



12 January 2022

Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

via email: smos.reps@aph.gov.au

Re: The House of Representatives Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety Inquiry

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) thanks the Select Committee for the opportunity to contribute to the social media and online safety inquiry.

ACCAN is the peak body that represents all consumers on communications issues, including telecommunications, broadband and emerging new technology. ACCAN provides a strong unified consumer voice to industry and government with the aim of achieving communications services that are trusted, inclusive and available for all.

ACCAN is pleased that there is an increased focus on the overall impact that social media and other digital platforms have across the Australian community. The benefits that these services offer must be evaluated alongside the real and potential harms that can result when the appropriate safety mechanisms are not in-place. We have participated in much of the discussion around online safety across the increasing myriad of digital platforms.

ACCAN is aware that while much of our work has traditionally involved representing residential and small business consumers of phone and internet services, the increasingly converged communications landscape has shifted the way that Australians communicate. We are concerned that at present the interests of everyday Australians are not being heard in the social media and online safety space. As the peak consumer representative organisation in the communications sector, we have an interest in ensuring that the online services that Australians engage with are safe and trusted. Australians need to be confident that their use of such services will not result in unwanted or unanticipated harms.

It is in this context that we make this submission to the Committee.

Acknowledging that the Committee has a focus on social media and other online platforms, ACCAN submits that social media services are but one sector of the broader digital platforms ecosystem that Australians engage with. Thus, it is with this understanding that we use the term digital platforms to

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encompass all online digital services in this submission. This includes, but is not limited to, internet search engines, social media services, and electronic marketplaces.

Australia has long been a nation of early adopters, and this is evident in the widespread use of digital platforms – made easier with the near-ubiquitous broadband connectivity, both mobile and fixed. In its *2021 Communications and media in Australia: How we communicate report*, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), stated that 96 per cent of all Australians used communication or social media services.¹

Australians – individuals, businesses, and the broader community – have benefited from this significant growth in digital platforms over the past several years. These benefits have included easier access to information, increased capability for social connection, opportunities for new and existing small business, as well as economic opportunities for the Australian economy.

However, along with these benefits have come a myriad of unwanted and sometimes unexpected harms. These include unwanted exposure to harmful content, such as child sexually explicit material (CSEM); images and video portraying violence and horrific acts of cruelty; the dissemination of mis/dis-information (including the spread of mis-information about COVID-19, mis-information about the environmental and health impacts of 5G networks, and mis-information about the causes of the 2019-20 bushfires); the proliferation of cyber bullying with dire outcomes for some victims; issues related to the collection, use, and breaches of individuals data; and issues and harms resulting from lax data privacy protections.

ACCAN is aware that there are a range of ongoing and recently actioned initiatives being taken by both digital platforms and government – both domestic and international - to address some of these problems. Furthermore, ACCAN has participated in many of these initiatives. In order to contribute to these various consultations, we have stretched our resources and capacity. Several times this contribution has been at the direct request from the consulting organisation, other times due to the absence of a community representative body able to provide the community voice to the consultation.

We have engaged in discussions with the digital platforms, industry associations and a number of government inquiries, reviews, and consultations. We have contributed to the eSafety Commissioner's consultation on a Restricted Access System;² the ACMA's Mis-Information Code;³ the Online Safety Act, and we are currently in discussion with both Communications Alliance and the Digital Industry Group Inc (DIGI), as they develop the Online Safety Act Industry Codes.⁴ We have also contributed to the Department of industry, Transport, Regional Development and Communications (DITRDC) Basic Online Safety Expectations (BOSE) consultation;⁵ and we have

¹ <https://www.acma.gov.au/publications/2021-12/report/communications-and-media-australia-how-we-communicate>

² <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/1941-esafety-restricted-access-system-ras-declaration>

³ <https://accan.org.au/media-centre/media-releases/1922-accan-comments-on-digi-misinformation-complaints-portal>

⁴ <https://accan.org.au/our-work/submissions/1833-online-safety-bill>

⁵ <https://accan.org.au/accans-work/submissions/1940-online-safety-act-basic-online-safety-expectations-determination-2021>

recently contributed to the Attorney-General's Department consultation on the Draft Exposure Online Privacy Bill.⁶

ACCAN has made a number of recommendations in our submissions to these consultations which we believe will increase the Australian community's trust in using digital platforms and provide a strong level of community protections while not hindering the innovation and development of digital platforms and the resulting benefits that they can provide.

Having said this, ACCAN is aware that if Australians are to have the necessary trust and confidence about their continued use of digital platforms there is considerable work to be undertaken. ACCAN recently (November 2021) undertook preliminary research to establish what are some of the significant pain-points for end-users of digital platforms. The research findings indicated:

- 74% of Australians think that it needs to be easier for people to make a complaint to digital platforms
- 78% think that it needs to be easier for people to get their digital platform issues resolved
- 60% feel like there's not much they can do when something goes wrong online
- 79% think that digital platforms should be responsible for the content on their sites
- 79% believe more needs to be done to protect people's safety and privacy online
- 47% do not trust digital platforms to act in their best interests
- Only 27% believe the government is doing enough to make sure digital platforms do the right thing

Clearly, these are alarming statistics. The 2021 Edelman Australia Trust Barometer reports that social media companies are the least trusted of all industries in Australia.⁷

This level of mistrust of digital platforms indicates that digital platforms must do more to level the playing field with their users. The current power imbalance that the industry holds increasingly lays the burden on end-users to safeguard themselves against potential online harms. As is indicated by our research findings, 3 in 4 users of digital platforms do not know how to engage with their digital platforms to raise issues of concern. Similarly, 3 in 4 end users think it is too difficult to have issues with digital platforms resolved and 60 per cent of Australians feel there's not much they can do when something goes wrong online.

This difficulty of resolving issues and the extent of increasing significant online harms highlight the importance of the Committee's inquiry.

In conclusion, ACCAN makes the following recommendations for the Committee's consideration:

Recommendation 1: Digital platforms should be required to provide clear and easily understood information about their end-user engagement policies and procedures with clear commitments to respond to complaints and what actions have been taken

⁶ <https://accan.org.au/our-work/submissions/1833-online-safety-bill>

⁷ <https://www.edelman.com.au/trust-barometer-2021-australia>

Recommendation 2: Digital platforms and Government must undertake broad consumer education initiatives to increase community awareness of the rights of end-users and how they can realise these rights

Recommendation 3: The digital platforms industry and the Government support a consumer organisation to represent the interests of the Australian community in decision making for digital platform policy

ACCAN is available to discuss any of the issues we have raised in this submission.

Sincerely,

Wayne Hawkins
Director of Inclusion