

Pre legislative scrutiny: Online Safety Media and Regulation Bill

Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media

Opening statement

- Dia dhuit and hello from Sydney. It's a pleasure to talk with you today.
- I am joined by my Executive Manager of Investigations, Mr Toby Dagg who manages our regulatory and complaints schemes. I'd like to make a few opening remarks and then I am happy to take questions. I will likely defer to Mr. Dagg on detailed questions around investigations and specific application of our regulatory schemes.
- Thank you Chair, and committee members, for this opportunity to meet with you today and to table an opening statement.
- Firstly, I would like to congratulate the Committee for delving deeply into these laws and considering how best to protect your citizens online.
- When I was preparing for this hearing, I reviewed some of the debates you have had for this Bill. I noticed that you've heard from industry and civil society, and understandably their views have differed on the recommended approach and timelines for online regulation.
- These issues are challenging — balancing a free and open internet with the protection of individuals and societies, where harms know no borders. It is a hard regulatory and policy posture to introduce and more importantly, to deliver — and requires commitment, education and a fair degree of cultural change.
- But, as you all know, the issue of online harms and keeping people safe online is more important than ever, as we rely on the digital environment to learn, work and even socialise. Here in Australia during the pandemic, where we are still locked down, we've seen a surge in reports across all of our regulatory schemes. In the fourth quarter of the last financial year, compared with the same time in the previous year, reports about:
 - illegal online content increased by 96%
 - image-based abuse increased by 255%
 - child cyberbullying increased by 19%, and adult cyber abuse increased by 53%.
- As the world's first government regulatory agency solely dedicated to tackling online abuse, we provide an important safety net for our citizens.
- In June 2021, a more robust and modernised Online Safety Act passed both houses of the Australian Parliament, providing me and my Office more expansive powers to help protect all Australians from the most serious forms of online harm.
- The new Act will take effect in early 2022 and enhance eSafety's ability to provide citizen-focused services and support, in line with our core functions.
- We believe we have an important leadership and cooperative role to play in the international arena, as other governments look to establish online content regulators.

- We believe we have a unique model here in Australia, that is working by focusing on three major sets of interventions, which are: Prevention, protection and proactive systemic change. We are very happy to share our learnings and experiences.
- We invest in our own research, education and awareness campaigns to prevent online harms in the first place; through our regulatory and complaints schemes, we protect our citizens by taking down seriously harmful content and through a range of powers and remedial actions to hold both perpetrators and platforms to account, and; we seek to minimise the threat surface for the future by staying ahead of emerging tech trends and by shifting responsibility back on the platforms themselves through initiatives like #SafetybyDesign.
- We accept that each country will approach online safety in line with their own perceived needs and regulatory structures but we do hope to achieve significant synergies in approach. Indeed, we expect that one day in in the near future we will have a global network of online safety regulators – very much like we have a network of Data Protection Authorities - that work together to address shared issues and to help unify internet regulation, so that ALL people can feel safer and more protected online.
- I wanted to conclude my remarks by saying that as you move through many future debates on your Bill, it is always helpful to remember the citizens for whom you are doing this reform.
- It could be a person you know, a child, a person of colour, a student, an older person in your life or a colleague. Online harms can affect anyone at any time. Digital harms may not leave visible scars, but the damage can be enduring.
- A citizen centric approach has been a core principle about how have framed our work at eSafety. I am looking forward to your questions.

STATEMENT ENDS

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