Editorial

Social Media and Identifiers

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Abstract: This editorial offers some observations about recent moves by the Australian Government to restrict access to social media by young people. It also outlines the other content of this December issue and notes some personnel changes in 2025.

Keywords: Editorial, Social Media, Age verification, Identity management

Social Media and Age Restrictions

The Australian Government plans to restrict access to social media for children under the age of 16 – a proposal that has garnered international media attention. The relevant law has been passed, but the details of how these new restrictions will operate are yet to be published. Nor have the relevant social media platforms been specified, but the basic definition is of those services whose "sole purpose, or a significant purpose, of the service is to enable online social interaction between 2 or more end-users" (Australian Government, 2024b, clause 63C, (1)(a)(i)).

What is the purpose of such a restriction? The Australian Human Rights Commission, while expressing "serious reservations" about the new law, suggested four reasons for restricting access by children: "Protection from Harm"; "Promoting Healthy Development"; "Addressing Online Privacy Concerns"; and "Supporting Parents" (AHRC, 2024). The Prime Minister has been quoted as saying that there is a "clear, causal link between the rise of social media and the harm [to] the mental health of young Australians" (Sullivan, 2024).

There has been some reporting that this is an Australian "world first". However, this is not so, as the world now knows after the CEO of TikTok, Chew Shou Zi, a resident of Singapore, appeared before a US Congressional Committee ("5 key moments", 2024). Singapore restricts access for the under-13s. The Singaporean experience is instructive (Chia, 2024). In

Singapore, TikTok bars users under 13 but does not ask for proof of age. TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat have parental-control features for child accounts that accept parental supervision. Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and Discord have no direct parental controls but are, in theory, only available to users over 13 years. One may rightly be sceptical about the effectiveness of these controls.

The Australian Government's approach to age verification and restriction is not yet known, but it has awarded a tender for a trial:

> The trial will examine age verification, age estimation, age inference, parental certification or controls, technology stack deployments and technology readiness assessments in the Australian context. It will invite Australians to participate in testing these different age assurance solutions in a live environment (Australian Government, 2024a).

The trial is due to be completed by the middle of 2025, in order for regulations to be in place by the end of the year.

The Government and most commentators have focussed on what social media platforms will or should do. Given (2024), for example, says that "tech companies" should have a "digital duty of care". She says that "social media platforms should be safe spaces for all users" and that the "onus is now on the tech companies to restrict access for youth under 16".

While the social media platforms should, can, and probably will implement some age-restricted access methods, they cannot provide the whole solution. Truly verified age belongs to the individual and to the government. In the long run, if age restrictions are to be fully effective, age will need to be verified by a trusted third party.

In the immediate term – and perhaps in the long term – there are potential solutions outside the social media platforms. The trial of age-verification methods includes "technology stack deployments" (Australian Government, 2024a, quoted above), whatever they are, but it could provide an opportunity to look more widely at the "technology stacks" used to access the platforms.

The telecommunications companies could be the trusted third party: they actually control access to the Internet and the World Wide Web. Each access point has an "owner", the person or organisation that is billed for the access. This owner could be given controls to determine who could use the access; the telco would be responsible for verifying the credentials of each user. Once admitted, the user would have access to all resources appropriate to their age and/or other characteristics. In essence, a mobile phone locked to a single user already provides the basis on which the required verification could be built. On a fixed access where there are potentially multiple users, more personalised control would be required.

Importantly, each access should retain a "guest" or "anonymous" option to open the Internet and Web to an unverified user. This would permit normal web browsing (but the search engines may restrict content) and access to sites that do not require verification. In addition, for added security, a bank, for example, may not accept a login to its website from an anonymous user, but only permit verified network users to login (with the usual two-step verification) to its website.

In addition, verified age is of value to all social media platforms, whether age-restricted or not, and to the advertisers that are their paying customers. This opens up a possible new revenue stream from the platforms to the telcos to defray the cost of implementing and maintaining strict access controls.

Telecommunications companies are used to dealing with regulators and there would be nothing new, in broad terms, in handling regulation of verified access. It would involve new processes and protocols, all of which would take some time to be discussed, trialled and agreed. This would not necessarily meet the government's preferred timetable.

Whatever the outcome for the present case of age restriction, it is important for all stakeholders to recognise that the Internet and Web are not working as originally envisaged and that verified identity in some form (Campbell, 2024) will be necessary. A consistent, systemic solution will be found not from the social media platforms alone, but will include the telcos and, potentially, other stakeholders.

In This Issue

As usual, we cover a wide range of topics in this issue.

We publish a Special Interest paper – the Charles Todd Oration 2024 presented by Will Irving; and the question-and-answer session that followed – entitled *If At First You Don't Succeed, …* This will be particularly relevant to readers interested in the history leading to Australia's National Broadband Network and the future of universal service.

In the Public Policy section, we publish one paper, *The Impact of Fixed and Mobile Broadband Adoption on Economic Growth*, which uses panel data from 34 OECD and G20 countries.

In the Digital Economy & Society section, there are three papers. *Decoding Consumer Behaviour in Indonesian E-Commerce: A Stimulus-Organism-Response Analysis* considers the barriers to acceptance of e-commerce by consumers and looks at possible solutions. *Sharing Business Data Securely: Insights from the European Gaia-X Project on Technical and Economic Roles Enabling Federated Data Spaces* provides results from a major European research project. *Autonomous Robot Navigation System Workflow for Monitoring*

and Maintenance in Industry 4.0 Applications studies autonomous navigation combining computer vision with path-planning algorithms.

In the Telecommunications section, there are two papers. *Review and Enhancement of VoIP Security: Identifying Vulnerabilities and Proposing Integrated Solutions* describes identified vulnerabilities in Voice over Internet Protocol and proposes a system for enhanced security. *Dynamic Touchstroke Analysis with Explainable Artificial Intelligence Tree-Based Learners* describes an explainable artificial intelligence method for touch-stroke analysis to be used for identity authentication.

We also publish two book reviews: *Data Rules: Reinventing the Market Economy by Cristina Alaimo and Jannis Kallinikos*; and *William Webb's Contrarian Thesis: A Book Review of "The End of Telecoms History"*.

The History of Telecommunications section has two papers. The first, continuing the e-commerce topic, is a reprint from the *Telecommunication Journal of Australia* in 2000, introduced as *E-Commerce Security Revisited*. The proposed publication of this reprint also triggered a further contribution, *E-Commerce Security Issues, Then and Now: Thoughts Stimulated by an Historic Paper by Dez Blanchfield (2000) on E-Commerce Security*.

As always, we encourage you to consider submitting articles to the *Journal* and we welcome comments and suggestions on which topics or special issues would be of interest. Feedback on the current issue would be welcome.

Editorial Personnel Changes

As announced in September, I am retiring as Managing Editor after this issue. The new Managing Editor is Dr Michael de Percy, Senior Lecturer in Political Science at the University of Canberra's School of Politics, Economics and Society and a long-standing Section Editor of this *Journal*.

A second notable change is the retirement of Professor Peter Gerrand from the Editorial Advisory Board after 30 years of service to this *Journal* and its predecessor. He was Editor-in-Chief of the *Telecommunication Journal of Australia* from June 1994 until its last issue in 2013; and then the first Managing Editor of this journal, published initially as the *Australian Journal of Telecommunications and the Digital Economy*, serving until the end of 2014. The length of Professor Gerrand's service is unlikely to be surpassed. More about Professor Gerrand's contributions and the wider history of the *Journal* will be published in 2025, the 90th year since publication of this *Journal* and its predecessors began.

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