

Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures submission to the Education and Workforce Committee for the inquiry into the harm young New Zealanders encounter online, and the roles that Government, business, and society should play in addressing those harms.

We request the opportunity to make an in-person submission.

Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures is New Zealand's independent, non-partisan boundary organisation focused on long-term issues and bridging the gap between complexity, evidence and decision making.

Our work encompasses a number of themes relevant to your enquiry including youth mental health, living with advanced technology and the changed information environment. We have published reports in all these domains¹⁻⁶ and our work is well respected nationally and internationally.

The issue of online harm to youth people is directly linked to the extensive work Koi Tū has conducted over recent years on the factors affecting mental wellbeing in young New Zealanders. New Zealand youth have a high rate of compromised social and mental wellbeing as is the case in other developed countries. There are multiple factors; the digital milieu cannot be seen in isolation as a factor and indeed may not be the primary factor affecting wellbeing. Neither our extensive review of the issues nor our recent formal investigation by structured discussion with many young New Zealanders would suggest that.^{1,2,7} Rather, the digital landscape is an additional factor adding to complex developmental and concurrent environmental influences that put further stress on young people. There are underlying sociological, educational and technological reasons that explain why young people are now increasingly ill-prepared for the world they live in. Failures in policy foresight are now obvious in retrospect.

We would make the following points which we would be happy to expand on in oral submission.

Harm is a complex concept

The concept of harm is complex. Addressing 'online harm' would involve understanding what is intended to be harmful and what young people perceive as harmful. One example of online harm is hate speech. In this context, one must distinguish between the content created with malevolent intent or if, despite benign intent, the content has been perceived by the recipient as harmful. The issues of how young people respond to trigger messages, especially in higher education, illustrate these two very different types of situations and the difficulties that then emerge.

Young people with impaired socioemotional development (about 35% of young people due to factors discussed elsewhere in our reports) are likely to be more sensitive to perceiving harm even when not intended.^{1,2} As we previously pointed out in reports to the government, suicidal intentions can be precipitated in young people by the perception of harm even if it was not intended.⁸ This is irrespective of the mode of communication – virtual or real.

Social media and online experiences

There is no doubt that social media and its pervasiveness have captured young people as much as if not more than adults. However, objective measures of what young people are doing online are largely missing and further investigation into the specificities of how social media and youth mental health are related is needed. This is difficult research for many reasons – there are many constructive reasons for why young people are on devices and most research does not distinguish these well, nor do they account for how the ongoings online often reflect and co-occur with what is happening within a young person's life offline. As a result, there is no consensus in scientific literature, with many studies reaching conclusions through very limited methodologies. The nature of the research needed is difficult, and I currently lead a major study in Singapore exploring these issues.

The very nature of social media is intentionally designed to capture and retain attention. It also allows messages to be spread rapidly and anonymously, and in some cases stores messages indefinitely. The way these features have changed discourse has pervaded every aspect of society and its institutions, including politics. Ad hominem attacks and aggressive are now normalised. Slander and libel laws have become impotent in reducing such messaging in the virtual world. The failure to make platform companies responsible for their content is, in retrospect, a global error of inadequate technology foresight and policy cowardice which, pragmatically, is now impossible to reverse.

Sociological and cultural changes over the last 40 years have led to societal boundaries being blurred.³ Norms have changed, and young people are navigating a social landscape where what is acceptable fluctuates – this is impacting on their education, socialisation, identity and behaviors in ways that both affect peer-to-peer and peer-to-adult relationships.

The nature of globalised technologies is such that it is unlikely, even if it is desirable, that the platform companies will take responsibility as publishers. Technological fixes are perhaps possible but again unlikely to be acceptable to the purveyors of the online world who promote the 'free speech' argument in a hyperbolic way that reflects their interests rather than that of protecting liberal democracy.

Strengthening resilience in young people

Given this, the answers must lie in strengthening children's capacity to cope with stress and information. This requires attention to their early development of robust executive functions in the first 5 years of life which requires attention to factors including maternal mental health, caregiver-infant interactions, and early childhood education.⁹⁻¹¹ It requires addressing the manifest and naïve gaps in primary and secondary education that must be filled to assist young people to navigate the changed information environment and the digital world. This also requires the recognition of young people as stakeholders of their own well-being and partnership with young people to understand the problems they encounter and co-design what would best support them to flourish.

Much is known on how to increase psychological resilience prospectively in childhood,⁵ so adolescents are more resilient, but this requires a systematic approach across agencies and the community. This does not yet exist in New Zealand, and it should be a non-partisan issue. It

requires considerable rethinking of aspects the compulsory education years and consideration of early intervention programmes for stressed young people. Much could be delivered online with appropriate validated programmes – but again, New Zealand introduces programmes that are not validated (e.g., Gumboot Friday). Whether delivered in-person or applied virtually, unvalidated programmes can risk greater harm than good (as has been seen previously in drug education programmes). There is an important opportunity now to leverage validated strategies to address the negative online experiences young people may face and support the development of young people's resilience.

We are happy to expand orally on any of the issues raised.



Sir Peter Gluckman

Koi Tū Managing Trustee

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