

Inquiry Into the Harm Young New Zealanders Encounter Online and Roles that Government, Business, and Society Should Play in Addressing Those Harms

1. "I believe the West made a mistake allowing those providers to be irresponsible," he said. "We've got these megalomaniacal tech billionaires, who are very greedy and selfish, and who are selling a dangerous product, which is undermining the mental health of young people."

He did not hold back on social media giants, describing their platforms as among the world's "great evils" and a threat to democracy. He said the ability to promote misinformation and propaganda online struck "at the heart of democracy".

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/557607/shoot-me-retiring-mp-david-parker-dismisses-prospect-of-wellington-mayorality-bid>

2. David Parker's quote above represents well my view of tech billionaires and their dangerous products lacking robust safeguards which micro-targeted psychologically manipulative and advanced algorithmically driven content to people unprepared to manage its impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

3. David Parker, a Lawyer and Minister for Economic Development, aptly describes these platforms in my opinion and below I describe why. I provide details of the nature of online harm, its severity, and prevalence as experienced as an individual and parent, as a professional fulfilling employment support contracts and, as expressed to me by young New Zealanders. I share clear and actionable, speedy, and practical solutions for government, business, and society to address the harm.

NATURE OF HARM

4. I never joined Facebook. I thought about it, I even started the process of joining until I was prompted to provide the platform with access to all of my contacts in Gmail. At that time, pre 2016, I thought to myself, why would I do that and then quickly backed out of the sign up process.

5. However, I became curious again in 2015/2016 while watching what was coming through on my husband's feed as he did have a Facebook account. As a regular lurker, I remember seeing several posts in his feed denigrating Hillary Clinton. We know now about the Facebook - Cambridge Analytica data scandal. Here's a link that describes in detail the unethical business practices involving individual psychological profiling and micro-targeting tailored to individuals' psychological states and traits, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge_Analytica.

6. As a dual NZ/USA citizen, I'm embarrassed to admit that the daily dose of anti-Hillary posts on Facebook did in fact influence our vote in the 2016 US Presidential election. I definitely was NOT going to vote for "grab 'em by the pussy" Trump however, the smear campaign against Hillary Clinton micro-targeting my husband was effective and we ended up casting our vote for the Independent candidate with the hope that if enough people did, it could break the two party system in the US which we feel is not healthy for its democracy (if that is still what it is).

7. Just last week, we saw the shareholder's lawsuit against Zuckerberg for the fine imposed on META for using tens of millions of people's personal data without their knowledge or permission to enable the Cambridge Analytical scandal was settled before the trial commenced. I say what a shame the slithering snake of a man and the others involved called to testify can slide away without public scrutiny and greater accountability. However, there are thousands of other lawsuits filed by parents and schools naming META as defendants that are underway. I wish deeply for their success.

8. As a staunch women's rights advocate, the impact of the harm resulting from the micro-targeted psychological manipulation and the illegal use of my husband's personal data was felt most keenly after Trump 'won' the 2016 election and started stacking the SCOTUS with religious zealots and conservative judges who enabled the overturning of Roe v Wade in 2022. I would describe the severity of witnessing the ripple effect of that decision to repeal Roe v Wade and the preventable harm experienced by women across my birth country as high. I am livid that women in many states in my birth country are not trusted with decisions about their private reproductive healthcare including abortion, that they are being actively surveilled, and put in greater danger as a result.

9. As a parent, I will not relay our private details here but I will confirm the critical severity of the impact of online harm experienced by our family. In addition to experiencing it at home, I was exposed to it professionally, too. In my role providing employment support to hundreds of people over the period of 2021 to 2025, I regularly heard stories of other people's children's online challenges

including phone addictions, cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content, and self-harm.

10. Teens describe to me their extreme fear of missing out, the online bullying they experience or, witnessing others' private photos passed around local schools. I learn how they are exposed to harmful content on Instagram, Tik Tok, and Pinterest and how these online harms contribute to their self-harm addiction. I am told that when someone is sad and goes online to seek information or belonging, they are fed a steady stream of other sad people making online videos, many of them with suicide ideation, bearing cutting scars or, actively cutting themselves. I am aware of a dozen or more girls at a local school who were cutting or engaged in a warped competition to see who could be the 'most fucked up'. This kind of peer contagion spreads quickly online.

11. I learn from other young people about the impacts resulting from instant gratification and advanced algorithms feeding them harmful content (and the dangers to critical thinking skills by being fed non-harmful content, too). They describe gaming online and encountering random rude or toxic people every couple of days and how it tanks their mood. Some share they realise they were starting to reflect that toxic behaviour back but come to understand that it is not a good thing to do and curtail their gaming activities. I hear from many young people experiencing back issues from sitting too long.

12. A seminar on self-harm held by our local Injury Safe organisation sold out in minutes; such is the prevalence of online harm being experienced by families in my small region. Several of the jobseekers I supported bore visible self-harm marks on their shoulders, arms and legs. A young hospitality worker at my local cafe tries to cover hers with tattoos. I saw them on the legs of a woman watching live music on our foreshore. It is always confronting to see them because cutting is a behaviour I had no knowledge of or even knew 'was a thing' in all my life until 5 years ago. Now I am hyper aware of it due to its prevalence and other preventable harm caused by negligent use of technology (looking at you Foodstuffs).

13. The high impact at work coupled with the critical impact at home resulted in me tendering my resignation. The mental load was simply too much to bear. The loss of income as a result of dealing with post traumatic stress disorder is ongoing. I wonder what the impact of online harm is having on New Zealand's overall productivity?

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN ADDRESSING ONLINE HARMS

14. I believe it is the role of the local and central government to not treat New Zealand as a country 'open for business' but as a country of people it has a duty to protect and lift up. One clear, practical and actionable solution is to funnel advertising dollars away from META toward ethical social platform alternatives. The speed of this practical step can start with a 12 - 18 month long awareness and change campaign to prepare people for this important move and why.

15. To build on paragraph 14, I wholly object to the use of my local rates or central taxes to be spent on advertising on unethical social platforms by any government agency including current spenders: Ministry of Justice, Department of Internal Affairs, Inland Revenue, Tourism New Zealand, NZ Police, Electoral Commission, Stats NZ, Dept. of Conservation, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Social Development.

16. Additionally, I find it abhorrent that IRD shared the personal details of New Zealanders with Facebook, an abusive company I deeply loathe. An immediate, speedy, reasonable, and practical action for the government is to assure us our personal details will never be shared with facebook or other unethical platforms again.

17. Another action the government must take is to stop assuming all people have social media accounts. It is rare, I know, to not be on social media however, in my work I have encountered a handful of people like myself who choose not to share their data with unethical businesses. I think it is the role of the government to realise we exist, respect our choice, and not force the use of unethical platforms as modes of vital communication.

18. Another clear and actionable solution the government can take to address online harm is to begin a class action lawsuit naming META as a defendant. The speed of this step will take years, no doubt, as megalomaniacal billionaires like to hold on to their ill-gotten gains yet, it would be a practical step to help bolster our support services that are being crushed by the weight of need in this country. Child Adolescent and Mental Health Services urgently require greater staffing levels and resources to address the fallout from the addictive playgrounds created by tech billionaires. They should be funding these services given the causal relationship of the global doubling of self harm and suicide because their platforms targeting young people lack robust safeguards.

19. Another clear and practical action our Government can take to address online harm is to remove META as a funding stream to Netsafe so they are a truly independent provider of online education and safety. The New Zealand government can be looking to implement a regulatory body like Ofcom in the UK, to ensure

platforms comply with safety standards and human rights protections, as long as it is given 'teeth' to do its job to protect us from online harm. These regulation improvements are needed to combat cyberbullying, misinformation, and digital exploitation, too.

20. The role of the government to address online harm can be extended to solutions which impact the overall effort to stop ratcheting up levels of anxiety already heightened due to the myriad of online harms. This includes prohibiting the use of invasive surveillance technology in our essential services and where public life convenes, not giving police more powers to widely and unjustifiably access ANPR, AUROR, CCTV, live FRT, and similar surveillance or, randomly test us by inserting a swab into our bodies or, carry firearms or, allow more centre focused semi automatics in this country. It can include, too, a review of the absurd use of Acusensus cameras on our roadways which are able to see in our cars and what our hands are doing. We should look, too, at lockdowns rebranded in New Zealand as 'reverse evacuation drills' in our schools; the majority that have occurred do not involve direct threats made to students or the school. It is these knee jerk over-reactions along with the above, that serve to ratchet up social anxiety. We should be working to reduce it, not create it.

THE ROLE OF BUSINESS IN ADDRESSING ONLINE HARMS

21. The role of Business in addressing online harm is to make sure when employees come to them asking for support they have an EAP or similar in place. Importantly, they need to conduct a timely follow up with the employee to make sure they have received help. Critically, they must never single out employees to point out to the wider team that they're the reason for starting an EAP at the business.

22. The role of Business in addressing online harms extends to their choice of advertising, too. From what I have witnessed, I wonder why would any business spend advertising dollars on an unethical company like Facebook? I realise it now claims 2 billion active daily users however, its size shouldn't make it so they can set such an evil standard (of behaviour) and people are expected to walk by it, ignore or, rationise it.

23. Further, businesses need to stop expecting employees to be OK with the use of META owned platforms/tools (E.g Whatsapp for group messaging). Additionally, it should not work against someone's ability to secure employment because they don't have a social media account or use Linkedin. Assuming all people do and, should be, is incorrect thinking. I believe business owners can show a greater respect for privacy and concern for ethics through the choice of tools they use.

THE ROLE OF SOCIETY IN ADDRESSING ONLINE HARMS

24. The role of Society to practically address online harms is clear. Our young people especially are bearing the brunt of over exposure and the cracks are showing. And, really, just how wide do they need to get before we start the healing process? The action we can take right now is to switch off from unethical platforms, refuse to compensate our abusers, and leave our phones at home more often when we go out.

25. Young people share with me their solutions and that they are seeing more of their friends with flip phones and opting out of social media altogether. They suggest using social media as a reward only (after getting stuff done). They say it's the parents job to set screen time limits. Additionally, for the gamers, they'd like more accessible local arenas where they can come together for esports.

26. To build on paragraph 25, I do believe parents have a responsibility to protect their children from harm. However, it is also true that if you develop a product and advertise it to young people seeking to maximise their engagement with it, it is the company's duty to ensure their product is safe. When a company sees that it is not, they pay reparations for the harm they have caused and fix the product. Ethical companies don't implement 'ghost' fixes or worse, turn their back on their responsibilities and expect others to find solutions.

25. What will the result of Australia's efforts with age verification be I wonder? Maybe that's not an action NZ Society wants to take, maybe it is, but another clear and speedy action we can take to address online harm is engaging more in real life and stop feeding the need to add to your content stream with photos of everywhere you are and, with, at all times. Raising public awareness and digital literacy levels will help, but it's vital our schools and universities teach and practice critical thinking skills.

26. Let's bring back the jobs for nature programme to get people outside, moving, and collaborating. Empower young people with policies like the teal card which enables young people to easily access healthcare, transport and financial support. Rather than enlisting people into boot camps, let's extend the limited services volunteer programs or initiatives which create a positive culture shift. We are failing to protect young New Zealanders from greedy and careless tech billionaires.

27. Thank you, David Parker, for showing the courage to speak up and represent what many of us are thinking and in my case, expressing in unhealthy, angry emails to support@fb.com and press@fb.com . Maybe as a tool, led by wholly different people unsullied by past decisions to knowingly harm people, social

platforms can retain their beneficial uses or be designed in a safer, more transparent way. However, the impact of social media I've witnessed and experienced personally and professionally since 2016, has been a net loss.

28. I end my submission with the fervent hope that platform owners, CEOs, and their executive leadership teams are held accountable and pay dearly for the preventable harm their products lacking robust safeguards have caused me, my family, my local community, the country of New Zealand, my birth country, and the world at large. I want to see prison sentences handed to Mark Zuckerberg, Sheryl Sandberg, Adam Mosseri, Chris Cox, Guy Rosen, Nick Clegg, Andrew Bosworth, and Mike Schroepfer who knew their META products were causing harm (Frances Haugen, whistleblower #1) then implemented 'ghost' fixes (Arturo Bejar, whistleblower #2) only to continue their greedy and careless ways (Sarah Wyn-Williams, whistleblower #3).

29. Failing that given jurisdictional issues, I expect to see actions and solutions from this coalition government, from business owners, and society to address online harms. Personally, I will never use a META owned platform (there are 91 so far); such is the depth of my knowledge and feeling that we should not be compensating our abusers.