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# **Joan Kirner Social Justice Oration 2024**

## **Pushing back – a call to rethink our relationship with social media**

Presentation by  
Hon Tanya Plibersek

[Communities in Control Conference](#)

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Video and audio versions of this speech will be posted here:  
<https://communitiesincontrol.com.au/speakers/tanya-plibersek>  
(Please note some slight variations between this transcript and  
the delivered speech.)

### **About Ms Plibersek**

Tanya Plibersek is the Minister for the Environment and Water, and the Federal Member for Sydney.

Between 2013 and 2019, Tanya was Deputy Leader of the Opposition and Deputy Leader of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party. From 2013 to 2016, Tanya was also the Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Development. From 2017 to 2022 Tanya was the Shadow Minister for Education and the Shadow Minister for Women.

Tanya served as a Cabinet minister in the Gillard and Rudd Governments. Tanya was Minister for Health, Minister for Medical Research, Minister for Housing, Minister for Human Services, Minister for Social Inclusion, and Minister for the Status of Women.

Tanya grew up in the Sutherland Shire of Sydney and is the daughter of migrants from Slovenia. Like many newly arrived migrants, Tanya's parents helped build the country in which they made their new home. Her father worked on the Snowy River hydroelectric scheme in the 1950s.

Tanya holds a BA Communications (Hons) from the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and a Master of Politics and Public Policy from Macquarie University. Before entering Parliament, Tanya worked in the Domestic Violence Unit at the NSW Ministry for the Status and Advancement of Women. Elected to Federal Parliament as the Member for Sydney in 1998, she spoke of her conviction that ordinary people working together can achieve positive change.

Tanya lives in Sydney with her husband Michael and her three children, Anna, Joseph and Louis.

## **Hon Tanya Plibersek**

It is an incredible honour to join you this evening to celebrate the legacy of Joan Kirner.

I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land where I am tonight – the Wurundjeri people, part of the Kulin Nation – and pay my respects to their Elders past and present.

And I extend that respect to all First Nations people here tonight and joining us via videolink.

I also want to acknowledge the special guests:

- Adjunct Professor Susan Pascoe, Community Directors Council Chair, Inaugural ACNC [Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission] commissioner



- Debby Blakey, CEO HESTA
- Simon Overland, CEO, Burnie City Council
- Joe Caddy, Vicar General, Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne
- Sonja Hood, ICDA [Institute of Community Directors Australia] Council and President of the North Melbourne Football Club

It was the 26th of September 1994 – thirty years ago, at Labor’s National Conference in Hobart – that the Australian Labor Party decided to introduce targets to increase the number of women MPs.

I remember very clearly the jubilation of the day – a group of us running from the bleachers where we’d been sitting onto the floor of the conference after the vote, thrilled at what this meant for the future of the party, and the future of our country.

These targets were the work of many, but Joan Kirner was the first among equals.

Joan was a pioneer. The first woman premier of Victoria, she wanted to support other women, creating a change that would endure long after she had gone.

This change would help more women to enter politics, breaking through the male dominated networks that had characterised the ALP.

Joan knew targets were good for women, good for the party, and, most importantly, good for the country.

If women were represented at the decision-making tables – in the Expenditure Review Committee, in Cabinet – the material aspects of women and children’s lives across Australia would be improved.

We saw evidence of this in the Whitlam Government, when the then Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, appointed Elizabeth Reid as the world’s first ever adviser on women’s affairs to a Prime Minister. It was a groundbreaking move.

Look at the policies that followed her appointment in 1973.



Free university education – which educated a whole generation of women and changed the trajectory of their families’ lives for the generations to follow.

No fault divorce.

Women’s refuges funded for the first time.

And the social security system changed forever with the Single Mother’s Benefit. No longer would unmarried women feel they had no choice but to give up their babies for adoption, because they couldn’t support themselves or their baby.

While influential advisers like Elizabeth Reid were pivotal, the role of women had yet to be baked into the political system. Our presence at the decision-making table was far from assured.

Joan knew this – and knew that the way to nail that down was via targets.

The targets – supported by the then-prime minister Paul Keating in 1994 – prescribed that by 2002, 35 per cent of candidates preselected for winnable federal parliamentary seats must be women, whether the ALP was in government or in opposition.

The response of the Tasmanian Liberal Premier Michael Hodgman was that “The mad-as-a-March-hare feminists have got the Labor Party firmly by the testicles ... The extreme lesbian elements which have infiltrated the ALP are delighted with their success....”

I’d say *all* elements of the ALP are delighted with the success of targets for gender equality.

For Liberals, “targets” are a dirty word – the only worse word is ‘quota’ – and because of their refusal to clear a path for women, they have found themselves to be in the wilderness, unelectable.

On paper, the Liberals have the same goal as Labor – of having 50 per cent female candidates by 2025 – but unsurprisingly Peter Dutton has stopped talking about it. They are wildly off track and will clearly fail to meet the benchmark they have set themselves.



This term, the Liberals have passed up several opportunities to bring women into

Parliament, replacing outgoing parliamentarians Scott Morrison, Stuart Robert, Karen Andrews and Marise Payne with men, and pre-selecting a man for the Dunkley by-election.

The Liberal Party has lost the women that should have been Liberal Party members and candidates to the Teals, and have consequently also lost the seats where most of their members and donors live.

In contrast, for Labor, targets have taken us from strength to strength.

We have embraced the path we set at the Labor conference in 1994 – and have taken it further. We weren't satisfied with 35 per cent.

In 2012 that first target was replaced by the 40:40:20 targets.

In 2015 we moved to a 50 per cent target by 2025.

In 2022, for the first time in Australian history, a majority-women government was elected federally, beating our own target by three years, and now there are 55 women in a Labor Caucus out of 104 MPs – or 53 per cent.

Targets are vital, but as the Liberals demonstrate, on their own they are not enough. Rule changes that cement the targets must follow. That's something the Liberals have failed to do.

And just as important as targets and rules, women entering politics need networks and resources.

Hence the creation in 1996 by Joan and others of EMILY's List in Australia.

EMILY's List was established to support, mentor and fund women candidates. Almost thirty years on, EMILY's List is still going strong.

And in the three decades that have passed, not only has Labor built a majority women federal government, 162 out of 332 Labor MPs in state and territory governments – 49 per cent – are women.

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The point of this work is not so individual women can get half the spoils. The point is that our parliaments (and any organisation) make better decisions when the people sitting around the table look more like the whole of our community.

Just as in Elizabeth Reid's time, you can see the effects on policy of more equal representation.

One of the first things the Albanese Labor Government did after we won the last election was legislate for 10 days' paid domestic violence leave.

We implemented a significant wage rise for aged care workers, around 90 per cent of whom are women. Last week's Budget includes money for more wage rises for aged care workers and early childhood educators.

Early in our term we passed legislation around the reporting and transparency of the gender pay gap – a gap that has since fallen to its lowest level on record.

And the government has supported rises in the minimum wage – which flows onto award-dependent workers, most of whom are women. Our fairer tax cuts benefit more women too, as women disproportionately benefit from our changes to give more to low and middle income workers.

More entitlements have been restored to sole parents to support their children into the teenage years.

And in last week's Budget there is money to pay superannuation on Commonwealth Paid Parental Leave, so that carers of small children are not economically disadvantaged down the line, in retirement.

Katy Gallagher has laid out a detailed, thoughtful path to gender equality and Amanda Rishworth, Linda Burney and Justine Elliot have presented a blueprint to end violence against women in a generation.

Many of these ideas have been part of our feminist wish list for as long as I can remember.

What's changed is the fact we have Ministers at the table to make the case, and a whole government willing to back them.



We've been working for decades to improve women's economic security and independence and reduce violence against women.

And I can't recall a time when government has made more progress – and made a greater financial investment.

This is all good stuff. Hard fought and hard won. I'm proud to be part of a government that takes seriously the needs of Australian women and is delivering.

And yet – who of us has not in the last few months, the last few years – felt like things are going backwards for women in some really important areas?

Who of us hasn't felt alarm, on some level – that society might be becoming more sexist and more dangerous for women – not less?

When just about every type of crime is declining except for sexual violence and harassment against women.

The events of April 13 at Bondi Junction Westfield shocked us all. This shopping centre is just down the road from my electorate – and it's somewhere where I shop, my kids shop, a great place to see a movie or just duck in to get a present.

But when six people were murdered there that Saturday – five of them women, in what appears to be a gendered attack – we all felt sick to our stomachs.

Pikria Darchia, Ashlee Good, Dawn Singleton, Jade Young and Yixuan Cheng were murdered. Along with heroic security guard – Faraz Tahir.

Other women killed this year include Molly Ticehurst, Rebecca Young, Hannah McGuire, Chaithanya 'Swetha' Madhagani, Erica Hay, and too many more.

We have this terrible roll call of women murdered – allegedly by intimate partners or former partners. This year alone – one every four days.

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Twenty-seven percent of Australian women will experience domestic violence from the age of 15. One in five (22 per cent) sexual assault.

There is, quite rightly, outrage at the rates of violence against women in this country.

Yet victim survivors share a depressing refrain.

The court process is re-traumatising.

And even if a perpetrator is found guilty under the very high criminal standard, too often the sentences don't reflect the seriousness of the crime.

We cannot claim to have achieved gender equality while women continue to be unsafe in their homes, or on our streets, or in our workplaces.

As I said, rates of almost every type of crime are falling. The exception is sexual violence and harassment against women.

So, what next? How to respond?

Of course we have made some progress, and we must acknowledge and celebrate these improvements.

Earlier this year we acknowledged 50 years since the opening of the Elsie Women's Refuge. So much has changed since then, and it is important to recognise the hard work that made that possible.

The work of activists – and victim survivors advocates including Saxon Mullins, Rosie Batty, Grace Tame, Jess Hill, Chanel Contos and Brittany Higgins – have led to changes in the law, and practice.

The second national plan on violence against women and their children, launched by Katy Gallagher and Amanda Rishworth – is a detailed, solid path to making a difference. To reducing rates of gendered violence. To improving responses.

The government has accepted and is implementing the 55 recommendations of Respect@Work, which addresses women's safety at work.

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The Jenkins Report has examined women's safety in the workplace of Parliament House and the Labor government has accepted and is implementing all 28 of those recommendations.

And we will achieve more.

Our changes to family law prioritise the best interests of children.

The Attorney-General's review of experiences of sexual assault victims in the legal system will lead to further changes designed to reduce the retraumatisation of going to court.

And there's state changes to affirmative consent and to bail laws for domestic violence offenders.

All of these are steps forward.

But I'm worried that the work of the women's movement and the family, domestic and sexual violence sector, as well as government, has run up against an insidious and powerful countervailing force.

It feels like we take two steps forward, then get shoved back a step by social media-fed-and-led misogyny.

It feels like backlash.

I'm sure some of you have read Susan Faludi's book Backlash.

Released in 1991 – it showed through meticulous research that recent gains by women – into the workforce, in equal pay, and access to education – were accompanied by a backlash.

The more women gained – the more media-driven scare campaigns started appearing, warning that educated women wouldn't be able to find husbands or that children in day care were worse off than those with stay-at-home mums.

For every step forward women took – there was something working against progress.



But what Faludi couldn't predict then – and what is dawning on us now – is that the internet – especially social media, algorithms, and artificial intelligence, is a potentially deadly accelerant. It is a facilitator and distributor of the backlash in these modern times.

What do I mean by this?

That the system itself – social media – can push users into misogynistic content. Even when they are not looking for it.

So tonight – what I want to talk about is how social media is helping to drive violence against women and girls, how artificial intelligence has the potential to make things even worse, and how we must urgently start dealing with this new frontier.

Right now, there's a generation of young men being targeted by malign influences and malign influencers.

And they are being targeted by social media algorithms only interested in profit.

We parents don't know the half of it.

How do we know what our kids are watching and consuming on their phones, when each person's feed is specifically tailored for them?

We have assumed that when our kids are on social media, they are going into a neutral space – where they have some control and choice about what they see.

We trust our kids and the values we've instilled in them.

But we can't underestimate just how powerful the anti-feminist algorithm is and how the Manosphere can radicalise young men.

And yet, as parents, when we ask why social media giants won't help us by insisting on strengthening age assurance or being more responsible with what they feed our kids, we're accused of being censors and Luddites.



## Social media

I'm not given to moral panic.

I'm an enthusiastic user of social media, both for getting my political message out – and posting photos of quolls and bettongs, bees and flowers.

Most of the time the internet is marvellous – and I'm glad to live in a time when we have it.

There are also some marvellous possibilities with advances in AI, including better healthcare.

Indeed, the great hope is AI will relieve us of many mundane tasks in the future.

But we are in an enormous period of change, and whether AI is onbalance, beneficial is yet to be determined.

## Smart phones

It's hard to remember what life was even like before social media and smart phones. But – also – it's easy to forget just how new they are.

The iPhone arrived in 2007. And with it – social media. In 2009, the like, retweet and share button transformed the social networks from more closed systems between friends, to something more akin to public broadcasting and distribution channels.

The front facing phone camera in 2010 was the start of the selfie era and Facebook acquired Instagram in 2012 – boosting its popularity – particularly among young girls.

Suddenly what was fun had darker possibilities. The front facing cameras and selfies led to a huge focus on beauty and body image. The like and retweet buttons created echo chambers and fuelled online toxicity.

And the phone itself – always there, always on – meant that you could never escape the judgement of strangers, the notifications, the bullying, the emails from your boss at all hours, and the endless, bottomless feeds.



Over the years, we've become aware of the costs, including the damage caused to our ability to focus, damage to our body image and self-esteem due to the popularity and prevalence of picture-based apps such as Instagram and Snapchat – and the burn out caused by always being on.

Then there is the dark side that has a particularly gendered lens.

## Porn

Too many kids are getting their sex ed from online porn. And today with smart phones everywhere, kids have got porn in their pockets.

Boys are learning how to treat women and girls from watching violent and degrading porn.

And from the social media Manosphere, influencers target young boys who want guidance about how to exist in the world without the old rituals and rites of passage.

The video games that young boys grow up playing are predominantly designed by men. Women working in gaming have long faced a toxic culture and backlash when they try to make games less stereotypical and include strong female characters.

According to reports by the ABC, female video game developers and critics in Australia say they have been threatened with rape and murder as part of vicious disputes around video game design.

As for the users of these games – young men who grow up with a sexist portrayal of women in video games, report stronger support for traditional masculine stereotypes and decreased empathy for female victims.

In a 2016 study, Italian high school students who played violent and sexist video games reported stronger support of traditionally masculine roles than those who played a neutral game. In addition, the study found those playing the violent and sexist game had decreased empathy for female victims.



It's not just video games that are promoting more extreme content.  
It's pornography.

Kids are watching choking and anal sex before they've even had their first kiss.  
Kids as young as 10 years old in Australia are viewing porn for the first time.

When they do become sexually active, the images imprinted on their young brains become embodied in real life. Girls are being convinced that uncomfortable, painful, violent, or degrading experiences are normal in sex.

This is changing the relationship between men and women, girls and boys. And not for the better.

The most recent data out of America, the UK and Australia shows that young men are becoming less progressive than their older counterparts. That is, they are less likely to identify as feminists than their older millennial peers.

The Survey Center on American Life found a nearly 20-point gender gap between Gen Z men and women in identifying as feminist. Only 43 per cent of Gen Z men say they generally think of themselves as 'feminist', compared to 61 per cent of Gen Z women. The gender gap is more pronounced among Generation Z than any other generation.

In contrast, according to The Survey Center on American Life, most millennial men identify as feminist – in fact, they claim the label in roughly equal numbers as millennial women.

In Australia, similar surveys align with this trend. The 2017 Young Australians' attitudes to Violence Against Women and Gender Equality survey found that 52 per cent of young men (compared with 37 per cent of young women) 'believe many women exaggerate gender inequality'.

And younger men are more likely than older men to believe that 'women prefer men to be in charge of the relationship'. What is happening to the younger generation? Why are they so different from the kids that came before?

Theories and evidence are starting to emerge.



American social scientist Jonathan Haidt [‘Height’] in his new book *The Anxious Generation* examined mental health data for young people and found that, even before the pandemic, rates of mental illness and hospital visits for adolescent psychological issues had doubled since 2010.

Doubled.

His view? Between 2010 and 2015, childhood and adolescence got rewired when smart phones became ubiquitous, and time spent in face-to-face play or playing outside independently plummeted. The loss of a play-based childhood and its replacement with a phone-based one, meant that mental distress among teenagers soared.

This theory is not without its critics. Correlation doesn’t equal causation, they argue.

But something is going on. In Australia the statistics are also extremely alarming and mirror the US experience as described in Haidt’s book.

The National Mental Health Survey in 2022 revealed the annual prevalence of mental ill health in 16 to 24-year-olds had surged from 26 per cent in 2007 to 39 per cent in 2020-22 — an unprecedented increase of 50 per cent in 15 years.

The mental health of young women is declining even more rapidly than young men. These rates of mental illness for young people are double the level of the rest of the Australian adult population.

Former Australian of the Year and mental health expert Patrick McCorry was concerned, saying, “If such a dramatic increase in prevalence had occurred in cancer, heart disease or any other major illness, it would be the catalyst for urgent and decisive action.”

The pandemic played its part – but the statistics were on the rise way before the lock downs.



This has huge cost implications. World Economic Forum modelling has revealed mental illness is the dominant health cause of loss of GDP, with double the impact of cancer.

The Productivity Commission revealed that in Australia, poor mental health and suicide could have an annual cost to the economy of up to \$200 billion.

We want people to flourish. We need to make sure that we invest more in mental health care.

We've done that in this Budget, for example, by spending \$361 million over four years to expand the range of free mental health services, including 61 free walk-in Medicare Mental Health Centres.

But we'll never be able to catch up if rates of mental distress continue to rise in the way they have. And we can't reach our target of ending violence against women in a generation, if the next generation of men is being trained by social media to hate and hurt women.

Canberra writer Carla Wilshire in her book *Time to Reboot: Feminism in the Algorithm Age* [it should be compulsory reading] writes in chilling detail how young men and boys have been pushed into more misogynistic content, even when they don't want to engage in it.

Carla's work was incredibly eye-opening for me, and I would really urge all of you to pick up a copy.

Last year, Carla's organisation, the Social Policy Group, conducted research into the attitudes of teenage boys and young men in the context of gaming and social media.

One young male interviewee described how he was constantly bombarded with content by Andrew Tate, a now jailed anti-feminist influencer.

In an attempt to beat the algorithm, this young man spent considerable time trying to alter his feed away from this type of content, but to no avail.



Even deliberate, repeated attempts by users to get away from this misogynistic content is thwarted at each turn. “It pops up, no matter what I do,” said the young man.

These social media companies could change the algorithm with adjustment of code. In the proverbial flick of a switch. So why don’t they do it?

Much of social media runs on division and conflict. Just look at X. The tweets that are the most extreme and negative, have the most engagement. More engagement means more profit.

So, if Big Tech won’t change algorithms, and if we can’t hack our way out of these misogynistic feeds, then what can we do?

We need a safer online environment for kids.

We should all strive to keep young people safer online. There is no longer a choice. We must push back.

The government has set up a parliamentary inquiry into the influence and impacts of social media on Australian society.

My colleague Michelle Rowland has brought forward a review of the Online Safety Act to keep pace with emerging harms. She is trialling age assurance technologies now. And she has quadrupled funding for the eSafety Commissioner.

The eSafety Commissioner has great resources for parents who want to keep their kids safer online.

As parents, we’ve been so, so vigilant around child safety. But we may not have been vigilant enough when it comes to social media.

We teach our kids to swim when they can barely walk. We have incredible safety standards around everything from car seats to button batteries because we want to remove any risks to our children’s physical safety.



We vaccinate. We teach our children the right way to blow their nose and wash their hands.

But when we give a child the use of an iPad or cave into their demands to get a phone or join social media – we do not have the equivalent guardrails. You wouldn't think of getting a pool today, without a pool fence.

Across many apps are laughable barriers: do you have parental permission? Check. Are you over 18? Check. The kids just have to tick a box. And then into the internet they go.

They can watch a beheading. Or a murder. They can watch porn. They can watch Andrew Tate or Jordan Peterson. They can watch hundreds and hundreds of hours of beauty tutorials or anorexia tips.

They can watch anything and everything – all of the time.

But I reckon I'm not the only one stopping to pause – and ask – should I have pushed back more against the absolute incursion of the internet and particularly social media into our lives?

Should I have pushed back harder against my children's use of social media?

And is it too late to push back now?

My children are now aged 13, 19 and 23 – but lately I have found myself wondering if I should have restricted their use of social media until they turned 16?

In fact, the front pages of last weekend's News Corp papers were asking the same question. Should we wait until our kids are 14, 15, 16 before giving them access to social media?

I can tell you, it would be much easier as a parent, if we broadly agreed on the right age for our children to engage with social media. No more kids telling you that you are ruining their lives and wrecking their friendships because they are the only ones not allowed to use Snapchat.



Increasingly the neuroscience is telling us that children's developing brains are not adequately equipped for virtual life.

We need to get them settled into actual life before we even start to think about introducing them to the virtual world.

There is something sinister in the fact that the people that invented and turbo-charged these systems – the coders and the venture capitalists – are men, who as they grew up and had families of their own, banned their children from using the very tools that they created.

Steve Jobs and Jonathan Ive designed some of the world's most desirable tech – but imposed strict limits on their own children using it.

In Silicon Valley tech execs send their kids to Montessori schools where the products they design are banned. One popular school in Silicon Valley even restricts tech to the extent that students predominantly use pen and paper.

The social media giants know they are deliberately reprogramming our kids. Like the Big Tobacco companies or gaming companies, they know a lifetime of profits depends on getting customers hooked young.

It's not hard to imagine a future where the elites of society will be the ones that are not addicted to tech. That have the luxury of switching off.

That don't need to constantly hustle for likes or retweets.  
That have a better relationship with their body image.

With nature.

Are more socially confident.

And have long lasting friendships in the real world.

And for the more disadvantaged in society?

Kids that are addicted to their phones, reliant on them for work and play, that have had their reward system and dopamine drive hacked for likes and notifications.



You may think the horse has bolted.

That once your kids have a phone you'll never prise it out of their sticky little hands. But it's not too late to start questioning our relationship with social media.

The best time to do this would have been 2007 – when we were marvelling at the first hunk of metal and glass smart phone that could seemingly do everything.

But the next best time to do it – is now.

You see, we are in this very particular hinge moment in history – when we are in the last moments before we have another huge shift – with the mainstreaming of AI in our lives.

If parents don't know the half of it now, AI will be even harder for them to cope with and comprehend.

Very soon, AI will have crashed through and transformed society in ways that many of us don't yet understand.

We must seriously consider pushing back against some of the more dangerous elements of AI, in a way we didn't push back in 2007.

We can't allow open slather in AI as we did with social media, because the harms are already becoming apparent.

Take the deepfake porn apps. You feed a photo of a real person into the app, which then spits out an ultra-realistic pornographic or nude picture of that person. Funnily enough, some of the most popular apps don't work on male bodies. Just young girls and women.

This is a global problem. Last year, Miriam al-Adib's 14-year-old daughter showed her a deepfake pornographic image of herself that had been doing the rounds of her school in Spain.



“The image is completely realistic ... If I didn’t know my daughter’s body, I would have thought that image was real,” Miriam told the Guardian newspaper. It was just one of dozens of nude images of schoolgirls in a Spanish town that had been generated by AI and which had been circulating in the community for weeks in a WhatsApp group set up by other schoolchildren.

Trying to shut the app down was almost impossible for parents and authorities – with journalists eventually tracing the company responsible to a headquarters in Belarus and Russia, via businesses registered in Europe, and a front company in London.

These apps and fake images are being used to bully, harass, and cause immense distress to young girls who are pornified by their classmates.

And the shonky shopfronts that some of these companies set up around the world, make them hard to police and regulate.

In Australia, this deepfake technology is being used to torment children.

Parents interviewed by News Corp papers tell horror stories about their children taking their own lives after being bullied and threatened by such fake images.

There were so many shocking stories – including that of Tilly Rosewarne from Bathurst who was bullied from Grade 5 onwards but found it escalated when one kid faked a porn photo of her and put it on Snapchat.

Tilly suicided.

Carla Wilshire calls it an epidemic of non-consent.

Bullying follows these kids home from school via social media and their phones. They can never escape. And it becomes a million times more toxic and powerful when combined with deepfake porn apps.

This stuff matters in the real world. What is happening virtually impacts what happens in our homes and our schools.

The government is acting.



We will introduce legislation to ban the creation and non-consensual distribution of deepfake pornography.

These reforms will make clear that those who seek to abuse or degrade women through doxxing, deepfakes, or by abusing their privacy online, will be subject to serious criminal penalties.

In the most recent Budget, we have also funded a rapid review of research into perpetrators that we expect will cover their use of social media and technology.

Researchers in the areas of domestic and sexual violence – Jess Hill and Michael Salter – are explicit about the connection between porn and rates of violence against women.

Professor Salter said last month, “The technology sector is profiting from services and products that cause mass social harm, including violence against women and children.”

The most recent research shows porn related searches and downloads ranges between 10 to 20 per cent of overall internet traffic.

While research on the algorithm on porn sites is just beginning, what is clear from studies, is that people are being shown and recommended new and more extreme forms of porn compared to what they searched for or even expressed a desire in.

## Connection

You can see why I’m starting to believe that this era – the last 20 years or so – will be looked on by future generations with some dismay.

Did we really give tiny children a portal into a world that we could not see, where forces that we could not control, could undo the work of so much of history’s recent progress?

Just like we now think with horror of children sent to work in factories at 12.

Or letting 14-year-old kids smoke.



No guardrails and the worst instincts of humanity – the black mirror – allowed to flourish.

Young, developing brains rewired after prolonged exposure to social media.

The thing social media promised – connection – it actually stole.

The young generation that grew up online – is it any surprise that they are the loneliest, the most anxious and most depressed generation in history?

We need each other. Five hundred Facebook friends do not come near one good real friend in our life, who actually will hug us when we're down.

So how do we fix this?

There are no easy answers. But we can take steps which might, together, help improve the situation.

We need to be as inventive and creative in our solutions, as the tech itself. And this should include challenging algorithms that push harmful and misogynistic content.

We can be more conscious and vigilant to the threats of emerging technology – particularly AI.

We accepted the last big tech revolution almost without question – but we can start to question things now. After all – it's our mental health. It's our kid's mental health.

We can ask the politicians to do what they can. My colleagues, Michelle Rowland and Ed Husic are doing fantastic work in this area.

But governments face challenges too. For example, when the company is in a different jurisdiction such as X, they become more difficult to regulate, as we saw with the explicit and upsetting Sydney church stabbing video available on the platform.

There is the possibility of watermarking AI-generated content so people can tell the difference between real and fake content.



We can start to think differently and creatively about how regulation might work.

We are more prepared than other countries to step in and regulate tech giants.

Three years ago – the federal government did a deal with the big tech companies to pay for journalists for their work.

We are now reliving this struggle as Facebook once again threatens to ban news if required to spend money to contribute to the cost of creating the news content it is sharing.

We must keep on pushing back.

These companies seem to think they are completely outside the law.

This is a conundrum for all societies: how do we protect free speech without promoting hate speech?

Silicon Valley was built on a deliberately libertarian ethos. But most Australians would not agree that protecting children from harm is government oppression.

Then there's personal responsibility.

We can control our tech diet. Just like we can choose what to eat, we can monitor what we feed ourselves and what we feed our children.

As I said in the wake of the Bondi stabbing – you can also turn it off. Just turn it off.

Of course its hard when tech companies invest so much to get our kids hooked, but you can see movements across the world are starting to spring up – including in Australia – aimed at bringing older notions of childhood back.

Less time on your phone, more freedom to explore and take risks in the outside world.

It's good for kids' brains and bodies to explore this way and both the federal government and the states are looking at how they can support this with school phone bans, and the social media age restrictions I have already mentioned.

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We are beginning to learn what the titans of tech always knew – too much of the virtual stuff is bad for us, and it's definitely bad for our kids.

We can become more conscious users of tech – aware of the unseen algorithm and where we're directed on social media.

We can push back. We can reclaim our time and our brains, and our sense of safety.

And we can reclaim childhood for our kids, who rely on us to help them navigate all the wonders and perils of growing up.

Thank you.

ENDS

## **MORE INFORMATION**

For reports, audio, transcripts and video from the 2024 Communities in Control conference and from previous years, visit [www.communitiesincontrol.com.au](http://www.communitiesincontrol.com.au).

