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Pivot to the Positive: The Australian Approach

The last 10 years have seen considerable focus and investment in cybersafety by the Australian Government, industry and non-profits. Incorporating a hybrid of approaches from all around the globe, Australia has developed its own innovative approach to the new technologies that are strengthening and creating ties to neighboring countries and to the wider world.

In June 2013, FOSI partnered with Telstra and held a forum entitled “Global Digital Citizenship: Encouraging Safe and Responsible Use Online.” The event aimed to bring together stakeholders from across Australia and the surrounding region to talk with those from the US and Europe about best practices, initiatives and educational programs that promote digital citizenship. The informative one-day event was grounded in Australian culture, society and politics so as to ensure that solutions and discussions were applicable to the region.



Australia has a population of 23 million people, of which, just under 5 million are below the age of 15. As a country, they have a history of good work in the field of Internet safety and security. This has included ongoing engagement in global efforts to combat online child abuse material, the regulation of illegal and offensive content through the Broadcasting Services Act of 1992 and the classification of online games. Most recently, cyberbullying has become a cause of concern for the Government and provisions were made in the Telecommunications Act to include online offenses of harassment and stalking.

A particular event of global note was the 2009 attempt to require Internet Service Providers to filter content that was given a ‘Refused Classification’ rating. RC-related material included child sexual abuse material, images depicting bestiality, sexual violence (including rape), and detailed instructions on drug use or on committing crimes. This material was already subject to ‘take-down’ requests, but the proposal dictated filtering at a national level. The list of sites would have been compiled through a public complaint mechanism and maintained by a government agency. The proposal was widely criticized in Australia and around the world, as it was considered heavy-handed and perpetuated common concerns around filtering. Mainly, there were fears that legitimate websites would be blocked, the filter could be bypassed and serious freedom of speech arguments, especially given that the list of blocked websites was to be kept secret. Ultimately the legislation was dropped.

To focus solely on the proposal to filter the Internet, would be doing a disservice to many of the positive steps that the Government and other interested parties have taken in Australia. In 2008, the Labor Government launched the [Cybersafety Plan](#), formed a Consultative Working Group and established a Select Parliamentary Committee on Cybersafety. This has been followed by years of diligent work on cybersafety and wellness, not to mention recently renewed commitments on these issues from both the Labor party and the opposition Liberal party.

The Labor Government launched a comprehensive cybersafety plan to combat online risks and help parents and educators protect children from inappropriate material. \$125.8 million was committed over four years, and measures included funding for cybersafety education and awareness raising activities, as well as content blocking and additional money for law enforcement activities.

In June 2013 the Government released an update to this strategy and expressed its hopes to coordinate a new set of cybersecurity and safety initiatives. This will include online safety tools and programs, coordinated cybersafety awareness raising and Government-industry cooperation. An integral part of this strategy was the development of a set of digital citizenship best practice principles by the media regulator, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). The principles will be

anchored around the pillars of “Engage positively, Know your online world, and Choose Consciously” shortened to “Engage/Know/Choose.” The “Digital Citizen’s Guide” will be released in late July.

Also in 2013, the opposition coalition, formed of the Liberal party and the National party, released their cybersafety policies. The priorities contained within [“The Coalition’s Discussion Paper on Enhancing Online Safety for Children”](#) included the establishment of a Children’s e-Safety Commissioner, more Australian-based research of Internet-related benefits and risks to children, and an adaptation of the UK Government’s “Active Choice Plus” model that would require that all parental controls in all technology devices be turned on by default.

It is clear that, come what may in the election this year, issues of cybersafety and digital citizenship will remain a priority for the ruling party.

As with most countries, the responsibility for Internet privacy and safety is spread over a number of government departments and agencies. In Australia, this includes the Departments of Education, Health & Aging, Families and the Attorney General’s Department; additionally the brief is shared between the federal Government and the States. At a national level, there are three key bodies responsible for cybersafety: the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy; the Australian Communications and Media Authority; and the Australian Federal Police.

The Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy (DBCDE) is charged with transforming the structure of telecommunications, engineering the switchover to digital television and enhancing the broadcasting sector, realizing the digital economy and enabling a good consumer experience. They must also promote policies that ensure safe, secure and positive online experiences for all users. As part of this mandate, the Department manages the Consultative Working Group on Cybersafety (CWG).

The CWG is expected to provide advice on measures to protect Australian children from online challenges such as cyberbullying, exposure to illegal content and privacy risks. The group meets quarterly and is constituted of representatives from industry, governments and non-profits. As part of the Cybersafety Plan, under which the CWG was formed, the Government also foresaw the creation of the Youth Advisory Group on Cybersafety (YAG). This is a group of young Australians, aged between 8 and 17, who provide advice to government on cybersafety issues. YAG works alongside the Teachers and Parents Advisory Group on Cybersafety.

Two achievements of note by the CWG include the “Cooperative Arrangement for Complaints Handling on Social Networks,” which was developed in conjunction with industry to improve the information that is provided to users on the handling of complaints. Additionally, “The Cybersafety Help Button” which particularly provides children and young people with easy online access to counseling, reporting and information on cybersafety issues. This too was developed with industry, to ensure that there was not interference with service or the mechanisms provided by individual companies.

About FOSI

The Family Online Safety Institute is an international, non-profit organization which works to make the online world safer for kids and their families. FOSI convenes leaders in industry, government and the non-profit sectors to collaborate and innovate new solutions and policies in the field of online safety. Through research, resources, events and special projects, FOSI promotes a culture of responsibility online and encourages a sense of digital citizenship for all.

In addition to being the regulator for Australia’s media, telecommunications, broadcasting and information technology, the ACMA plays a significant role in Internet safety. The Authority manages the Cybersmart program, which provides information for children, young people, parents, teachers and library staff on online safety. The ACMA also operates the Cybersmart Online Helpline and is now charged with developing their digital citizenship principles and corresponding Guide.

Finally, the Australian Federal Police (AFP) bears responsibility for the prevention and detection of online criminal activity at the Federal level. They work nationally and internationally, notably as part of the Virtual Global Taskforce regarding child abuse material. Furthermore, they engage in proactive education programs to raise awareness of some of the challenges that children can face online.

All three key bodies were represented at FOSI’s Forum in June 2013, where the discussion ranged across a broad variety of topics as they related to digital citizenship and online safety. Global companies, such as Microsoft and Facebook, talked about the importance of adapting their products and approaches to the local culture in which they are operating. The non-profits organizations present highlighted their work and called on others involved in similar efforts not to reinvent the wheel, but to draw on their experiences and knowledge when designing new initiatives. Australian Government representatives and domestic companies focused on the work that was being done in the country and learned from other programs being run around the world.

An intriguing and ground-breaking part of the event was the conversation that centered on the concept of wellbeing and the contention that you can have wellbeing without safety, but you cannot have safety without wellbeing. The positive role of technology in the lives of young people and its use in the treatment of certain mental health conditions was also emphasized. Young people who were involved in the forum, as well as those who work with children and teenagers, urged industry and government not to focus solely on the risks but to remember the many positives and life-enriching experiences that the Internet can provide when thinking about these issues.

This focus on wellbeing in Australia is far ahead of much of what we have recently seen in the United Kingdom and United States. The UK is currently preoccupied with inappropriate content that may be accessed by children, while the US remains concerned with the protection of children’s privacy and the changes to the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act Rule. While these are important issues that deserve attention, focusing on the negatives of the Internet rather than the positives means that children can be denied the chance to use the Internet in a way that enhances their lives and broaden their horizons.

A global pivot to the positive will reassure children of the good that can be experienced online and will allow them to learn and develop into media literate digital citizens ready to actively participate in the 21st Century.

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