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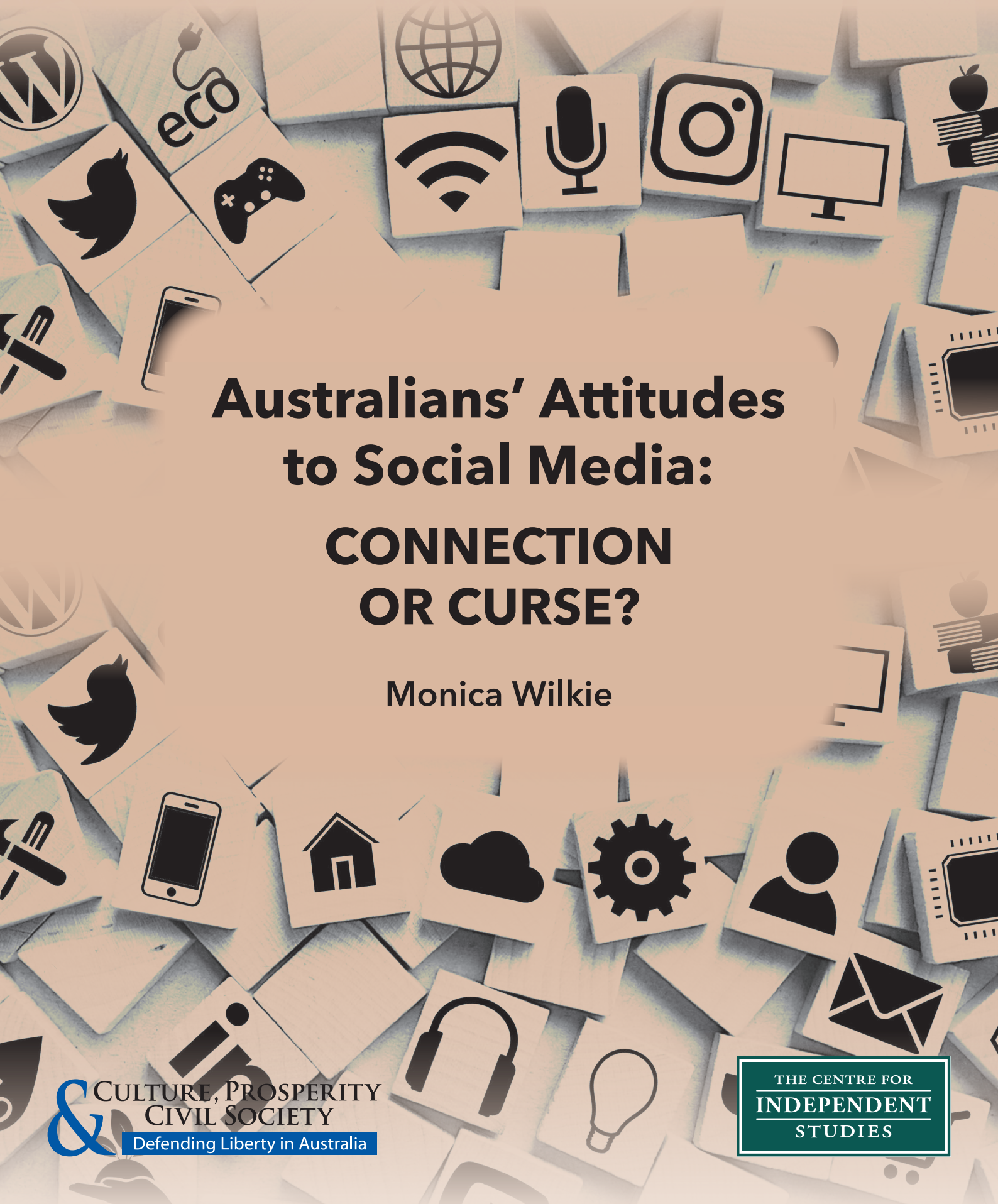

Australians' Attitudes to Social Media:

CONNECTION OR CURSE?

Monica Wilkie

Culture, Prosperity & Civil Society
Defending Liberty in Australia

The Centre for Independent Studies

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Introduction

Since the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission (ACCC) released its *Digital Platforms Preliminary Report* in December 2018, social media has been constantly in the news.[1] One of the biggest stories was Australia's world-first media bargaining code, passed by both Houses of the Federal Parliament on February 25, 2021, after tense negotiations that saw Facebook temporarily remove access to Australian news on its site and app.[2]

Social media has become an extremely complex policy and social issue. Accordingly, it is important to examine the impact it has on society and Australians' attitudes towards it.

The Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) commissioned YouGov to poll 1,024 Australians over the age of 18 to research those attitudes. The polling was conducted online from February 12–16, 2021, before Facebook blocked Australian news and the media bargaining code was passed. The results were weighted and are representative of the Australian public.

In addition to the usual demographic questions such as age, education level, income, sex, and state, the poll also asked about frequency of social media use; type of use; platforms visited [See Box 1], and voting intention. This extra demographic information allowed valuable analysis of how the social media type and frequency of use impacted attitudes.

The findings from the CIS poll are important for any future policy development. As the passing of the media bargaining code shows, the government is willing and able to regulate social media. There are also various proposals to extend the powers of certain bureaucratic bodies, such as the eSafety Commission. Policy proposals and interventions tend to only consider the negative impacts of social media, therefore overlooking the clear benefit Australians derive from its usage. Given the findings of the CIS polling, and the novelty of social media, it would be prudent for governments – current and future – to stop adding additional laws to control social media.

Box 1: Publisher Vs. Platform

There is an ongoing conversation about whether social media sites are publishers or platforms – a conversation that is simultaneously unhelpful and unnecessary, because it misunderstands the nature of these new technologies and companies.

Although this paper uses the term platform, this is also not a wholly accurate description either; because social media sites are new, distinct, and ever-changing business models that do not fit neatly into current definitions. But, in the absence of a more accurate term, 'platform' will have to suffice.

Results

Social Media: Connection or Isolation?

The majority of respondents (70.3%) used social media to keep in touch with family and friends (See Chart 1). This was ahead of uses such as entertainment (55.9%) and news (47.9%). Use of social media to connect with others was the primary use across all generations, except for Generation Z which mainly used social media for entertainment (77%) — See Chart 2. Use of social media for connection and entertainment were the two principal uses across all groups other than the 'Silent Generation' — those born between 1918 and 1945.

Chart 1: Which of the following do you regularly use social media for?

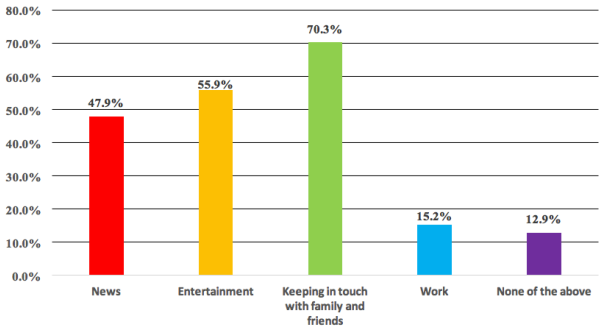
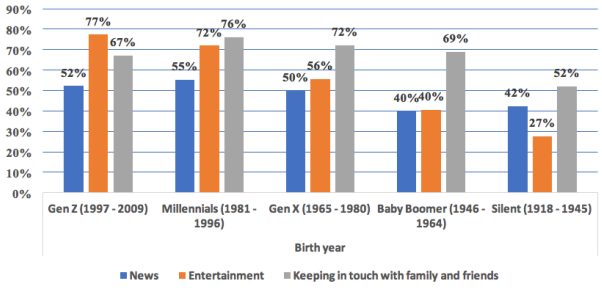


Chart 2: Which of the following do you regularly use social media for (By Age)



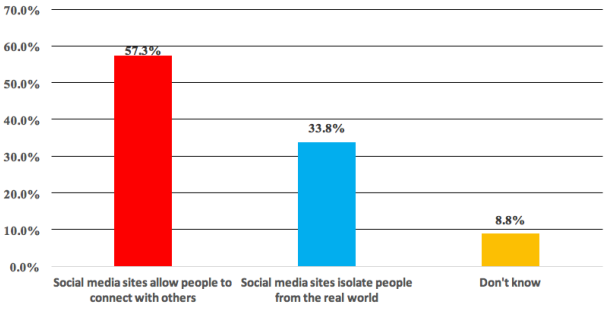
Building and maintaining connections with friends and family is an important part of identity formation, and these results suggest much of that connection now comes from social media.[3] As researchers Chris Berg and Simon Breheny have remarked:

> From a sociological standpoint, the major feature of social networks is not that they encourage technological skill development but that they encourage social development. Social networks are a powerful medium for self-expression and identity development.[4]

Although social media brings risks — like all new advancements — Berg and Breheny note that "the benefits of digital media for personal and social expression are dramatic."[5]This observation is enhanced when social media is viewed as, what journalist Tom Standage observed, "[as] two-way, conversational environments in which information passes horizontally from one person to another along social networks…"[6] Unlike traditional media, or many forms of communicative technologies in which information is delivered by, what Standage called an "impersonal central source", social media personalises and disrupts this top-down approach.[7]

High use of social media to socialise with friends and families explains why the majority (57.3%) thought social media connected people more than it isolated them from the real world (33.8%) — See Chart 3. These results were consistent across age groups, with those over 65 being the ones who most thought social media allowed people to connect with others (60%).

Chart 3: Which statement do you think most accurately describes social media?



These findings are consistent with much of the scholarship on the impact of social media. As sociologist Manuel Castells argues, social media has revived the old concept of the public sphere and democratised the communication process.[8] Head of The Internet Governance Project, Milton Mueller, has also noted that: "the tremendous value of social media platforms [is] based on their ability to match seekers and providers of information in huge quantities."[9]

Australians are positive about this exchange of information that appears to give them a sense of community as opposed to isolation. However, questions about social media's impact on society yielded some interesting results. (See Chart 4).

More respondents thought social media had a negative impact on society (45%) than a positive impact (37.5%). These results were, again, quite consistent across the ages, with Generation Z being the only group where a majority (52%) thought social media had a positive impact on society, and the Silent Generation the only group where the majority (53%) thought the impact negative (See Chart 5).

Chart 4: Which statement do you think most accurately describes social media?

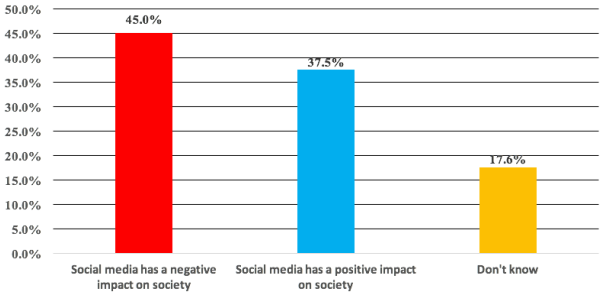
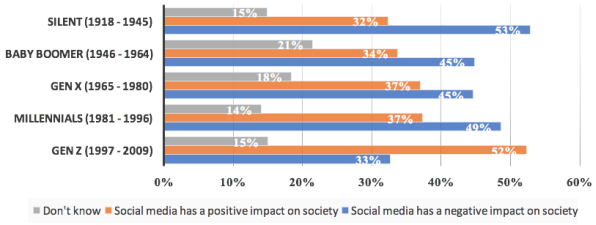


Chart 5: Which statement do you think most accurately describes social media? (By Age)



Clear differences also emerged in how the users of varying platforms perceived societal impact. Facebook users were more likely (39%) to think social media has had a negative impact on society, whereas users of Twitter (51%) and Tik Tok (53%) thought it had a positive impact.

These results appear incongruous with the results outlined earlier in this report that indicated Australians thought social media connects people more than it isolates them. If something connects people, it would be reasonable to expect that most would think it would be more positive than negative.

However, this incongruity can be explained by further analysing the questions of connection and society. Of those respondents who thought social media has a positive impact on society, 88.7% thought social media allows people to connect with others. Conversely, of those who thought social media has a negative impact, most (64.1%) also thought it isolates people from the real world. Further, those who used Facebook at least once a day were more likely to agree social media has been positive (66.6%).

A picture starts to emerge of an Australian individual who is more positive than negative about social media. Heavy social media users — those who use platforms multiple times a day and/or every day — who think social media is positive and connects others, also view social media as beneficial to themselves and society. This type of user is likely to rely, significantly, on social media to build and maintain their network of family and friends.

These findings are perhaps surprising, considering the negative attention social media receives in traditional media. Stories about social media often blame platforms for bullying and isolation — which can and do occur on social media.

However, it is superficial to focus only on the negative aspects of social media. As American legal scholar, Cass Sunstein, has argued, "we should evaluate communications technologies and social media by asking how they affect us as citizens, not only by asking how they affect us as consumers." Are communicative technologies, "promoting or compromising our own highest aspirations?" Sunstein asks.[10]

Social media is seen as serving the aspiration to create a better, more open public space.[11] John Samples, Vice President of the Cato Institute, has argued social media dramatically lowers "the cost of speech and association", and allows users to be "more involved in more like-minded groups than ever."[12] Samples points out a peculiar tension seeded by internet association: the phenomena now disparagingly called the "filter-bubble."[13] Samples argues that these filter bubbles have always existed, as people tend to associate with the like-minded; and when communication moved to the internet, this natural tendency continued.[14]

Associating only with the like-minded can be negative, but as a 2017 survey of French, German, and British citizens concluded: "Social media users are more likely to disagree than agree with the political contents they see on these platforms" and "citizens are much more likely to encounter disagreeable views on social media than in face-to-face conversations."[15]

The role of social media platforms in fostering and maintaining a diversity of viewpoints on their platforms has been a source of discussion and controversy for years.[16]

You Can / Can't Say That

All social media sites have terms or service, known as 'content moderation policies', that a user must agree to before setting up an account. These policies include content that would be illegal offline, such as distributing abuse materials. They are also more expansive and include content that can bully. Social media sites justify bans, suspensions, or content removal, because they violate those terms of service — hence it is important to explore whether people understand them.

There is a fairly even distribution across those who agree (28%), disagree (36.7%), or neither agree nor disagree (35.4%) with the statement "social media policies have clear and unambiguous content moderation policies" (See Chart 6). This suggests there is at least some ambiguity in social media content moderation policies; otherwise more would agree.

Chart 6: Agree or disagree with "Social media companies currently have clear and unambiguous policies for moderating content."

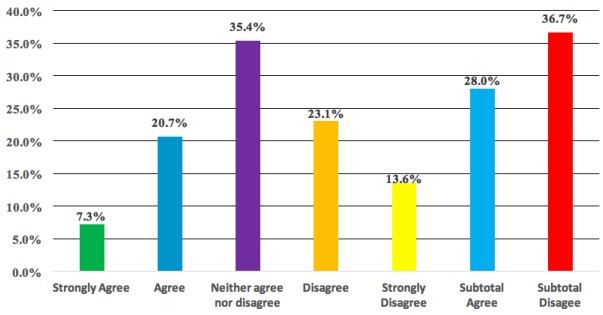
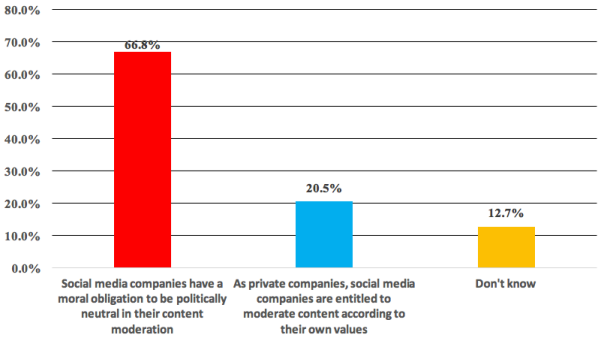


Chart 7: Which of the following is closer to your own view?



Each social media site has different processes for enforcing content moderation. But most include the capacity to suspend or even 'permanently suspend' accounts for rule violations; delete certain posts; and allow users to appeal any content moderation decisions. These processes have caused controversy because of a perception they are politically biased against conservatives – an issue discussed in greater detail in the next section.

But social media platforms have been dealing with — and are fully aware of — the issues around their content policies. In November 2018, Facebook decided to establish an Oversight Board to use:

> its independent judgement to support people's right to free expression and ensure that those rights are being adequately respected. The board's decision to uphold or reverse Facebook's content decisions will be binding, meaning that Facebook will have to implement them, unless doing so could violate the law.[17]

The Oversight Board was formed after significant public consultation that included several round tables, workshops, public submissions, and consultations on the Board's charter. The Board is not yet fully in operation. But what its establishment reveals is the complexity of devising policies for over a billion global users. The phrase 'unprecedented' is both over and incorrectly used. But setting the content standards for over a billion people is truly unprecedented.

Who Can Speak?

The moderation of content on social media has been further complicated by the perception of political bias.

The CIS study found 66.8% of respondents thought social media companies should be politically neutral in their content moderation (See Chart 7). This compares with 20.5% who thought social media companies could moderate content according to their own values.

Due to the controversy caused by the perception that social media companies are biased against conservatives, attitudes towards political neutrality unsurprisingly differ across political lines. An overwhelming majority (75%) of Coalition voters thought content moderation should be politically neutral compared with Labor (61%), and Greens voters (62%). Coalition voters were second, behind 'other' (79%), which would include those who intend to vote for minor parties, and because minor parties rely heavily on social media to build awareness and momentum, they could be more concerned that if their accounts were limited or deleted, they would have very little opportunity to reach voters.

Richard Hanania, an academic at Columbia University who has attempted to assess anti-conservative bias at Twitter with empirical evidence, found that:

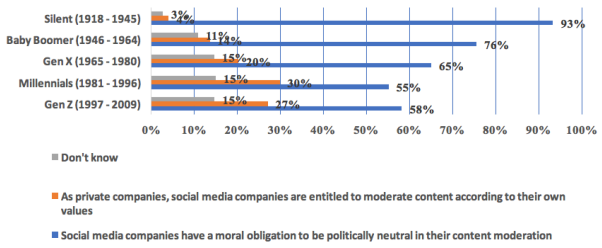
> Of 22 prominent, politically active individuals who are known to have been suspended since 2005 and who expressed a preference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, 21 supported Donald Trump.[18]

Hanania's analysis has merit; but when smaller groups are banned, the picture is more complicated.

Online magazine, *The Intercept*, has been reporting for some time how social media sites such as Facebook have been removing "the pages of numerous antifascist, anti-capitalist news, organizing, and information sites."[19] Banning prominent conservatives from social media sites generates a lot of attention, whereas banning smaller organisations does not.

Although there are political differences around the question of neutrality, the greatest difference in views about political neutrality is spread across the generations. The Silent Generation had the highest level of support for neutrality (93%) compared with 55% of Millennials. Millennials also had the highest support (30%) for thinking social media companies

Chart 8: Which of the following is closer to your own view?



can moderate content according to the companies' values (See Chart 8).

This generational difference in attitudes, is caused by two factors.

First, the young — for whom politics is more activist — are more likely to identify with social causes such as climate change, as opposed to political parties or ideas. Even before the arrival of social media, American social critic Howard Rheingold argued that the innovation of new communicative technologies, such as mobile devices, was akin to a social revolution that would create "smart mobs" and allow people to assemble and influence political and social issues. [20]

This insight has certainly proved accurate. Social media platforms are now the main tool used to organise protests, and many also use them to apply political pressure to politicians or groups. At the same time, the tilt towards an activist politics among the young is coupled with a lack of appreciation for democratic values.

According to the latest Australian Election Study, those under 35 years of age are the least satisfied with democracy. Out of respondents between the ages of 25-34, 50% were 'satisfied with democracy', compared with 72% aged 65 and over, and of those in the younger cohort, the number dissatisfied with democracy almost outstrips those who are satisfied.[21] There has been a significant decline in satisfaction levels since 2007.[22]

When the young are disaffected with their system of government, they are less likely to support the values that support and maintain it, such as open debate. As Sustein argues, a proper culture of deliberative democracy "demands not only a law of free expression, in which people are eager to listen to what their fellow citizens have to say." [23] He believes "a democratic polity, acting through democratic organs" may help foster such a culture by creating "a system of communications that promotes exposure to a wide range of issues and views."[24]

Younger people are happy for — even to the point of demanding or expecting — social media to advocate for causes they believe in. As *Quillette* founding editor Claire Lehmann has argued:

> Conflict theorists [who dominate universities and the minds of 'progressive' Millennials] are not persuaded by the need for debate. They may view debate as being a distraction, a delaying tactic, an attempt to proliferate ideas that are harmful to the disadvantaged.[25]

Therefore, Millennials are more sympathetic to the idea of large companies using their abilities to control dissenting voices. Young people want social media to promote *their* activism, but not necessarily that of their opponents.

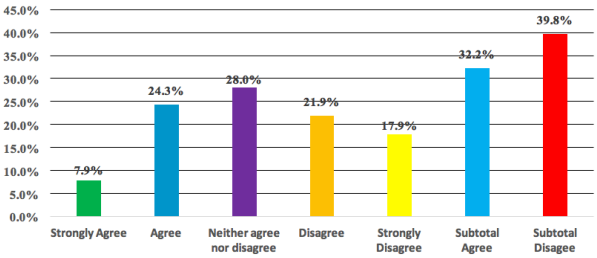
Second, younger generations have been captured by the notion of 'harm reduction'. Calls to remove content, groups, or people on social media are often rationalised on the grounds that such content allegedly causes harm to certain individuals or groups. The harm could be tangible (such as individuals being 'doxed' or threatened), or far more abstract (such as demanding social media sites take down 'hate speech'). Facebook's definition of 'hate speech' demonstrates the complications of applying this standard, because Facebook considers anything from "dehumanising speech" to "cursing" to be a violation of their community standards.[26] Such a broad definition allows groups or individuals to claim a wide range of posts as 'harmful.'

You're Fired!

The controversies about posting become even more complicated when the online and offline worlds collide.

Most respondents (39.8%) believe employers should not be able to form policies and discipline employees for what they post on social media in a private capacity (See Chart 9). Younger people were more sympathetic for employers imposing social media policies than older people. A significant number (28%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. This also suggests it is a complicated question and many

Chart 9: Agree or disagree with "Employers should be able to form policies on what employees can say on social media – even in a private capacity – and discipline employees who break them."



people have not yet formed an opinion — although this is not surprising, given the newness of both the technology and the problem.

More of those from Generation Z (39.3%) disagreed with the statement than Millennials (31.6%). Millennials are a particularly interesting group when it comes to analysing the impact of social media on society. Unlike those who came to maturity before 1980, who grew up without any social media, and Generation Z who have only ever consciously lived with social media, Millennials are right in the middle. They were teenagers when social media came into existence and thus were maturing with a very new and complicated communicative technology. Therefore, questions such as the relationship between work and social media were being decided, for Millennials, in real time. Comparatively, Generation Z have real-world examples to draw upon, and are perhaps less tolerant of the consequences some endure for private social media posts.

The examples of such firings are illuminating because they expose the complications of this issue. The High Court ruled that Michaela Banerji, a public servant fired for tweets critical of the government, was lawfully fired because her tweets breached the public service code of conduct. [27] Sending out thousands of tweets critical of the federal government is a clear violation of the public service act. But if Banerji had worked for a different employer and was criticising them, her firing might have been unlawful.[28]

Football commentator Scott McIntyre was dismissed from the SBS network after he posted tweets criticising ANZAC Day. He took his case to the Fair Work Commission and although SBS argued he had been fired for violating the SBS code of conduct, and not for expressing his opinions freely, it settled the case out of court.[29]

Victoria's Deputy Chief Health Officer was counselled, but not suspended or fired, after she tweeted a comparison between Captain Cook and COVID-19. Victoria's public service social media guidelines state:

> Whether using social media for official use, or in a private capacity, staff must not do anything that may adversely affect their standing as a public official or which could bring themselves or the public sector into disrepute.[30]

These examples demonstrate the complexity of deciding where to draw the line between private and work life, and how that intersects with social media. Although some cases seem clear and — like Banerji — have a legal ruling behind them, others are less so.

How to Solve a Problem Like Social Media?

Things will likely become more complicated as the government further extends its reach into social media. There is already a distinct age shift in how people view regulation. Only 26% of those aged 18-24 would support regulation if it resulted in loss of certain functions compared with 55% aged 65 and over (See Chart 10). Overall, more (41.8%) said they would support regulation over those who would not (36.6%), even if it resulted in the loss of some functions they currently use (See Chart 11).

Given the scope of social media policy, the term 'regulation' encompasses many areas, and it is difficult to determine exactly what the public thinks *should* be 'regulated'. But there are already many regulation proposals for different aspects of social media. The media bargaining code, which will govern the relationship between social and traditional media, is a recent example. In addition, the issue of 'harmful' online content is a topic of discussion. The federal government proposed, in late 2020, "a world-first adult cyber abuse scheme [giving] Australia's eSafety commissioner [the ability] to order the removal of "seriously harmful" content within 24 hours if a legitimate complaint has been ignored."[31] Further, the ACCC is conducting an inquiry into "Digital advertising services", and has asked for feedback on several proposals including: the promotion and expansion of competition in "ad tech services"; rules to manage

Chart 10: If further government regulation of social media resulted in some content you can currently see or share being made unavailable or restricted, would you support that regulation? (By Age)

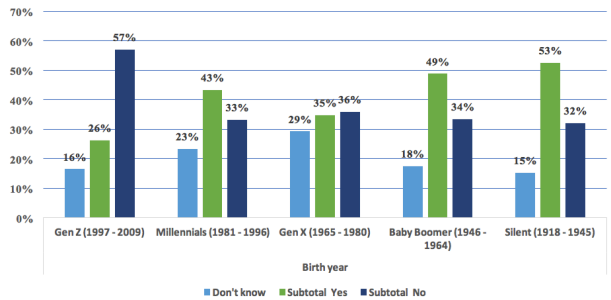
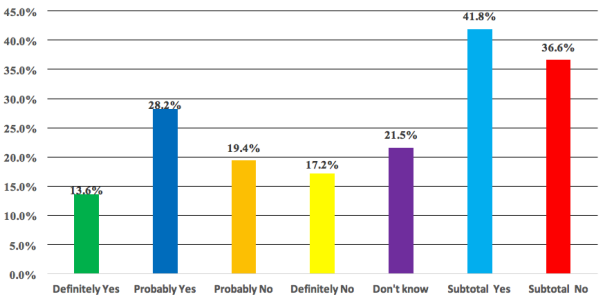


Chart 11: If further government regulation of social media resulted in some content you can currently see or share being made unavailable or restricted, would you support that regulation?



conflicts of interest; and harmonising transaction identifications.[32] Online speech and advertising are only two, of many, policy areas of social media, but they are the areas currently preoccupying governments.

It was important to ask about regulation in relation to loss of functionality. Regulation can often exist only abstractly in people's minds, and this would have been the case when the CIS poll was conducted. However, Facebook's ban on Australian news has turned into a reality the previously theoretical question of loss of functionality due to regulation.

The day of Facebook's Australian news blackout, Treasurer Josh Frydenberg spoke with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg several times, in an attempt to resolve the issue.[33] The fact Frydenberg felt resolving the issue of Australians losing the ability to view news on Facebook was of such urgency he needed to phone the company's CEO (and majority shareholder), indicates the government is aware that impeding Australians' usage of social media is a problem. The trade-off of regulation and functionality is significantly more complicated than many polls suggest, and the government will be unlikely to find popular support if they introduce measures that significantly impeded social media use.

The difference between understanding regulation abstractly, and in reality, is evident in similar polling. An Essential poll, conducted in August 2019, found 80% of Australians agreed "There should be tighter regulation of online platforms like Facebook and Google."[34] However, the poll's high level of support for regulation is unsurprising when you consider that the question was framed in a way that ignored trade-offs that would accompany regulation, such as losing access to specific content. In comparison, the CIS polling, found only 41.8% of respondents would support regulation if it meant a loss of content. This demonstrates that, when Australians weigh up regulation's trade-offs, they are far less enthusiastic about it. Somewhat expectedly, out of those who thought social media had a negative impact on society, 52.3% would support further regulation.

The differences in attitudes to regulation can also be explained by usage. Of those who are frequent users, 35.5% would support regulation, compared to 57.3% of occasional users. Further, Coalition voters were also the only category where a majority (50%) supported regulation if it resulted in a loss of function. As already discussed, this is likely to be because of the perception of anti-Conservative sentiment in social media.

There are already numerous laws governing social media, something noted by Berg and Breheny:

> The internet is not a lawless wilderness. Activity which occurs online is subject to, and constrained by, territorial law. Expression online is subject to the very same limitations as offline speech. In recent years Australian courts have applied defamation and racial vilification laws on social media and blog posts, to name just two of the most prominent cases.[35]

The calls for more regulation — despite existing legal frameworks — shows both the sheer number of areas social media touches and, on a broader scale, the degree to which regulation has increased in all other areas.

Research by academics Patrick McLaughlin, Jason Potts, and Oliver Sherouse found that regulations are becoming "more wordy."[36] While there are many possible explanations for this, one that is particularly relevant to social media is the expansion of political power. As McLaughlin, et. al. wrote:

> Increased intensity of the political process, manifesting as increased output of regulation and therefore increased bureaucracy, benefits the agents of that process, namely bureaucrats (Niskanen 1994). The direct incentives to legislators are perhaps small, but the greater quantity and complexity of legislation directly benefits the political class of public servants, whose job it is to oversee, develop, implement, and enforce these regulations.[37]

The regulation of social media has given rise to the expansion and creation of several new roles including the eSafety Commissioner, and the possible creation of a specialised department within the ACCC. As Berg explains:

> More law means more enforcement, thus more career opportunities. It also creates specialised intellectual capital that legal simplification may reduce or destroy. For example, a complicated tax system tends to increase the future income possibilities of tax officials.[38]

The desire to regulate social media, and the rise of a new bureaucracy to achieve that task, has numerous causes. But what is certain, are the challenges social media pose to those of a classical liberal persuasion.

Policy Implications

In Australia, the policy question has not been *whether* social media should be regulated, but *how*. This poses unique challenges to those who prefer government to have a light touch, and who are naturally wary of government intervention.

As American academics Justin Hurwitz and Geoffrey Manne argue, technological change poses unique risks to classical liberalism:[39]

> Technological disruptions upon existing legal institutions, creating the possibility that a technological advance could both dramatically benefit some parties but dramatically disadvantage others in indirect and unpredictable ways. Where this is the case, technology has the potential to undermine both the moral foundations and the welfare justifications for classical liberalism.[40]

Hurwitz and Manne are arguing from an American perspective and, understandably, consider the challenges posed by private governance of speech to the First Amendment — a constraint Australia does not need to consider in legal terms. Nonetheless, their insights are transferable to a local context.

A significant number of Australian politicians support some type of regulation of social media.[41] Senator Andrew Bragg argues 'Big Tech' is "a relatively new "utility"" and has thus far escaped the regulatory scrutiny of businesses of comparable size.[42]

However, this approach misunderstands the nature of social media. By comparison with barriers to entry confronting utilities such as electricity providers, those for competition online are virtually non-existent. New social media alternatives can, and do, routinely spring up. As Bill Ottman, founder of the social networking site *Minds* argues, the cure to the problems created by the current dominant social media sites, is "radical transparency."[43] Ottman believes the internet needs "a renaissance-level transformation that will see users migrate to more open networks and corporate models" — and that this will see companies publish their source codes, take privacy seriously, and have "a decentralized global infrastructure."[44]

Further, these companies and technologies are new. Companies, and society, are being forced to deal with new and ever-changing problems. Demands for the government to intervene —because social media companies have failed in some areas — are premature, especially since these companies are generally aware of the problems they face, and are implementing corrective measures. Facebook's Oversight Board is a demonstration of a civil society response that will be more effective than a regulatory body far removed from the workings of the company.

Finally, as noted by Hurwitz and Manne: "The mere fact that a new technology has some deleterious effects today does not necessarily justify corrective intervention through legal institutions."[45]

Social media is often viewed as mostly, or entirely, negative and its deleterious effects deemed so severe there is no choice but to regulate. However, the CIS polling shows Australians have a far more optimistic view of social media and that regulation risks damaging the positive aspects — thereby leaving consumers worse off.

Conclusion

There are five key conclusions to be drawn from polling conducted by CIS:

- Australians value the social benefits of being able to connect with family and friends.
- Australians want social media platforms to be politically neutral.
- There are concerns about the impact social media can have on employment.
- Regulation of social media could quickly lose its appeal if users lost a lot of the functionality and content they use and enjoy online.
- Policy makers, and politicians need to be aware of the benefits social media brings to Australians, as opposed to only focussing on the negatives.

Social media poses unique challenges to society, and government. Remarkably, social media, over the past decade has seen a heroic rise and fall. In 2013, *MIT Technology Review* ran a cover page with the headline: "Big Data Will Save Politics" and the story positing "How Technology Has Restored the Soul of Politics."[46] The pieces were praising innovations in how political campaigns were using data to target voters. Less than a decade later, the same tactics have been demonised. As writer Fraser Myers outlines:

> Today social media are blamed for a whole host of social and political ills. Everything from teenage angst to terrorism can apparently be blamed on social media. Political shocks around the world, including Brexit, Trump and the rise of populism, are blamed on the spread of fake news and misinformation via social-media platforms.[47]

This summarises concisely the complicated nature of understanding social media and its impact.

By the time there is a consensus on how to use social media, a new technology will emerge that will displace the old; and that too will come with its own benefits and drawbacks. This is especially why government should not continue to regulate social media — and serious consideration should be given to removing some of the laws already passed.

CIS polling indicates Australians greatly value the democratised nature of modern communication. Regulation of social media is not only premature, but risks disadvantaging Australians who clearly see a benefit from these technologies. Politicians should not be pollyannaish about social need, but nor should they be catastrophists.

Endnotes

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