2024 Royal Society of New South Wales and Learned Academies Forum: "Threats to Democracy"

Panel Session 4: Challenges to public sphere: educating for democracy[1]

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Christina Slade: This session follows on naturally, and was designed to follow on naturally, from the debate that we've just had. It's been an interesting day. We began with a philosophical debate about why democracy matters and the importance of polycentric systems. We might come back to that in the conclusion: global challenges to democracy, Australian attitudes to democracy, and now we've been looking at technology and all of the challenges and the problems.

What I'm hoping that this panel can do is start to think about how we might move ahead. We're particularly lucky to have here the new Privacy Commissioner, Carly Kind; Catherine Lumby, a journalist first turned scholar — one of the first to call out disinformation and misinformation loudly; and Amanda Third, who's an expert on social media and young children. She's the co-director of the Young and Resilient Research Centre.

Thinking back to Cambridge Analytica — and it seems a very long time ago now, doesn't it? The great shock was the one that I think Fatemeh identified. That was realising that Facebook and the other social media platforms gathered our data — not only did they gather it and sell it on — but with the capacities of their algorithms, they could put together that data and know more about our choices than we do ourselves. Cambridge Analytica knew how to change votes because they understood the patterns of behaviour that we ourselves couldn't introspect.

Now that's a big hit to identity. It makes one really nervous about understanding what your own choices are. And I think that sense of surveillance, which Fatemeh talked about so clearly — that appalling sense that you are being seen all the time. lt's not just private companies that do this, it is the public companies as well, or nation states, that know more about than you do yourself. And really there's no way you could find out how they reached that understanding — it is hidden in the data sets and algorithms they use.

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1 This is an edited transcript of the session, which can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O47lc5oT7M8

I've heard doctors say one of the problems they have with AI is that they put their results into the black box and then the decision is made for them. If you're going to get eye surgery, and that decision is made for them, who's responsible if it goes wrong?

I'm glad that we are finishing the session on the question of children and privacy. The next generation and how we look after children is really important. We're going to be talking about misinformation and disinformation in the new media landscape. Should we be worrying about social media, which of course has been such a big topic that our third speaker has been totally taken up with over this week?

We begin with Carly Kind. Carly joined as Privacy Commissioner from the UK-based Ada Lovelace Institute — a human rights lawyer, a leading authority on the intersection of technology, policy, and human rights. She's worked at the European Commission, the Council of Europe, and a range of civil society organisations. She's also no defeatist. I don't know that there could have been a tougher introduction to Australian processes than the rather rocky road of the privacy legislation over the last few months. Changes were made, but there was this strong pushback from private industry and from businesses, who say protection of data is going to stop free global trade. Carly's response: we need trade and tech, but we need protection too.

I'll hand over to Carly.

Carly Kind

It's interesting that you start off talking about Cambridge Analytica. The Office of the Australian Information Commis-sioner — which is the home of the Privacy Commissioner — is still in mediation with Facebook (now Meta), some six years on from commencing legal action against them for that very incident. These things have a long tail, as they do — obviously across many aspects.

I think one of the really interesting things about Cambridge Analytica — and I wanted to start off talking about this anyway — was what it revealed to many of us who already had an eye on technology. This is not a bug; this is a feature of digital tools. The ability to target and to influence behaviour was not some perverse thing that Facebook was doing behind the scenes — it was a feature of its system, something it was out there selling to advertisers. I think that Cambridge Analytica was a big wake-up point for society at large about the political economy of the information environment.

I think it's important that we stay there for a second to understand that political economy. We all know: if you're not paying for the product, then you are the product. That is no more true than in the online realm. As Professor Shoshana Zuboff called it — surveillance capitalism is the overarching framework within which we go onto digital technology.[2]

The major social media platforms have a data-driven business model. What is a data-driven business model? It's a business model that's based on data that we, as its users, create — either our personal information or information that's derived from our personal information. Inferences about who we are, based on the things we do online.

I think that this political economy creates a few incentives — often perverse incentives.

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2 Zuboff S (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. Profile.

One of those is to collect more and more personal information about individuals. That creates a range of additional risks, not least the risk that that data then gets exposed in large-scale data breaches, of which we've seen many here in Australia in the last few years. Darren talked about 23andMe — they were subject to a data breach earlier this year: 7 million people's genetic information exposed to hackers.

But it also creates incentives to use that data to keep us online longer and longer. We know that the longer we stay on digital tools, the more times our eyeballs will look at digital advertising, and the more money that platforms will therefore be able to charge their advertisers. It's a pretty simple set of steps.

Therefore, to keep us online longer, what do they do? They show us content that we already agree with, so that we're more likely to keep scrolling. They show us other people who are like-minded. We get to feel safe, like we're amongst friends. Therefore, we see the emergence of filter bubbles, echo chambers, and so on. They show us more and more outrageous content — things that are going to excite us and keep our attention for longer. Essentially, these platforms are optimising for our attention alone, without thinking about those potential societal flow-on impacts. This foundation really has shaped the social media environment that we have today.

I'll give you an example of an issue we're looking at, at the moment. One way in which social media platforms are able to make sure their advertising is as personalised and curated as it is, is through the use of something called "tracking pixels." If you go on a website — you might be scrolling through that website — and then you later go to your social media account, you'll notice that something you looked at earlier is advertised to you. You looked at a pair of shoes on, say, Country Road, and then you go onto your Instagram account and there are those Country Road shoes. That's through the use of a particular piece of technology called a tracking pixel.

That kind of technology is being deployed pervasively throughout the online ecosystem, and it's not discriminating as to whether the browser is an adult or a child. We're now at the use of pixels on sensitive websites, such as health insurers or online therapists. We're finding that, for example, a website that might offer a helpline to children is using tracking pixels to later track those children when they're going onto TikTok or onto Instagram.

There's an argument to be had that there may be some social benefit in doing so — because they want to make sure that that child is reminded of the services available to them. If they're, for example, looking for information about bulimia, and then they're later on their TikTok and targeted with "you can get help if you're experiencing bulimia." But on the other hand, you have to think that many of these children are going to feel that it's creepy, that there's some form of surveillance. They might be less likely to search for the information in the first place.

From a strict regulatory privacy perspective, there are a lot of real legal concerns as to whether those websites are allowed to disclose that information to social media companies. That's what we're looking at.

I raise that because I'm preoccupied at the moment — and I'm very much looking forward to hearing what Amanda has to say — about the proposed social media

ban, wherein the government wants to stop children under the age of 16 from going onto social media sites. I think the thing that sits uneasily with me about the ban — and there are many reasons, but one for me — is that it accepts the premise of the current state of the online ecosystem. That it's data-driven, this kind of surveillance capital business model, and that it can't be shaped in the way that we want it to be shaped. I simply feel unwilling to accept that.

I think we've only had these technologies for less than two decades. They are not permanent features of our information environment. They can be shaped — including through regulation, including through the proper administration of existing laws. We're not even talking necessarily about new regulation. In that sense, part of that's on my shoulders — to make sure that existing privacy laws are enforced.

But I still think that by saying we need to keep children off these tools, we're accepting that the tools are the way they are. That technology is some kind of inevitable fact, rather than solely the product of human engineering and ideas. That engineering and those ideas can be changed at our will.

One other lever we can pull is through improving our privacy regulation. I'm relatively new in the role and have been grappling with this dual challenge of enforcing the law as it is and also asking for new laws. I do think there's scope to strengthen the privacy framework here in Australia. But I would also say there's a lot we can do with what's already there.

The regulator hasn't been particularly well resourced historically — certainly not to meet the scale of the challenge. I think there's a lot of scope there. That's what I'm really looking to do — to use the powers that

I have to shape this online environment. I keep asking myself: how could we shape what these tools look like if we actually address the underlying business model? Essentially, that is about curtailing the use of personal information.

I'll wrap up, but I just want to say one final thing. Last night, the Communications Minister introduced the idea of a duty of care that would be imposed on tech companies. I'd love to hear from my panellists about that. One thing I've observed moving from the UK to Australia this year is a lot more appetite in Australia to exert some power vis-à-vis those large tech platforms. I view the government here as much more willing to take that on.

It was very interesting to hear Minister Michelle Rowland talk about introducing a digital duty of care last night — on the same day her counterpart in the UK, Peter Kyle, said, "We have to act with humility when it comes to big tech companies. We have to accept that they are akin to nation states." I thought that was very interesting. That's definitely my view having been in the UK — there is this sense that we actually have to treat them as equals and we can't just exert our power. Then to come to Australia, where I think there's actually much more appetite for trying to exercise power. I just think that's an interesting feature of the environment that I thought I'd call out for our conversation. Thank you.

Christina Slade: Thank you. Can I just ask — Elon Musk being in government — do you think that reduces the possibility or the chances of a strong regulatory regime in the United States?

Carly Kind: Oh, absolutely in the United States. I absolutely do. I don't know if others are frequent Twitter users, but if you are,

you will have noticed that the quality of information on X has declined dramatically in the last year. I've just moved over to Bluesky, and I would really encourage others to do the same. It's so nice there — just all these well-meaning people who want to have intellectual conversation, and no outrage or horror.

CS: We're going to continue now with Catherine Lumby. Many of you will know her — she's been a journalist at *The Sydney Morning Herald*, the ABC, *The Bulletin*; she was a Harkness Fellow in New York; founding director of the Journalism and Media Research Centre at UNSW; and Chair of the Media and Communications Department at the University of Sydney. But I suppose what we mainly all know her for are those early books where she called out journalism — *Bad Girls: The Media, Sex and Feminism in the '90s* (1997) and *Gotcha: Life in a Tabloid World* (1999).[3]

She writes on pornography, violent extremism, the sexualisation of children, and social media. She's worked with the NRL, and now she's published a biography of Frank Moorhouse.[4] So she is, I suppose, what you might call a leading public intellectual.

Catherine Lumby

Carly, I'm so thrilled you're our Privacy Commissioner. You're focusing on the right stuff. And when Fatemeh showed those AI images, it brought to mind a summer 15 years ago. If you're a female professor at a university, they always make you sit on every promotions committee. I was in a little silk frock — it was hot, and I was five minutes late. I walked in the door and a lot of the guys on the panel were science professors. One of them looked at me and said, "I'll have a macchiato." So I got him one anyway.

I'll move on now. Threats to democracy — where do I begin? After last week, it honestly crossed my mind to ditch this talk, get up, sob, and rend my garments, taking a leaf out of the Old Testament. But I'll go on as planned.

I'm a recovering print and TV journo, and I now research social media. Amanda and I are close colleagues — we're working on a big research project on this. We've both long been concerned about young people, but also about the way we are concerned about them. Why don't we listen to them? Why don't we acknowledge their agency? Amanda will talk about that.

Today I want to talk about something I'm writing a book on for Simon & Schuster. I'm concerned about the rise of what I'll call hard- or far-left identity politics. I say this as someone who comes from the political left. I try to be balanced in my scholarship, but I'm worried about the direction these debates are taking — especially on the left. For me, this is about democracy.

The book came out of what I call the "third rail" question. When I moved to New York in 1992, I learned a phrase for topics you're not supposed to talk about at middle-class dinner parties: the "third rail." Like the electrified rail on the subway — touch it, and you die. I'm concerned that many of us are now at risk of getting electrocuted — unable to speak coherently about

3 Lumby C (1997) *Bad Girls: The Media, Sex and Feminism in the '90s.* Allen & Unwin; Lumby C (1999) *Gotcha: Life in a Tabloid World.* Allen & Unwin.

4 Lumby C (2023) *Frank Moorhouse: A Life.* Allen & Unwin.

politics or social justice, or even just listen to each other.

I'm left-wing, I come from a largely Christian family, I have Muslim friends, my husband's Jewish. I care deeply about inclusivity. But I'm seeing things on university campuses — my own tribe — that concern me. I hear people shouting, "You're on the wrong side of history!" (Personally, I always thought history was three-dimensional.) I want to understand how we ended up in a place where complex issues like the horrific Israel-Hamas war, or the debates about trans and women's rights, have become so polarised. Why are some activists using tactics like doxxing, social media pile-ons, and deplatforming to shut down any possibility of debate or reconciliation?

These tactics — which we now call "cancel culture" — certainly occur on the political right. But I'm seeing them increasingly on the left. That's why I'm writing this book, *Cancel This* — probably an unwise title, but I'm sticking with it.

What do the hard left and hard right have in common in terms of messaging? Why so much shouting and so little listening? And what role — here's the heart of this talk — does social media play in all of this?

"Cancel culture" is a term that originated on the right — like "political correctness," which was once weaponised against the left. But I believe there's a truth in it that we on the left need to reckon with.

I don't come with answers, just questions. I see too many "answers" that suggest we're asking the wrong questions. As a former law student and journalist, I've been trained — like many of you — to ask forensic questions, evaluate evidence. But as Ed Santow said, that's not what gets traction on social media. That kind of analysis is often seen as elitist. And I'm not saying it *should* be irrelevant — but we need to understand how most people make decisions now.

I come from a working-class background. I learned critical thinking because I got into Sydney Uni Law School — luck and hard work, yes, but also privilege. That's cultural capital. And a lot of people don't have access to that — just as they don't have access to economic resources.

One of the great things about the online era is that everyone gets a say. That's still an improvement on the old days, when white men behind desks controlled public discourse — in the media, the courts, Parliament. I was a utopian — I even wrote my PhD lauding the internet.

But we didn't foresee monetised algorithms. Carly spoke so eloquently about this. The honeypot of data. Who knew that late capitalism would profit from democracy itself? Well, it has. Look at Elon Musk — he helped put a president in the White House.

Algorithms send users down information rabbit holes. I taught media law and ethics last year to 120 incredibly bright students — Law or Media Communications. I asked them in our first class, "Where do you get your information?" Ten hands went up for newspapers — ten out of 120. They don't listen to radio. They don't watch the news. They get their news from social media. And I'm not moral panicking. But that's the reality.

Let me end — and this is the most sensitive part of my talk. I want you to understand I'm not taking sides. But I'm worried about what social media is doing to political discourse and activism.

Two days after the appalling Hamas terrorist attack on Israel — and two weeks before Israel launched its brutal retaliation

in Gaza — I went to give an evening lecture at Sydney University. On my way to the theatre, I saw a young woman wearing a Star of David, sobbing uncontrollably. I put my arms around her. She said, "I was holding it together, but when I got to campus, I had to walk through a rally where people were calling Jews genocidal — all Jews. Don't they know anything about history?" She had a nuanced view. She opposed Netanyahu and the West Bank settlements. But she was falling apart. I got her an Uber and made sure she got home safely.

That wasn't the last time I saw Jewish students or staff feeling unsafe. And at the same time, I strongly support peaceful protest. I'm no fan of Netanyahu's far-right government or many of its military actions. But what I see in some of these pro-Palestinian encampments is a kind of heat — that third-rail energy again.

Many of the protesting students are passionately opposed to imperialism — just like the Vietnam protesters of the '70s. But there's a qualitative difference. For most of them, this conflict is remote. For others — those of Muslim or Jewish background — it's personal. But for many, the activism is grounded in ideas, not lived experience.

And that raises the question: why has Israel become the limit case in colonisation debates, when most of us are standing knee-deep in colonial history ourselves, unless we're First Nations Australians?

I'll end with this. Emile Sherman and Lloyd Vogelman have a podcast called *The Principle of Charity*. They invite guests with opposing views to argue each other's position — in pursuit of truth, not victory. I did

it with Clive Hamilton — who has said some pretty unpleasant things about me — on pornography. He thinks it should be banned. I don't. But we argued each other's case. And I thought, "Yeah, I'd have a glass of wine with you, mate."

My concern is the rabbit holes. In a *New Yorker* piece two weeks before Trump was elected, Adam Gopnik wrote: "We may be standing on the edge of an abyss ... but nothing is wrong in the expected way. The vehemence of conflict is confined to what we might call the cultural space."[5] We live in the age of individualised collective action — the "like"-driven post. And I wonder whether performative politics on the left has eclipsed the deeper question of what we're actually trying to *change* about democracy. Because there's still so much that needs changing.

CS: Thank you, Catherine. I think we are being quite controversial — and if I can just make one comment: when I was a young mother, I got involved in Philosophy for Children. I'd been a logician, and one of the first things we tried to teach three- and four-year-olds was: listen to people's arguments. Discuss the argument, not the person. We seem to have lost that completely. I've tried to reintroduce it with my grandchildren — with great failure. They're very sick of me telling them things.

Amanda is one of the new wave of researchers working with young people and social media. Apart from her role at Western Sydney Uni, she was a faculty associate at the Berkman Klein Center at Harvard. She's worked with Sonia Livingstone on the UN's work on children's rights in digital spaces, and she led a global team gathering evidence

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5   Gopnik A (2024) How alarmed should we be if Trump wins again? *The New Yorker*, October 14. An excellent prediction of Trump's first 100 days. [Ed.]

from over 700 children about digital access. I think it's worth remembering — when we debate social media — how important even electricity is to a child's life chances in rural Pakistan.

Amanda Third

I want to begin by thanking Christie for organising all of us. She had to rustle black cats at midnight to get us here today, but she's done it. I'm going to talk to you about children, social media, and democratic life — and take you on a bit of a journey. I ask you to suspend any strong beliefs, either for or against technology, and enter an imaginative space for a moment.

To be clear, I'm not an expert in civics education. While we're here to talk about educating for democracy, that's not my specific area. My expertise lies in using youth participation research methods to hear directly from children and young people — under the age of 18 — about how and why they use technology, what they get from it, and how it shapes their sense of self and their place in the world. I've led projects in over 80 countries, and what's remarkable is how consistent children's messages are. They tell us two things. First, they love their technology — no surprises there. And, second, adults, including parents and teachers, just don't get it. So I'll start with that insight.

Let's begin by asking: Should we be concerned about the future of democracy in a digital world?

That question conjures two key dynamics. First, the proliferation of digital technologies that are deeply embedded in everyday life. And, second, as Whitney Houston once reminded us, "children are the future" — an idea deeply ingrained in our culture. Edu-

cating for democracy, then, is really about how we socialise children into democratic life — how we shape the next generation. But I'd also argue that the question reveals a deeper adult anxiety: the fear that children might slip out of our control.

So, should we be concerned? The short answer is both yes and no.

Yes, we should be concerned, because children across Australia are increasingly disengaged from and disillusioned with democratic processes. In a recent study, my team and I worked with children from communities deeply affected by climate change. Across the board, they expressed feeling alienated from decision-making processes — and, interestingly, let down by adults. The word they repeatedly used was "abandoned." Now, abandonment is a form of neglect. And while you could argue it's not always severe, widespread feelings of abandonment can amount to a brewing social crisis.

It's time we listened to what children are telling us — that we are not listening.

Because they aren't seen as full citizens, children are often invisible to democratic institutions. There aren't enough mechanisms to ensure their needs, rights, and aspirations are heard and acted on. If this is how children are imagining their place in democracy, we can see how it might feed into long-term disaffection.

Yet, on the other hand, children are using digital technologies in droves to participate politically. For most young Australians, digital technologies are seamlessly integrated into daily life. For them, there's no meaningful distinction between online and offline — the digital is simply part of how they experience the world.

Our research consistently shows that children use technology to learn about, organise around, and act on issues that matter to them — mental health, climate change, and more. They are growing up in an information ecosystem that could support an exceptionally well-informed citizenry — one that could underpin a vibrant democracy.

Of course, as my co-panellists have noted, the digital world also poses challenges — misinformation, data privacy, and so on. We absolutely need robust regulation and thoughtful design to mitigate harms. But we also need to be ambitious: to harness technology's potential for democracy. That means strengthening online safety, boosting digital literacy, and exploring ways to connect children's digital practices to democratic processes. Too often, our national conversation about children and technology focuses narrowly on protection, missing the opportunities to revitalise democracy.

What we need is to imagine new "democratic imaginaries" — to reimagine what democracy can look like in a digital world.

This brings me to Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities," coined in 1983 to explain how large populations — who can't all meet face-to-face — come to imagine themselves as part of a nation.[6] He described the act of reading the morning newspaper as a powerful way people connected to the idea of nationhood.

While the digital world is different — multi-directional, participatory — it still enables new imaginative possibilities. For the first time in history, children can connect with each other globally, share information, and organise. This gives them a new sense of themselves as a political constituency capable of demanding and enacting change.

And they're already doing it. Hundreds of thousands of children are using digital platforms to educate themselves, organise, and march in climate strikes. These emerging transnational democratic imaginaries could be critical to building the global solidarity we'll need to face the overlapping crises that define our era. But because these imaginaries transcend national boundaries, we need to think carefully about how to nurture and support them in democratic ways.

So, what's holding us back?

I'd argue that technophobia, our fear of technology, is a key barrier. I'm not a techno-utopian; I call myself a technological pragmatist. I've worked extensively on online safety and digital literacy, and I'm well aware of the risks. But instead of letting fear dictate our approach, we need to think pragmatically about both the risks and opportunities.

And that's hard — because when you put children and technology together, it triggers massive anxiety. Children are the bearers of our greatest hopes and our deepest fears. We project onto them. And children also make us confront how much the world has changed since we were young. That's unsettling.

Technology does the same. It reminds us how quickly the world is changing, and how little control we often feel we have over that change. Think about how you remember your first gramophone, Walkman, mobile phone. Technology marks time and stirs unease. So, when children and technology collide, it creates deep cultural anxiety.

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6   Anderson B (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso/New Left Books Ltd.

Unless you've been living under a rock, you'll know that the federal government is proposing to raise the minimum age for social media access — from 13 to 16. This proposal was announced, controversially, on the same day as Donald Trump's re-election, in the shadow of a media frenzy.

The rationale is that social media causes undeniable harm to children, exacerbating the youth mental health crisis. And yes, some children are harmed, and we absolutely must act to protect them. But I want to highlight three problems with this debate:

First, children themselves have been almost entirely absent from the conversation. We're talking about fundamentally changing how they experience the world, and yet they've had no say. Instead, we're regulating parents' anxieties. This reinforces what children already tell us — that they're excluded from decision-making. That's a democratic failure.

Second, the evidence linking digital technologies to youth mental health issues is inconclusive. Numerous studies and systematic reviews have failed to establish causal links. Technology doesn't cause change — it is implicated in change. It's embedded in everyday life. And children use it for connection, learning, information, support, and advocacy. Many of these uses benefit their mental health. For some young people, digital spaces are a lifeline — a source of community, identity, and agency.

In today's world, where children are overprotected and overscheduled, social media may be one of the few places where they can exercise genuine agency — just as earlier generations did at the park or shopping centre. These experiences are vital for healthy development.

Third, if the goal is to hold tech companies accountable, banning children from platforms is counterproductive. It removes their obligations to young users. Children will still find ways to access these spaces, but potentially in more dangerous ways. And if something goes wrong, they may be afraid to seek help because they "shouldn't have been there." These bans have already failed in multiple European countries. What we need instead is systemic regulation that puts children at the centre.

We also need to support parents. Many are understandably anxious. But we must provide better tools and knowledge to help them realistically assess online risks, and empower their children.

So when we talk about educating for democracy, it's tempting to focus on the next generation. But what I'd like to leave you with is this: it's time to re-educate the adults. Parents need to understand the benefits, policymakers need to grasp the consequences of their actions, and we all need to do better at imagining how digital technology can serve a democratic world.

CS: Thank you very much, Amanda — an impassioned speech.

Dorothy Hoddinott: I was a high school principal in a disadvantaged public school for 23 years. I can't see any point in imposing a ban on social media for young people. I think the horse has completely bolted — and not just in terms of young people, but also in terms of adult responsibility for what children are viewing. There's a strong case for educating parents about proper supervision. We advise parents who complain that their children are going into dark places online in the middle of the night: "take all of those things out of their rooms: no television, no radio, no computers, no phones. Let them

sleep, because they actually need to sleep a lot longer than you do".

These are serious issues. I don't see how saying, "You can't access social media until you're 16 or older" is going to help. It sounds a bit like trying to regulate sex until you're 16, doesn't it? The prohibition — I don't see how the government can control that, or how it could be enforced. So, instead of that, maybe what we should be doing — and this ties into your point about teaching critical thinking, which is hard to teach — is engaging more in giving children agency, and giving them the skills to think through ethical issues and find ethical ways to navigate them.

CL: Very quickly — thank you for that. Amanda and I work together, and I'm with everything she said. But I want to bring Carly in for a second because we were both at the Sydney Institute dinner last night and heard Minister Michelle Rowland speak. She gave a lot of detail, which I didn't expect. Carly, do you want to respond to that — how it's going to map out?

CK: I'd just say that the implementation has its own problems. Essentially, what will happen is that social media companies will need to verify the age of everyone accessing their platforms. From a privacy perspective, we have real concerns about that — because now, whether you're a 15-year-old or a 55-year-old, you'll have to prove your age to use Facebook.

That creates new incentive structures to collect information. There's also talk of AI-based age verification — tools that analyse your face to determine your age. We can all see the problems with that. So you're right: the implementation is challenging and problematic. That's part of the issue.

CS: In the spirit of this discussion, is there anyone who'd like to take a contrary point of view? This is an issue that seems to have bipartisan support and almost no real debate in the mainstream media. So, this is going to go through, isn't it?

AT: There are 150 experts across the country calling for a parliamentary committee process. At the very least, we can't rush such an important piece of legislation through — it needs proper scrutiny. The detail needs to be looked at carefully. The issues Carly has raised are extremely important.

We also need to consider how a ban would sit alongside the review of the Online Safety Act, which, as of last night, now includes a statutory duty of care. It's unclear how all of these pieces fit together. Those questions need to be addressed.

CS: What's really interesting is that this takes us back to the very first session today, where Philip Pettit argued that our idea of democracy is polycentric — and that requires strong, distributed forms of control. But with this kind of legislative pace, you do worry a little.

Helen Jones: I think one reason for the bipartisan support around an age limit is that it's a knee-jerk reaction to parents who want information and support, but don't know how to solve the problem in their own homes. It seems like a quick, simple solution — which of course, it isn't.

And one silly thing: what happens to all the kids under 16 who already use social media? Are they supposed to stop tomorrow?

Q: Carly and Amanda, you both mentioned the importance of reshaping social media to make it better for young people — and for everyone, really. But thinking of something

Nick Bryant mentioned this morning, is it a kind of self-belittling to imagine that Australia, or societies like ours, can realistically influence global tech platforms controlled mostly by people in the US or China?

CK: I agree: it's a huge problem. Just look at the eSafety Commissioner's efforts to use lawful powers under various pieces of legislation against Silicon Valley-based companies.[7] Not only do these companies defend themselves forcefully, but the courts here are reluctant to issue injunctions.

They're afraid that if orders are ignored, it will expose the fact that the system has no real teeth — that the emperor has no clothes. So that's a real dilemma for regulators. Why would I take a platform to court, knowing the Federal Court won't back enforcement because they're afraid it will just be ignored, and that would undermine our legal system? I'm cynical about the prospects, but we absolutely need some kind of cross-jurisdictional consensus to tackle these challenges.

CL: I want to endorse what you're saying, Carly. Back in 2010, I did a major research report for Google with Kate Crawford, who's now a global leader in AI ethics. We looked at content regulation through a three-tier model: government, industry, and digital users. All three are part of the system.

But in Australia, there is no meaningful content regulation. I say that as a law graduate, and I know the lawyers in this room will agree. Elon Musk is a cowboy — I mean,

he doxxed the eSafety Commissioner, Julie Inman Grant, and her family. It's horrifying.

One big issue we haven't talked about is the misinformation and disinformation bill. How do we meaningfully distinguish between free speech and hate speech — legally, ethically, and in the context of the internet?

CS: There's a very good recent book by Ed Coper that deals with exactly those questions.[8]

AT: I fully understand what Carly is saying, and I worry about it too. But I think there's some cause for optimism. First, our eSafety Commissioner is highly respected internationally — governments around the world are watching that office very closely.

Second, she has helped build a network of international regulators, aimed precisely at shaping these global conversations. In some ways, this push for a ban has reminded me of how much of a leader Australia actually is in this space.

Over the past few days, I've had about 30 calls from major international media outlets wanting to report on the social media ban. And I've had to say, very carefully: this is a policy driven by domestic political and economic interests. It is *not* a policy centred on the wellbeing of children. The timing — right before an election — is not a coincidence.

CS: I want to thank our speakers, who moved the discussion very effectively toward the next generation.

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7   See Inman Grant J (2024) How a single letter changed the world: W×3 — the World Wide Web (we weaved). *Journal & Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales* 157: 266–284.

8   Coper E (2022) *Facts and Other Lies — Welcome to the Disinformation Age.* Allen & Unwin.