Submission to the Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety

17 January 2022

CROAKEY HEALTH MEDIA

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We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians of the Country where we live, work and travel upon, and to the Elders, past, present and future.

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1. Overview of Croakey Health Media

Croakey Health Media is an innovative non-profit public interest journalism organisation with a focus on public health, health equity, and the social determinants of health, including the impact of digital platforms upon the health of individuals, communities and policy-making. We privilege the voices and expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through our work, including our governance. Our board is chaired by a leading Aboriginal health academic, Professor Megan Williams, who is Wiradjuri through paternal family and Head of Girra Maa, the Indigenous Health Discipline in the School of Public Health, Faculty of Health at UTS.

Croakey Health Media's membership is based on our social journalism team, a multi-disciplinary network of journalism and health practitioners located across Australia. Croakey Health Media is a national organisation, headquartered in regional Tasmania and is a registered health charity. Our vision is: 'A vigorous and sustainable public interest journalism sector contributes to the health and wellbeing of people, families, communities, policies, societies and the environment'.

We provide a range of social journalism and professional services to enable communities, policy-makers and practitioners to improve health and wellbeing, with a determined focus on improving health equity. We take a local, regional, national and global focus, and bring a health-in-all-policies lens to our reporting, which is particularly relevant for an issue such as online safety.

Our archive on digital platforms and health can be seen here (as of 17 January 2022, we had published 56 such stories since March 2019):

https://www.croakey.org/category/digital-platforms/

We also share related articles and resources on Twitter using the hashtag: #RegulateDigitalPlatforms, and the Committee will find many relevant articles at this hashtag:

https://twitter.com/hashtag/RegulateDigitalPlatforms?src=hashtag_click&f=live

In June 2021, Croakey hosted an online webinar to engage the public health and wider community in identifying solutions and ways forward to a safer, healthier digital environment. https://www.croakey.org/join-us-for-an-online-discussion-about-digital-platforms-and-public-health/

Read a report about the webinar discussions:

Big Tech captives or citizens in healthy digital ecosystems? Making the transformation… (16 June 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/big-tech-captives-or-citizens-in-healthy-digital-ecosystems-making-the-transformation/

Croakey's Chair Professor Megan Williams and Editor-In-Chief Dr Melissa Sweet have contributed a chapter to a recent book on related matters, *The Public Square Project: Reimagining Our Digital Future*, (Eds): Peter Lewis, Jordan Guiao.

https://www.mup.com.au/books/the-public-square-project-paperback-softback

This submission summarises sections from articles that Croakey has published over the past two years that are relevant to the terms of reference.

Firstly, we would like to thank the Committee and the Secretariat for granting a short extension to the deadline to enable this submission. Like many organisations working in the health sector, we have a disrupted workforce and constrained capacity.

Secondly, we raise two significant concerns with the Committee:

- The short timeframe for this inquiry has not enabled time for the health sector to provide relevant expertise to this inquiry, especially considering the context of the COVID pandemic, which is affecting the health workforce drastically while also underscoring the importance of relevant health expertise informing this inquiry. Many health organisations and experts have not been able to make submissions to this inquiry due to this unproductive timeline.

- It is disappointing to see the Committee includes an MP who has a track record of publishing misinformation about COVID and other public health matters. (See for example, this article by a senior GP, Dr Tim Senior (9 Feb, 2021): 'On Craig Kelly, misinformation and a view from the clinical frontlines'. https://www.croakey.org/on-craig-kelly-misinformation-and-a-view-from-the-clinical-frontlines/

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2. Responses to terms of reference

Below we identify 8 key themes from our coverage relevant to the terms of reference (as indicated.

2.1. Undermining democracy and public policy

This theme acknowledges that the undermining of democracy and democratic institutions due to an unsafe online environment is a global problem and is not limited solely to Australia. Concerns about the threats to democracy arising from an unsafe online environment are raised by diverse stakeholders and experts.

This theme is relevant to terms of reference:

(a) the range of online harms that may be faced by Australians on social media and other online platforms, including harmful content or harmful conduct.

Relevant Croakey articles include:

For the sake of health and democracy, there are growing calls to regulate digital platforms (6 Oct 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/for-the-sake-of-health-and-democracy-there-are-growing-calls-to-regulate-digital-platforms/

This article cites concerns raised by an Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) inquiry calling for more effective regulation of the digital economy, a whistle-blower formerly employed by Facebook, Frances Haugen, public health academic Associate Professor Kathryn Backholer and a Nobel Laureate journalist Maria Ressa, CEO and President of the Philippines media company Rappler, who has been the victim of Facebook-fuelled disinformation as part of a campaign of persecution.

Federal Government urged to take a public health approach to disinformation on digital platforms (25 November 2020)

https://www.croakey.org/federal-government-urged-to-take-a-public-health-approach-to-disinformation-on-digital-platforms/

This article cites an inquiry by a United States House of Representatives committee, "Investigation of competition in digital markets. Majority staff report and recommendations", which investigated the market power of Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google. It outlined potential benefits of systemic reform and regulation of the digital platforms that are important for both public interest journalism and public health.

The inquiry found companies were using their dominant market power in ways that weaken democracy; erode diversity, entrepreneurship and innovation; degrade privacy online; and undermine a free and diverse press.

Regulation of digital platforms may be world leading but it's no panacea (9 December 2020)

https://www.croakey.org/regulation-of-digital-platforms-may-be-world-leading-but-its-no-panacea/

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Professor Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel laureate and former World Bank chief economist, says the market power of the tech giants is proving "absolutely devastating" for public interest journalism and democracy, and it may be time for governments to fund public interest journalism as a public good, in the same way they fund important scientific research.

Nations may have to face the reality that, "like the production of basic research, the production of good information is an essential thing for a well-functioning democracy and we're going to have to pay for it," he said, suggesting it may also be time to build public platforms to compete with digital giants.

Media deals behind closed doors: public interest or private benefit? (10 March 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/media-deals-behind-closed-doors-public-interest-or-private-benefit/

This article highlights concerns about the current online environment upon the community's right to public interest journalism and reliable news and information sources.

2.2. Risks of misinformation and disinformation

Many articles raised concerns that the online environment is unsafe, especially during a global pandemic, because it is disseminating and amplifying misinformation and disinformation, undermining public health measures and pandemic control.

This theme is relevant to the terms of reference:

(a) the range of online harms that may be faced by Australians on social media and other online platforms, including harmful content or harmful conduct; and

(b) (ii) the extent to which algorithms used by social media platforms permit, increase or reduce online harms to Australians.

Relevant Croakey articles include:

Epidemiologists join global fight against "fake news" (8 Sept 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/epidemiologists-join-global-fight-against-fake-news/

The Australian Epidemiological Association (AEA) supports the resolution of the World Health Organization recognising that managing the infodemic of misinformation and disinformation is a critical part of controlling the COVID-19 pandemic and calling on Member States to counter misinformation and disinformation disseminated in the cybersphere. The AEA ALSO stressed the disproportionate impact that misinformation and disinformation about COVID could have on at-risk communities: the communities most likely to believe mis- and disinformation are the same communities that have been and will continue to be worst affected by the pandemic.

New report targets 12 'super spreaders' of COVID-19 misinformation (6 April 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/new-report-targets-12-super-spreaders-of-covid-19-misinformation/

A report, 'The Disinformation Dozen', produced by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), a not-for-profit NGO with offices in London and Washington, highlights the failures of social media platforms to prevent the spread of potentially dangerous anti-vax misinformation.

Key findings of the report are as follows:

- Anti-vaccine activists on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter reach more than 59 million followers, making these the largest and most important social media platforms for anti-vaxxers.

- Anti-vaxxers are using social media platforms to target minority groups, including communities of colour to spread conspiracies and lies about the safety of COVID vaccines.

- Facebook, Google and Twitter have put policies into place to prevent the spread of vaccine misinformation but thus far have failed to satisfactorily enforce those policies.

- Anti-Vax Watch conducted an analysis of a sample of anti-vaccine content that was shared or posted on Facebook and Twitter a total of 812,000 times between 1 February and 16 March 2021. It shows that 65 percent of anti-vaccine content on these platforms is attributable to twelve prominent anti-vax activists, whom the report terms "the Disinformation Dozen".

Research conducted by CCDH last year has shown that platforms fail to act on 95 percent of the Covid and vaccine misinformation reported to them.

In particular, these platforms have failed to remove the accounts of prominent anti-vaxxers who have repeatedly violated their terms of service.

Nine of the "Disinformation Dozen" remain on all three platforms, while just three have been

UK, US, Australian COVID-19 communications fail readability tests, research shows (25 Jan 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/uk-us-australian-covid-19-communications-fail-readability-tests-research-shows/

A newly formed coalition of health and technology experts, including the Doherty Institute, on Monday warned of the risks of "rampant misinformation on social media" for Australia's COVID-19 efforts and widespread take-up of vaccinations.

The coalition, led by Reset Australia — the local affiliate of the global initiative working to counter digital threats to democracy and society — called on the federal MPs to force Big Tech companies to reveal the true extent of COVID-19 "deadly and hidden" misinformation.

They are pushing the introduction of a Big Tech 'Live List', which would let "those working to keep us safe know which groups are being exposed to certain COVID-19 narratives so they can better frame our public health response". Read more here.

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In a toxic information environment, here's a practical guide for reporting harmful information (17 November 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/in-a-toxic-information-environment-heres-a-practical-guide-for-reporting-harmful-information/

All major social media platforms have policies on false and misleading information; understanding these policies can help users know what type of material is likely to be removed or restricted when reported. These policies have been used by all major social media platforms to some extent to reduce false and misleading content on their platforms, including banning and de-platforming some high profile spreaders of misinformation and disinformation. However, is important to note that despite these policies, misinformation and disinformation continue to circulate on social media platforms and that public health and journalism advocates have repeatedly criticised the platforms for failing to prevent the spread of COVID conspiracy theories and anti-vaccine propaganda.

Is misinformation the public health challenge of the 21st century? (14 April 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/is-misinformation-the-public-health-challenge-of-the-21st-century/

Right now Google, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and others are sitting on a treasure trove of data about what is being shared in various bubbles. They know what conspiracy theories are taking off, where they're taking off, and which vulnerable population groups they're manipulating. At the press of a button these tech giants could release this information to the rest of us. We should be demanding they do so.

Reset Australia, the local affiliate of the global body fighting digital harms to society, is building a coalition of public health bodies to advocate for a live list of the most viral COVID-19 URLs.

It's not just a social media problem – how search engines spread misinformation (17 March 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/its-not-just-a-social-media-problem-how-search-engines-spread-misinformation/

In this article, Associate Professor Chirag Shah, from the Information School at the University of Washington, explains the "vicious cycle" of how search engine algorithms spread misinformation.

This article also cites a recent #LongRead at The Atlantic, 'How to Put Out Democracy's Dumpster Fire: Our democratic habits have been killed off by an internet kleptocracy that profits from disinformation, polarization, and rage. Here's how to fix that'.

The authors, Anne Applebaum and Peter Pomerantsev, argue that democracy is becoming impossible as the algorithms of digital platforms promote hate speech, radicalisation, conspiracy thinking and propaganda, with an "online system controlled by a tiny number of secretive companies in Silicon Valley".

Applebaum and Pomerantsev argue that breaking up the big companies might help to diversify the online economy but won't be good for democracy without efforts to also

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address the problematic nature of algorithms through greater transparency and public control over their use.

Their article suggests that the most apt historical model for algorithmic regulation is not monopoly-busting, but environmental protection: "To improve the ecology around a river, it isn't enough to simply regulate companies' pollution. Nor will it help to just break up the polluting companies…"

Meanwhile, a professor of law at the University of Ottawa, Vivek Krishnamurthy, has raised concerns that Canadian plans to regulate content on social media are unlikely to be effective and may have unintended consequences for countries "that don't share our commitment to human rights".

Authoritarian governments are adopting social media laws that are similar to the ones to be unveiled in Canada, imposing draconian penalties on social media companies that fail to take down content that is illegal under national laws, Krishnamurthy writes in the Canadian edition of The Conversation.

"The problem, however, is that the laws in many authoritarian countries criminalise forms of expression that are protected under international human rights law, from voices dissenting against the regime in power to the cultural and religious expression of minority communities," he says.

The answer, Krishnamurthy says, is for democracies that respect human rights to work together in developing a multilateral approach to addressing harmful online content.

2.3. The excessive market power of digital platforms is unsafe

The monopoly power of these corporations makes them unresponsive to the concerns of businesses, governments and communities because of power imbalances. Australia witnessed these companies' preparedness to exercise their market power – reducing communities' access to information and services even in the midst of a global public health crisis.

This theme is relevant to terms of reference:

(a) the range of online harms that may be faced by Australians on social media and other online platforms, including harmful content or harmful conduct.

Relevant Croakey articles include:

Facebook action creates public health emergency in Australia (18 Feb 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/facebook-action-creates-public-health-emergency-in-australia/

Public health experts in Australia were horrified by Facebook's decision – in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic – to block Australian users from seeing or sharing Australian news over its opposition to having to pay news media outlets for content.

Vaccine expert Professor Julie Leask said on Twitter it was "breathtaking hypocrisy from Facebook" to censor anti-vaccination content 'for public health' at the same time as restricting user's access to local news "at the start of a vaccine rollout, when it's needed the most".

Media outlets and others were [reporting](#) that emergency services, government health departments and agencies, including the Bureau of Meteorology, Fire and Rescue NSW, Queensland Health, Sydney Local Health District and Western Sydney Health were [caught up](#) in Facebook's move.

So too were multiple health and community services, putting at risk critical public health responses in the pandemic, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

AMSANT, the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory, tweeted concerns that "weeks out from a huge effort to vaccinate people living in remote communities across the NT, Aboriginal health and media organisations' FB pages look to have been shut down as part of all this".

Leading tobacco control expert, Associate Professor Becky Freeman said the move, which welcomed commercial actors like tobacco interests that harm public health but blocked government health agency communications, risked providing "yet another leg up in their lobbying efforts to weaken public health laws".

Is news worth a lot or a little? Google and Facebook want to have it both ways. (27 January 2021).

https://www.croakey.org/is-news-worth-a-lot-or-a-little-google-and-facebook-want-to-have-it-both-ways/

Executives from Google and Facebook have told a Senate committee they are prepared to take drastic action if Australia's news media bargaining code, which would force the internet giants to pay news publishers for linking to their sites, comes into force.

Google would have "no real choice" but to cut Australian users off entirely from its flagship search engine, the company's Australian managing director Mel Silva told the committee. Facebook representatives in turn said they would remove links to news articles from the newsfeed of Australian users if the code came into effect as it currently stands.

Google and Facebook dominate web search and social media, respectively, in ways that echo the great US monopolies of the past: rail in the 19th century, then oil and later telecommunications in the 20th. All these industries became fundamental forms of capitalist infrastructure for economic and social development. And all these monopolies required legislation to break them up in the public interest.

2.4. Harming mental health

This theme reflects the impact of the digital platforms in disseminating and amplifying hate speech, racism, White Supremacy, extremist far right views, and bullying.

It addresses the terms of reference:

(b) evidence of: (i) the potential impacts of online harms on the mental health and wellbeing of Australians.

Relevant Croakey articles include:

Mental health specialists warned of rising harms of hate speech for individuals and society (18 May 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/mental-health-specialists-warned-of-rising-harms-of-hate-speech-for-individuals-and-society/

The rising harm of hate speech on mental health and society was centre-stage on the opening day of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists' 2021 Congress.

Noting that psychiatrists see daily the harrowing consequences of hate speech in their work, keynote speaker University of Queensland's Professor Katharine Gelber said both individuals and institutions had a responsibility to call it out and to hold to account politicians and social media giants for their complicity.

In an era dominated by populist politics and social media behemoths whose business models are built on stoking negative emotions, there has been a marked rise in hate speech, at great cost to individuals, minority communities and our democracy.

There had been a mainstreaming of hate speech into modern political discourse by mercenary populist leaders who had seen electoral gain in stirring animosity and division, eagerly abetted by social media platforms whose business model was predicated on hate-clicks, said Gelber.

The costs were disproportionately borne by minority groups, with flow-on effects to cohesion and democracy

Likening the responsibility of digital platforms to the builders of civil infrastructure like a bridge, Gelber said it was not enough to simply provide the space and accept no ownership for the consequences of it failing. She called for social media giants like Facebook to have a statutory duty of care, to be broken up into smaller, locally-accountable entities, and to face greater regulation.

Gelber described current moderation attempts, driven by algorithms and enforced by a paltry corps of staff using a one-size-fits-all reference, as doomed to fail, given that defining hate speech relied to a large extent on local context.

Instead, Gelber said the speed, anonymity and echo chambers of social media had allowed hate speech to flourish and greatly expanded the scope for targets to feel its repercussions – at school, in the workplace, in public, and even in the privacy of their own homes.

2.5 The online environment is dangerous for children

This theme highlights the impact of marketing by predatory companies – notably alcohol and junk food – in creating an unsafe online environment for children. It addresses the terms of reference:

(c) the effectiveness, take-up and impact of industry measures, including safety features, controls, protections and settings, to keep Australians, particularly children, safe online;

These Croakey articles are relevant:

Alcohol marketing and digital platforms: stronger regulation is required (11 August 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/alcohol-marketing-and-digital-platforms-stronger-regulation-is-required/

Cancer Council Western Australia researchers report that digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Google, YouTube, and TikTok have opened a world of opportunities for alcohol companies to promote their products, in a setting that's often described as 'dark' – only visible to those in the target audience, and not open to public scrutiny.

Shedding light and making the case for better regulation of digital alcohol marketing (17 November 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/shedding-light-and-making-the-case-for-better-regulation-of-digital-alcohol-marketing/

This case highlights yet another instance of industry self-regulation failing to adequately protect children from the harmful exposure and impacts of digital alcohol marketing. Australia must implement strong, evidence-based policies and government regulation to ensure digital marketing activities are brought out of the dark, and into the light.

Federal Government should introduce better monitoring and reporting mechanisms to show how much alcohol companies spend on digital marketing each year, how they collect and use personal information, and how they target people via digital marketing.

Other countries have already taken action in this space, and government regulation of digital alcohol marketing in Australia is well overdue.

How the food industry blocks action to protect children's health (24 December 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/how-the-food-industry-blocks-action-to-protect-childrens-health/

Many presenters at a global food governance said digital marketing was the major challenge facing governments and regulators when attempting to restrict children's exposure to the promotion of unhealthy food. Associate Professor Bridget Kelly from the University of Wollongong, highlighted the increased use of digital marketing by the food industry, citing predictions that expenditure on digital advertising worldwide is predicted to double between 2019 and 2024.

She described how digital marketing has particular impacts on children as it allows for greater behavioural targeting which can heighten its impact and can impact their privacy.

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2.6. Inadequate responses by the Australian Government

Many health and public interest organisations have raised concerns that Australian Government regulatory responses to date have been inadequate and piecemeal, in relation to a range of related public health concerns, including harmful marketing practices, and misinformation and disinformation.

This theme is relevant to term of reference:

(g) actions being pursued by the Government to keep Australians safe online.

These Croakey articles are relevant:

Federal Government urged to take a public health approach to disinformation on digital platforms (25 November 2020)

https://www.croakey.org/federal-government-urged-to-take-a-public-health-approach-to-disinformation-on-digital-platforms/

This article urges the Federal Government appoint an independent committee of appropriately qualified public health experts to report on the public health impacts of disinformation and misinformation and to make evidence-based recommendations for policy reform, drawing upon the public health literature. This committee should include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and organisations. It should include specific consideration of policies and strategies for addressing the spread of racism, hate speech and white supremacy as part of the tide of disinformation. The Federal Government should fund its work, to ensure independence and also to recompense organisations and individuals for their time, noting that the sector is under great pressure. The capacity of the public interest journalism sector to investigate disinformation and misinformation should be strengthened through policy reform. This should be done independently of the digital platforms to avoid conflicts of interest.

Political leadership needed to address disinformation (17 Feb 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/political-leadership-needed-to-address-disinformation/

Self-regulation by corporations such as Facebook and Google will not address the worrying health threat of disinformation, a health leader has warned.

Alison Verhoeven, CEO of the Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association, has called for regulation and political leadership to address the "rampant" spread of disinformation.

Her comments come as a digital industry group prepares to release a self-regulatory industry code for addressing disinformation.

See also: News media code is coming, but regulation of digital platforms remains a work in progress (24 Feb 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/news-media-code-is-coming-but-regulation-of-digital-platforms-remains-a-work-in-progress/

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New disinformation code slammed as "pointless, shameless, shameful" (22 Feb 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/new-disinformation-code-slammed-as-pointless-shameless-shameful/

A new code of practice to address online misinformation and disinformation, developed for and by the digital tech industry, has been slammed by critics as falling way short of the critical action needed to prevent growing harms to public health and democracy.

Leading public health experts, who have fought long battles with food, alcohol, tobacco and gambling industries, warned that voluntary codes rarely work and challenged the tech industry to invite the public health sector to play "a serious role" in efforts to combat disinformation.

In a public health emergency, the Government is sitting on a critical report on misinformation and disinformation (20 Oct 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/in-a-public-health-emergency-the-government-is-sitting-on-a-critical-report-on-misinformation-and-disinformation/

News that Clive Palmer's United Australia party has spent nearly $1.2 million on YouTube ads criticising lockdowns and government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic adds urgency to the critical need for action on online misinformation and disinformation in Australia.

Yet the Federal Government has yet to publish or respond publicly to an important report on the effectiveness of the much maligned voluntary Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation that has been on Communications Minister Paul Fletcher's desk for four months.

2.7 More effective regulatory approaches are needed, across whole of government

Regulation of digital platforms should be encompassing of all the public health and public interest concerns involved (including media policy, monopoly-busting, public health) – rather than focusing on single issues and self-regulatory approaches.

This theme is relevant to terms of reference:

(g) actions being pursued by the Government to keep Australians safe online.

Relevant Croakey articles include:

Pandemic communications: what have we learnt? (26 May 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/pandemic-communications-what-have-we-learnt/

This article highlights the interconnections between media policy and digital regulation, and the importance of addressing both areas for a safer and more empowering communications environment.

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On public health and the digital platforms (9 June 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/on-public-health-and-the-digital-platforms/

It's not enough to just regulate online platforms. Policy makers must also support the journalists and media organisations that strive to stem the tide of disinformation. Public interest journalism is critical for providing accurate, scientific and credible information when it's needed most.

On powerful platforms, profits and "an existential threat" to public health (7 July 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/on-powerful-platforms-profits-and-an-existential-threat-to-public-health/

Health professionals, researchers and citizens need to demand action from governments to rein in the power and influence of Big Tech over our health and wellbeing, according to Associate Professor Kathryn Backholer, Associate Director of the Global Obesity Centre within the Institute for Health Transformation at Deakin University.

Big Tech's unprecedented concentration of money, power and data about billions of people is an existential threat to public health, she writes in the article below, calling for data protection, privacy and anti-trust laws, restrictions on the advertising of unhealthy products through digital platforms, and checks on Big Tech's political influence.

Facebook whistleblower urges Australia to take tougher line on abuses, misinformation (21 Oct 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/facebook-whistleblower-urges-australia-to-take-tougher-line-on-abuses-misinformation/

Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen has warned Australian MPs and Senators not to trust the tech giant's promises that it is working to make its platform safer and encouraged Australia to step up as a leader for smaller countries across the globe to rein in its power and abuses.

Haugen delivered damning testimony to the US Senate last month on how Facebook products "harm children, stoke division, and weaken our democracy", warning that the company knows how to make its platforms safer but puts "astronomical profits ahead of people".

The former Facebook product manager who had previously worked at Google and Pinterest, also encouraged Australian politicians to protect whistleblowers, saying the rapid pace of change in technology meant "the only people who will understand what is happening inside these companies are the employees themselves"

2.8. Global issues demand multilateral solutions

The power and reach of the Big Tech companies requires multilateral regulatory reform.

This theme addresses the term of reference:

(h) any other related matter.

Relevant Croakey articles include:

Regulating in a digital world (19 March, 2019)

https://www.croakey.org/regulating-in-a-digital-world/

An inquiry in the UK by the House of Lords Communications Committee recommended 10 principles to guide the development of regulation online:

1. Parity: the same level of protection must be provided online as offline

2. Accountability: processes must be in place to ensure individuals and organisations are held to account for their actions and policies

3. Transparency: powerful businesses and organisations operating in the digital world must be open to scrutiny

4. Openness: the internet must remain open to innovation and competition

5. Privacy: to protect the privacy of individuals

6. Ethical design: services must act in the interests of users and society

7. Recognition of childhood: to protect the most vulnerable users of the internet

8. Respect for human rights and equality: to safeguard the freedoms of expression and information online

9. Education and awareness-raising: to enable people to navigate the digital world safely

10. Democratic accountability, proportionality and evidence-based approach.

Trump's time is up, but his Twitter legacy lives on in the global spread of QAnon conspiracy theories (20 January 2021)

https://www.croakey.org/trumps-time-is-up-but-his-twitter-legacy-lives-on-in-the-global-spread-of-qanon-conspiracy-theories/

A coordinated international effort is needed to tackle the dissemination via social media of dangerous conspiracy theories and far-right extremism, according Professor Verica Rupar, from the Auckland University of Technology, and Dr Tom De Smedt, a Postdoctoral research associate at the University of Antwerp.

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3. Conclusion

As outlined above, the key points from this thematic analysis of articles published by Croakey Health Media on the digital platforms and public health can be summarised as:

A weak and incoherent regulatory environment, within Australia and globally, has created an online operating environment that is unsafe for democracies, communities, businesses, and individuals, especially First Nations people and others who are subject to racism and White Supremacy. It is also particularly toxic for children due to predatory marketing by unhealthy industries. The implications of this under-regulated environment have been nothing short of disastrous during the global COVID pandemic, due to the online environment disseminating and amplifying misinformation and disinformation. The mental health ramifications are enormous. The excessive market power of Big Tech companies such as Facebook and Google is intrinsically unsafe, as their exercise of this power in Australia has recently shown. Despite these wide-ranging public health concerns, the Australian Government's efforts to regulate digital platforms has been inadequate and piecemeal to date. More effective and encompassing regulatory approaches are needed, across whole of government. Multilateral solutions are also needed and the Australian Government should invest in research, policy and advocacy to support the development and implementation of such solutions.

Due to resource constraints, this submission has been prepared in haste; however, we hope that it provides the Committee and Secretariat with links to a wealth of useful articles and resources.

If you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact Editor-in-Chief Dr Melissa Sweet via the Croakey.org website, or contact details provided in an accompanying email.

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