eSafety **Youth Council**

Submission to the WSIS+20 review

We're ready to be part of the future...

We are the eSafety Youth Council, 16 young people with diverse lived experiences, gender identities and cultures, representing all states and territories across Australia. The eSafety Youth Council gives young Australians a direct line to the Australian Government and eSafety, ensuring young people remain central in the decision-making process for online safety policies and programs impacting them, now and into the future.

From cyberbullying and harmful algorithms to the digital divide and online harassment, we've seen firsthand the challenges that need urgent attention. But we haven't stopped at identifying problems - we also propose practical, youth-informed solutions that reflect what safety, inclusion, and empowerment should look like in the online world.

If WSIS is to truly build a people-centred society, then it must centre young people in that vision, not just as users of the internet, but as leaders and decision-makers.

Through youth consultations and engagements, it is clear that young people want to interact more with government and industry. Society now has a responsibility to listen and act on our recommendations and contributions and embed these insights into decisions affecting our future.

We're ready to be part of the future.

📢 Including youth voice in governance

We urge decision-makers to create meaningful and ongoing opportunities for young people to participate in the governance of the internet. As the first generation to grow up entirely online, we bring lived experience and unique insights into how digital spaces impact and influence our daily lives. To achieve meaningful change over the next 10 years, we must empower young people and uplift their voices within all areas of digital governance. Consultation and tokenistic youth advisory councils without real power is not enough - a digital world for young people must be designed and co-governed with them. Government and big tech companies must commit to meaningful inclusion of young people through true collaboration, with young people engaged as equal members of governance boards and committees, their voices holding equal weight in decision-making processes that impact them.

👀 Transparency for a safer internet

The internet should be a place where young people can be their true selves, open about their age, gender, race, religion, sexuality, and/or disability, without fear of harassment or discrimination. But right now, that's far from reality. As social media platforms cut back on fact-checkers and rely more on unreliable AI

moderation, our safety online is more at risk than ever. To make safety a reality, platforms must give users the tools to spot misinformation and think critically, making transparency a core priority.

Governments must hold big tech companies to account, requiring more transparency and improved action to address harm, and work together to ensure a stronger global system - one that responds quickly to disinformation and cyber-attacks, tracks offenders, and protects digital archives that support fact-checking. Because in the end, the internet should empower us, not manipulate us.

📖 Digital empowerment

Technology has the capacity to cause harm, and at times, is purposefully designed to do so. We feel that algorithms are constructed to entrap young people in an endless scroll, isolate us within social and political bubbles, and feed harmful content when we're at our lowest. Too often, young people aren't given the opportunity to effectively strengthen the skills needed to navigate online spaces confidently and safely, so we're calling for essential digital literacy skills to be taught in schools globally. Young people need to be able to critically analyse and engage with online information and identify media bias, understand and communicate data, effectively and responsibly use digital tools, and manage the impact of digital use on their wellbeing. Real digital empowerment also means giving young people the opportunity to gain recognised, practical skills through partnerships between schools, universities, and industries, such as the opportunity to gain micro-credentials that are relevant and respected in today's world.

📞 Social media and algorithms

Social media is an everyday part of young people's lives, allowing us to maintain and navigate connections and relationships, however it can also target the vulnerabilities of young people. We suggest an increase in co-developed wellbeing features to help manage the balance between online and offline interactions and support healthy online habits. A 'reset algorithm' button should be made easily accessible on all social media platforms, and the use of AI algorithms such as recommender systems must be heavily monitored and regulated as the resulting echo chambers have been proven to have a detrimental impact not only on the societal and political views of a young person, but also their mental health. In addition, those who identify as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) should not be disadvantaged by AI algorithms that cycle majority culture and should instead be empowered to share their stories and culture with the world so that the digital sphere is more diverse and open to all.

💻 Closing the digital divide

Poor internet connectivity can be isolating for young people in regional and remote communities, restricting them from participating in an increasingly digital world. There is a genuine disparity between those in metropolitan areas with reliable internet access and those who don't have the same luxury due to their location. Similarly, individuals who require support to access the internet in the form of inclusive technologies or due to financial constraints, should not be disadvantaged.

Governments must address this digital divide to ensure an accessible and inclusive online space. This could include investing in a global broadband infrastructure, developing satellite internet connectivity that is affordable and accessible to all and removing paywalls from vital services like news and academic journals and creative/educational software such as video editing or programming.

⏰ Time for action

Over the next decade, the decisions we make will define whether the internet remains a space of unchecked harm or becomes a tool for empowerment, equity, and connection. If we truly want a digital world that is safe, inclusive, and fair, then young people must be involved not as passive users, but as co-creators of solutions. Now is the time to invest in young people, trust our leadership, and co-design a digital future where everyone can thrive.

Yours sincerely,

Aditi, Ellie, Grace, Kiana, Marcus and Raghu

On behalf of the eSafety Youth Council
This letter articulates the personal insights and perspectives of Youth Council members and was crafted with the support of eSafety staff.