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Committee Secretary

Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: ec.sen@aph.gov.au

Submission: Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024

Dear Secretary,

I am writing on behalf of 6 News Australia (6 News) in relation to the *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024*, and I thank the Environment and Communications Legislation Committee for the opportunity to provide a submission. 6 News is a streaming news channel founded in 2019 and run entirely by young people – the majority of whom are teenagers in high school. 6 News has tens of thousands of followers and millions of views across our social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram and YouTube.

Vulnerable young people

6 News opposes this Bill on the basis that it will only cause further problems for young people online. In particular, we are deeply concerned about the impact it will have on vulnerable teenagers who may use social media as a necessary escape from their day-to-day lives. Marginalised young people who may feel safe in an online community (including those who may not feel safe at home), teens in remote parts of our nation who have found friends online, and those who have built up important relationships and friendships online all benefit.

Speaking to many young people in recent weeks, we have heard how they have been able to get through extremely difficult times in their own lives by using various social media platforms. Although we understand that students may experience bullying online, restricting all teenagers from using social media is not the solution.

Stifling creativity

6 News is deeply concerned that this legislation will stifle the creativity of Australia's young people, instead of allowing them to thrive. Young journalists from across the nation have joined 6 News from age 13, and 6 News has been able to grow through this. Young people have seen 6 News content on social media, and they have been able to get better informed about our nation's news and current affairs by watching the perspectives of people their own age. 6 News is a unique outlet, and Australia's teenagers have no other nationwide news channel that is fronted by people their own age.



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As a nation, we should allow kids to explore their creativity online in whatever field they may want to enter, and we should ensure that these platforms are safer. A blanket restriction stops this from happening, and stifles the creativity of the next generation. For many young people, it stops their perspectives being heard.

Under this legislation, there are no exemptions for parents who are more than happy for their teenage child to have their own social media account. This does not give parents any options, regardless of what they believe is best for their own child.

Implementation concerns

6 News also has concerns about how such restrictions could be implemented. There is general consensus that 'ticking a box' to state you are over a certain age is ineffective, but for such legislation to be effectively implemented, some form of identification may be required for all Australians – not just under-16s – to ensure they are allowed under this legislation. This opens up a wide range of privacy concerns, including the serious question of whether or not a passport, driver's licence or other similar identification form would be required to have a social media account.

Noting that minors (aged 16 and 17) are allowed to have social media accounts under this legislation, we are concerned about the information that they – and all Australians – may have to hand over if social media platforms were forced to make this age restriction near-foolproof. Many Australians are deeply concerned about privacy, and handing over sensitive information to overseas-based platforms does not assist in decreasing those concerns.

Recommendations

Instead of a mandated minimum age, 6 News recommends improved in-school education for young people to help them navigate any harmful content they see online, and education for parents so they can better understand social media as a whole. This gives parents a better ability to understand what platforms their children use, and how to best navigate each one individually. Working with tech platforms to ensure there are safer places for young people online, rather than removing them entirely, is also critical.

We again thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide a submission.

Sincerely,
Leonardo Puglisi
Founder and Managing Director | 6 News Australia

21 November 2024