a third party.
(g) Much research defines pornography narrowly and fails to take into account more "culturally acceptable" forms of pornography such as gratuitous sexual content in mainstream movies and television, artistic sexualised nudity in fashion and art magazines, sexualised fashion influencers, erotic literature, and erotic romance, thereby excluding many of the ways in which women traditionally consume pornography.
(h) Much research assumes a vague concept of "moral harm" or "loss of innocence" that underpins its eventual conclusions.

These issues, and their impact on the literature of pornography research, are further discussed here:
https://scholar.google.com.au/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=R7MvygIAAAAJ&sortby=pubdate&citation_for_view=R7MvygIAAAAJ:bKqednn6t2AC
(which I highly recommend)
and here:
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13691058.2019.1617898

The alleged benefits of age verification

Noting my comments above about pornography, it is very difficult to see what benefits the Australian public would enjoy from any system of age verification, whether targeted at young people using social media or people of all ages accessing pornography.

It is sometimes suggested that social media is addictive – a proposition for which there is no scientific evidence – or that it some way warps the brain patterns of young minds – again, something for which there is no evidence.

The vast majority of people aged 20 to 30 today used social media as minors and there is very little evidence of any kind of serious harm or epidemic in that cohort resulting from that use.

Reference is also often made to bullying and cyberbullying. There is a tendency to treat this as some kind of new problem, merely because it involves new technology, but the reality is that it is not. Bullies have never needed smartphones to make someone's life hell, nor have they needed video footage in order to cause an embarrassing incident to haunt a victim over multiple years. Bullying is the same problem that it has always been, and it is hard to solve, and because it is hard to solve government sometimes look for easy answers – like social media age verification – rather than confronting the underlying problem. But I would urge against that.

(I note again that the police and the eSafety Commissioner already have quite broad-ranging powers to confront online harassment, and that those powers are rarely used. Social media age verification feels like punishing the victim before we've even tried to punish the culprit.)

In a similar vein, reference is sometimes made to the sexualisation of minors on social media. I agree that this is a problem – but I regret to say it is not a problem caused by, or even primarily enabled by, social media, and again this requires a cultural solution, and real political leadership, rather than a knee-jerk ban.

The harms of age verification

First, let's state the obvious. When we talk about verifying the age of minors, we're talking about verifying the age of *everyone*. That's how that works. Everyone, including adults, will have to verify their age to access the relevant content. And, depending on how that's accomplished, that may also involve verifying their *identity*.

This is a *huge* privacy nightmare. It is impossible to do this without storing data, of some kind, somewhere, and the nature of data is that, over a long enough timescale, it *will* be breached. We do not want a database of the identities of children in the hands of bad actors. We do not want a database of women who have accessed reproductive health information in the hands of bad actors. We do not want a database of people who have viewed pornography in the hands of bad actors.

But let's go on to assume an age verification system exists, and it works, and it prevents people under an age from accessing (a) the major social media sites and (b) the major pornography sites.

Obviously it's not going to work, because VPNs are a thing, and young people know how to use them. If they want to access these sites, they will.

But if they *couldn't* access those sites, or it was too inconvenient to do so, they will simply access other sites. They will seek their pornography in the dark corners of the internet. They will engage in their social interaction with their peers on shadowy and unregulated forums.

This is how the infamous 4chan and 8chan boards came to be. These are places that are often explicitly predatory, and which provide fertile breeding grounds for radicalisation and extremism.

When you suppress a basic desire of humans – such as to socialise with their peers, or engage with their sexuality – you don't stop it from happening, you just push it underground. And that is less safe and less healthy for everyone involved.

There is absolutely no surer way to increase the grooming and exploitation of our young people, and promote their exposure to bad ideas and extremism, than to ban them from doing it in public, well-regulated spaces.

I would also note that social media today is largely where young people form their political opinions, and organise in political ways to advocate their opinions and rights. A social media age ban would be a significant oppression of the right of young people to engage in political activity and political communication – which is, again, perhaps why it is so strongly favoured by conservative advocates.

The impracticality of age verification

Besides all of the above, age verification *simply doesn't work*. There exists no technology currently available today capable of delivering the stated policy goal. The option often mentioned by the government and opposition, biometric age verification, is easily fooled, and also subject to a range of

biases that create problems and inequities for women, people from certain cultural and racial backgrounds, and people with certain conditions and facial deformities.

Other technologies are even more flawed, and often come with unacceptable privacy risks.

Systems that rely on interfacing with existing identification – such as driver's licences, or a MyGov ID – violate the human rights of Australian citizens and residents who, for various reasons, may not possess such identification, or have control of it.

I would strongly direct the committee to the recent scholarly paper by Zahra Stardust et al on this topic, entitled "Mandatory age verification for pornography access: Why it can't and won't 'save the children'". I have included a copy of this paper with my submission for your convenience as it very directly speaks to the topic of this review.

https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/20539517241252129

The industry cost of age verification and other online regulation

In discussing all forms of regulation of the online space, it is important to keep in mind the regulatory burden.

New rules that come with compliance costs – such as online age verification, or moderation requirements – can have the effect of privilege large industry against small industry. They increase the cost for new entrants to the industry, and therefore discourage competition and change within the industry.

Sometimes that may be desirable, where the government specifically wants to limit an industry to a small number of reasonably-controllable large players. However, it is less effective in industries with international pressures, where new international entrants can avoid the early compliance costs by not doing business in Australia until they are large enough to absorb those costs, whereas Australian startups are choked from day one.

It is *particularly* an issue in the context of adult content, because the "small players" and "new entrants" in that industry are usually solo content creators, performers, and sex workers. It is the interests of Australians to protect and encourage solo creator businesses, for the following reasons:

(a) It creates a wider diversity of content in the adult content market, helping to break stigmas, and showing a wider range of body types and relationship types;
(b) It lets solo creators work without having to enter relationships with larger studios, which can (sometimes) be predatory or exploitative;
(c) It supports semi-casual creators who are juggling content creation with parenting or caring responsibilities, other forms of work, or disability;
(d) Creators who are empowered to work under their own terms, and choose their collaborators and their work conditions freely, are safer and face fewer risks.

In developing any age verification policy, I would encourage the government to:

(i) Directly consult with the adult industry, including businesses and peak bodies, as well as individual adult creators and sex workers; and
(ii) Aim any policy directly at large players in the industry while leaving exemptions for solo creators and small-to-medium enterprise – perhaps by imposing different compliance standards on the two groups.

AI and Deepfakes

I feel it's likely that there will be some commentary on the creation of AI "deepfakes" and their use online in harassing women. And by that I specifically mean realistic or semi-realistic depictions of women in the nude, or performing sexual acts, created without their consent using generative AI such as Stable Diffusion or Midjourney.

On that, I'd just like to say that the harassment of women is unacceptable, but it's a mistake to focus on AI in addressing this problem.

Humans have been able to imagine other people in the nude for as long as we have had imagination, and we have been able to create photorealistic visual representations of that imagination since at least the Renaissance. There has been a significant trade in painted, hand-drawn, or digital fake images of celebrities throughout the majority of human history. (I'm not condoning that, I'm just saying it's not new.)

AI may make it easier and faster to produce a plausibly realistic image, but it is not, fundamentally, a new ability that we didn't previously have.

The harm that comes from these images is not their existence, but rather their use to harass and humiliate women, either intentionally, or by distributing or publishing them in a reckless manner. It is not terribly relevant to that harm that the images are realistic. I doubt that few of those consuming them believe them to be a real depiction of a real event.

The reality is that harassment can be accomplished just as easily with a crude hand-drawn caricature, or a cartoon, or with something a simple as person's head photoshopped onto someone else's body in a way that leaves no doubt that it is a fake. The harm is in the intent, and the idea, and it is not materially enlarged by the realism of the image.

In combatting the harm associated with harassment using AI deepfakes, I would urge government to focus on the *harassment* – the intent, and the behaviour – rather than the manner in which the image was created, which is ultimately a dead-end. We have existing harassment laws intended to target this behaviour. They could probably be strengthened – and police could be encouraged to actually make use of them more often.

Making a subset of offences related to AI is a distraction from the real work of combatting online harassment, and is unlikely to improve the safety or dignity of women.

The role of leadership

I'd just generally note that in combatting online abuse and harassment, no amount of regulation is going to make a difference if we don't have leadership. And by that I mean specifically leadership from our elected representatives.

When we talk about volumetric attacks on individuals on social media, racist abuse, misogyny, sexual harassment, and hate speech, we need to acknowledge that this behaviour all too often originates with, or is cheered on by, or is amplified by, elected members of the Australian federal parliament.

It is ridiculous to say that we can prevent the racial vilification of journalists of colour in Australia when there are elected politicians actively taking part in that vilification. It is laughable to say we can prevent the sexual harassment of women, when rape is occurring within the walls of Parliament House, and certain politicians are going out of their way to defend the rapist and vilify the victim. It is hypocritical to say we can combat online extremism when federal politicians like and retweet the

comments of fascists, racists and misogynists and appear on their podcasts and pose for photos with them.

I would call on all parties to be a little less broad in their broad churches, and demonstrate the leadership necessary to call their members and followers to account, and refuse to allow themselves to be associated with, and take the votes of, people who engage in vile and abhorrent conduct, both online, in public, and within the walls of parliament. Because until that happens, any other action the government may propose to take is just theatre.

Yours truly,

Greg Tannahill

15 June 2024