



## **SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE SAFETY February 2022**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to this House Select Committee inquiry into Social Media and Online Safety.

ACCM is the national peak not-for profit body representing the interests of children as media consumers. Its mission is to support families, industry and decision makers in building and maintaining an enjoyable media environment that fosters the health, safety and wellbeing of Australian children. Its membership includes major national and state education, welfare and parent organisations and individuals.

ACCM's core business is to collect and review research and information related to children and the media; to provide information and advice on the impact on children of print, electronic and screen-based media; to provide reviews of current movies and apps from a child development perspective; to advocate for the needs and interests of children in relation to the media; and to conduct and act as a catalyst for relevant research.

The chief aim of the ACCM submission to this inquiry is to provide input relevant to children's uses of social media and online technologies. While social media have profound implications for people of all ages, and indeed for society as a whole, ACCM believes that this inquiry should ensure that its processes and methodology create space for a specific focus on children's needs and interests throughout. This would be consistent with the Commonwealth's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as recently elaborated in General Comment 25 *on Children's Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment* (2021)). We note that some of the Terms of Reference refer specifically to children and others do not; but for the reasons just mentioned such references should be implied throughout.

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### **Promoting healthy choices and stronger voices in children's media**

*Australian Council on Children and the Media*

*Patrons: Steve Biddulph AM Baroness Susan Greenfield CBE*

*Pres: Prof. Elizabeth Handsley FAAL; Hon CEO: Barbara Biggins, OAM CF*

ACCM's comments are informed by our many years of reviewing the research on the impacts of media consumption on children, and of observing the practices and problems in the media accessed by Australian children. There has been, and continues to be, a lack of access by children to age-appropriate, quality and enjoyable experiences. These problems are exacerbated by the advent of the internet, portable smart devices, streaming services, apps, and the marketing practices of Big Tech.

This submission sets out ACCM's responses to the issues raised in the Terms of Reference.

This submission can be posted on the review website.

Further information about this submission can be obtained from

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## The Terms of Reference

The Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety will inquire into:

- 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.
- b) evidence of:
  - (i) the potential impacts of online harms on the mental health and wellbeing of Australians;
  - (ii) the extent to which algorithms used by social media platforms permit, increase or reduce online harms to Australians;
  - (iii) existing identity verification and age assurance policies and practices and the extent to which they are being enforced;
- (c) the effectiveness, take-up and impact of industry measures, including safety features, controls, protections and settings, to keep Australians, particularly children, safe online;
- (d) the effectiveness and impact of industry measures to give parents the tools they need to make meaningful decisions to keep their children safe online;
- (e) the transparency and accountability required of social media platforms and online technology companies regarding online harms experienced by their Australian users;
- (f) the collection and use of relevant data by industry in a safe, private and secure manner;
- (g) actions being pursued by the Government to keep Australians safe online; and
- (h) any other related matter.

## **ACCM COMMENT:**

### **Introduction**

ACCM adopts the following expression of the issues that the digital world poses for children's rights: <https://5rightsfoundation.com/uploads/DigitalServiceAct-5RightsPositionPaper,June2021.pdf>

Children's rights apply universally, yet digital providers routinely ignore children's presence, their rights and needs on services designed by adults for adults but regularly used by children. Even when children are the intended users of a service, their rights are often overlooked in favour of commercial outcomes and revenue generation. The problems children face from the digital world are systemic. They are not restricted to technical bugs or bad actors but are also present in the features and architecture of the products and services on which children rely for access to education, health, entertainment, civic engagement and to manage their relationships with family and friends.

In a commercially driven environment, children are routinely presented with information, behaviours and pressures inappropriate to their evolving developmental capacity. They are introduced to unknown adults<sup>2</sup>, nudged to make in-game purchases<sup>3</sup>, targeted by sexualised content,<sup>4</sup> bombarded with targeted advertising and misinformation,<sup>5</sup> and subjected to invasive, extractive data gathering.<sup>6</sup>

The normalising of services designed by and for adults creates an environment that is beyond children's development capacities, which is difficult to navigate and exposes children to a wide range of systemic risks. The resulting harms have been well documented by the EU Kids Online project as well as by the 5Rights Foundation.

2 Omegle: Children expose themselves on video chat site, BBC, February 2021.

3 The Rip-Off Games: How the Business Model of Online Gaming Exploits Children. A Parent Zone Report. August 2019.

4 5Rights research uncovered several pornographic pictures shared in two Recommended public chats on AntiLand: "Hell on Heels" and "Fat Lovers 2.0" in April 2021.

5 Facebook executives shut down efforts to make the site less divisive, The Wall Street Journal, May 2020.

6 Dataethics (2021), Games are gambling with children's data.

### **ACCM comment on the Terms of Reference.**

ACCM will comment on the following selected ToRs as they relate to children under the age of 16 years.

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**(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.**

A useful taxonomy of online risks has been devised by Sonia Livingstone and Mariya Stoilova (2021).

*This 4Cs classification recognises that online risks arise when a child:*

- *engages with and/or is exposed to potentially harmful **CONTENT***
- *experiences and/or is targeted by potentially harmful **CONTACT**;*
- *witnesses, participates in and/or is a victim of potentially harmful **CONDUCT**;*
- *is party to and/or exploited by a potentially harmful **CONTRACT**.*

See [Microsoft Word - SR2 2021-02-26.docx \(ssoar.info\)](#)

	<b>Content</b> Child as recipient	<b>Contact</b> Child as participant	<b>Conduct</b> Child as actor	<b>Contract</b> Child as consumer
<b>Aggressive</b>	Violent, gory, graphic, racist, hateful and extremist content	Harassment, stalking, hateful behaviour, unwanted surveillance	Bullying, hateful or hostile peer activity e.g. trolling, exclusion, shaming	Identity theft, fraud, phishing, scams, gambling, blackmail, security risks
<b>Sexual</b>	Pornography (legal and illegal), sexualization of culture, body image norms	Sexual harassment, sexual grooming, generation and sharing of child sexual abuse material	Sexual harassment, non-consensual sexual messages, sexual pressures	Sextortion, trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation, streaming child sexual abuse
<b>Values</b>	Age-inappropriate user-generated or marketing content, mis/disinformation	Ideological persuasion, radicalization and extremist recruitment	Potentially harmful user communities e.g. self-harm, anti-vaccine, peer pressures	Information filtering, profiling bias, polarisation, persuasive design
<b>Cross-cutting</b>	Privacy and data protection abuses, physical and mental health risks, forms of discrimination			

ACCM commends the above paper to the Committee as a very useful way of considering the many and diverse risks when children are online, and where appropriate action might lie.

ACCM has an overriding concern that many social media platforms are used by children under 13 years, and social media companies are well aware of this fact. Despite this knowledge, they have not acted effectively to deny children entry to their sites, nor to prevent harm.

Their proposed solution of setting up children's versions of such platforms has consequently been condemned by children's interest groups and on at least one occasion, a company backed down from such a plan.

<https://www.commondreams.org/newswire/2021/09/27/after-6-month-campaign-led-fairplay-facebook-pauses-planned-instagram-kids>. Rather the solution needs to go to the heart of social media, how it is designed and how it functions.

## **b) evidence of**

(i) the potential impacts of online harms on the mental health and wellbeing of Australians;

There are a range of demonstrated harms to the mental health and wellbeing children. Recent research reviews of the impacts of children's screen use on mental health and wellbeing offer general insights.

Valkenburg, P. M., Meier, A., & Beyens, I. (2021). Social media use and its impact on adolescent mental health: An umbrella review of the evidence. *Current opinion in psychology*, 44, 58–68. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.08.017>

Coyne, S. M., Rogers, A. A., Zurcher, J. D., Stockdale, L., & Booth M. (2020). Does time spent using social media impact mental health?: An eight year longitudinal study. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 104. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.106160>

Haidt, J., & Twenge, J. (2021). Social media use and mental health: A review. Unpublished manuscript, New York University. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wHOfseF2wF9YIpXwUUtP65-olnkPyWcgF5BiAtBEy0/edit>

Odgers, C. L., & Jensen, M. R. (2020). Annual Research Review: Adolescent mental health in the digital age: facts, fears, and future directions. *Journal of child psychology and psychiatry, and allied disciplines*, 61(3), 336–348. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13190>

Dickson, K., Richardson, M., Kwan, I., MacDowall, W., Burchett, H., Stansfield, C., Brunton, G., Sutcliffe, K., & Thomas, J. (2018). Screen-based activities and children

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and young people's mental health: A Systematic Map of Reviews, London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, University College London.

Naslund, J.A., Bondre, A., Torous, J. *et al.* Social Media and Mental Health: Benefits, Risks, and Opportunities for Research and Practice. *J. technol. behav. sci.* **5**, 245–257 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41347-020-00134-x>

Dimitra Hartas (2021) The social context of adolescent mental health and wellbeing: parents, friends and social media, *Research Papers in Education*, 36:5, 542-560, DOI: [10.1080/02671522.2019.1697734](https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2019.1697734)

ACCM is here focussing on the less well publicised harms including the impacts of persuasive design; the role of social media in distracting children (loss of attention); impacts on sleep; body image; and the impacts on children's wellbeing of large-scale invasion of children's privacy. Where found, ACCM has included Australian research.

### **The impacts of persuasive design**

A comprehensive report on this issue can be found in the 2021 5Rights report <https://5rightsfoundation.com/uploads/Pathways-how-digital-design-puts-children-at-risk.pdf> and this in 2018 <https://5rightsfoundation.com/uploads/5rights-disrupted-childhood-digital-version.pdf>

### **The role of social media in distracting children (loss of attention)**

See the Gonski Institute for Education (UNSW) report 2021

<https://www.gie.unsw.edu.au/children-more-distracted-digital-devices-home-parents-say>

### **Sleep**

The abundance of research about the impacts of children's screen use on sleep provides strong indicators of harm to children's sleep quantity and quality, and consequent detrimental impacts on children's wellbeing and performance.

Here is some relevant research from 2021.

Hamilton, JL; Lee, W

Associations between social media, bedtime technology use rules, and daytime sleepiness among adolescents: cross-sectional findings from a nationally representative sample

JMIR MENTAL HEALTH SEP 23 2021 VL 8 (9)

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Seton, C; Fitzgerald, DA  
Chronic sleep deprivation in teenagers: Practical ways to help  
PAEDIATRIC RESPIRATORY REVIEWS DEC 2021 VL 40 73-79

Bergfeld, NS; Van den Bulck, J  
It's not all about the likes: Social media affordances with nighttime, problematic, and  
adverse use as predictors of adolescent sleep indicators  
SLEEP HEALTH OCT 2021 VL 7 (5) 548-555

Zou, Y; He, MJ; Su, DT; Huang, LC; Fang, YQ; Zhang, RH  
The current status of insufficient sleep duration and its influencing factors among  
children and adolescents: a household based cross-sectional study in Zhejiang  
Province, China  
JOURNAL OF PEDIATRIC NURSING-NURSING CARE OF CHILDREN & FAMILIES SEP-  
OCT 2021 VL 60 E1-E5

Charmaraman, L; Richer, AM; Ben-Joseph, EP; Klerman, EB  
Quantity, content, and context matter: associations among social technology  
use and sleep habits in early adolescents  
JOURNAL OF ADOLESCENT HEALTH JUL 2021 VL 69 (1) 162-165

Kristensen, JH; Pallesen, S; King, DL; Hysing, M; Erevik, EK  
Problematic gaming and sleep: a systematic review and meta-analysis  
FRONTIERS IN PSYCHIATRY JUN 7 2021 VL 12

Cavalli, E; Anders, R; Chaussoy, L; Herbillon, V; Franco, P; Putois, B  
Screen exposure exacerbates ADHD symptoms indirectly through  
increased sleep disturbance SLEEP MEDICINE JUL 2021 VL 83  
241-247

Rodrigues, D; Gama, A; Machado-Rodrigues, AM; Nogueira, H; Rosado-Marques, V;  
Silva, MRG; Padez, C Home vs. bedroom media devices: socioeconomic disparities  
and association with childhood screen- and sleep-time SLEEP MEDICINE JUL 2021  
VL 83 230-4

## Body image

Australian researcher Prof. Marika Tiggemann has an impressive research record in the field of impacts of media on body image. Her articles in recent years (2019-2021) have had a focus on social media.

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357037474> Social Media and Body Image Recent Trends and Future Directions

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350447548> No likes no problem Users' reactions to the removal of Instagram number of likes on other people's posts and links to body image

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[Muscles and bare chests on Instagram: The effect of Influencers' fashion and fitspiration images on men's body image](#)

[The effect of viewing challenging "reality check" Instagram comments on women's body image](#)

[A picture is worth a thousand words: The effect of viewing celebrity Instagram images with disclaimer and body positive captions on women's body image](#)

[Uploading your best self: Selfie editing and body dissatisfaction](#)

[#Loveyourbody: The effect of body positive Instagram captions on women's body image](#)

[The effect of Instagram #fitspiration images on young women's mood, body image, and exercise behaviour](#)

[Social media is not real: The effect of 'Instagram vs reality' images on women's social comparison and body image](#)

[The effect of #enhancement-free Instagram images and hashtags on women's body image](#)

## **The invasion of children's privacy**

In its submission to the Attorney General's review of the *Privacy Act 1988*, and via its project *Apps can trap* (2021) <https://childrenandmedia.org.au/app-reviews/apps-can-trap-tracking>, ACCM provides detailed evidence of harms to children from the widespread invasion of their privacy when online.

More evidence of the impacts of screen use on mental health and wellbeing of children is found in these reports from government and peak organisations.

*Tweens, Teens, Tech, and Mental Health*

<https://www.common sensemedia.org/research/tweens-teens-tech-and-mental-health>

US Surgeon General Report on youth mental health 2021

<https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2021/12/07/us-surgeon-general-issues-advisory-on-youth-mental-health-crisis-further-exposed-by-covid-19-pandemic.html>

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see p 23-28 “What social media companies, videogaming and other technology companies can do”

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

The use of algorithms by social media platforms and by children’s apps poses a significant risk to children’s right to privacy.

As the Center for Humane Technology (US) says

<https://www.humanetech.com/youth/persuasive-technology>

*TikTok isn’t addictive just because creators are funny; it’s addictive because it uses one of the most sophisticated persuasive algorithms on the planet to choose videos that will keep you watching. When everyone’s videos get more and more likes, everyone ends up on TikTok far longer than they intended*

And further:

*Unfortunately, an increasing number of technologies are leaning on the power of persuasion. As algorithms become better at changing your behavior, companies stand to make more money. The profit motive incentivizes companies to add persuasive technology to more types of apps. For example:*

- *Many game apps use loot boxes. Loot boxes are mystery clicks (often costing real money) that yield random virtual rewards. They operate much like scratch lottery tickets and can easily become addicting.*
- *Google Search uses a sophisticated algorithm to find the best matches for what you’re looking for. But what’s above those “best matches”? Paid ads, that look like search results, where advertisers compete to pull you away!*
- *On Google Maps, advertisers can pay for their location to be a “promoted pin” on the map. So now, instead of simply offering users directions, Google Maps offers advertisers the ability to compete for your attention while you’re using the app for another purpose. They use factors like search/browsing history, interests, time of day, and demographics to choose what ads to show.*

The UK group 5 Rights published this critique of the role and impacts of persuasive design in 2021.

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<https://5rightsfoundation.com/uploads/Pways-how-digital-design-puts-children-at-risk.pdf>

And this US article shows the outcomes of such practices

Meyer, M., Adkins, V., Yuan, N., Weeks, H. M., Chang, Y.J., & Radesky, J. (2019). Advertising in Young Children's Apps: A Content Analysis. *Journal of developmental and behavioral pediatrics: JDBP*, 40(1), 32–39. <https://scholar.nycu.edu.tw/en/publications/advertising-in-young-childrens-apps-a-content-analysis>

**b)(iii)** existing identity verification and age assurance policies and practices and the extent to which they are being enforced

The UK group 5rights has published this investigation into age assurance policies

<https://5rightsfoundation.com/in-action/but-how-do-they-know-it-is-a-child-age-assurance-in-the-digital-world.html>

[The EU has published a review of methods of age verification.](#) ACCM recommends the following paper as providing a useful discussion of methods of effectively verifying the age of child users, and of parental consent. <https://euconsent.eu/project-deliverables/> see 5<sup>th</sup> paper September 21.

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

### Privacy policies

Privacy policies are one of the main tools that parents are expected to use to protect children's privacy when playing apps. But privacy policies are often long, too hard to read and ambiguous.

These policies say what companies "may" do with personal data, rather than unequivocally specifying what a company *will* and *will not* do with that data. Privacy decision-making based simply on what data an app *might* access is an imperfect strategy.

## Age verification

Companies often set an age suitability level for their products. The age of 13 years is set by many social media platforms. However, even though it is most likely evident to the companies which run these (using their algorithms to effectively detect this and other personal data) that underage children are using their services, they make little or no effort to refuse access to their product.

## Age-based classification of content

Some streaming services offer classification of their content, based on the National Classification Scheme. This is conducted in-house and may or may not arrive at the same classifications as the Australian government system would.

Others use their own system.

Some create “children’s” sections. Such selections can include M classified product and so they are not very useful to parents.

The big downside of all these systems for signalling content suitable for children is that they do not employ research-based and recognised concepts of content that suits children at different ages and stages of development under the age of 15 years.

Privacy policies, age barriers, and forms of signalling content for children are but some of the range of tools offered by industry and most differ from one platform to another and from app to app. Requiring parents to be aware of and understand all of these is not the way of constructively helping parents to choose age- appropriate experiences and content, and to avoid harm. It is puts unrealistic burdens on parents.

The government must require industry to adopt the policy of “safety by design” for all of its products intended for or likely to be used by children.

### **f) the collection and use of relevant data by industry in a safe, private and secure manner;**

ACCM refers the Inquiry to our 2021 project *Apps can Trap: privacy tips and checks*, and to our submissions to the Review of the *Privacy Act 1988*. See Nov 2020 <https://www.ag.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-03/australian-council-on-children-and-the-media.PDF>

And Dec 2021 <https://childrenandmedia.org.au/taking-action/our-submissions>

Note also 5rights concerns about industry's lack of application of the new UK **Age- appropriate Design Code**. <https://5rightsfoundation.com/in-action/letter-to-the-ico-breaches-of-the-age-appropriate-design-code.html>

### **g) actions being pursued by the Government to keep Australians safe online**

While the eSafety Commissioner is well funded to provide information and resources for parents aimed at keeping children safe online, there is much more to be done to support parents. Such provision, in effect, puts the responsibility on parents for keeping their children safe in an increasingly complex screen environment.

The government needs to do more to tackle the underlying cause of many of the risks to children: the business plans of Big Tech which are based on exploiting children's vulnerabilities in so many ways. Their marketing plans as they impact on children must be changed, and before more generations of children are harmed.

The government must require such companies to cease using *persuasive design* techniques in their products, and to apply effective safeguards for children to protect them from adult and other products which are harmful. This is the meaning of *safety by design*.

### **CONCLUSION**

The digital world has been designed without children's interests and needs in mind, and so imposes additional burdens on parents – it outsources responsibility to them, thereby placing too heavy a burden on them. Certainly, parents do have responsibilities, but they also have needs, and rights (including a right to support in order to exercise their responsibility (CROC Article 18)).

A human rights approach says government and industry should be supporting parents – both by implementing safety by design, by avoiding heaping (extra) responsibility on parents, and by providing them with evidence-based information and tools.