What Australia hopes to achieve with its unique Online Safety Bill

What is the issue?

The online trolling bill, if passed, would allow the government to hold social media companies responsible for the trolling comments and content posted on their website.

What is Australia's Online Safety Act?

- Australia's Online Safety Act was passed in July 2021.
- It defines what accounts to bullying.
- It allows adults to report cases of online bullying in the country to the e-Safety Commissioner.
- The time frame for the removal of bullying content has been decreased from the present 48 hours to 24 hours.
- While bullying laws for children already exist, it addresses bullying against adults as well as children.
- A mechanism that requires age verification to access adult content is being developed.

What a person needs to do when abused online?

- First, it is important to report the content to the social media app that they are being bullied or abused on.
- Filing a complaint with the police should be the next step, since online harassment is still a crime.
- Then, if the content is not removed, the concern can be reported to the eSafety commissioner.

What are the powers of eSafety Commissioner?

- Ensure the implementation of the act.
- Supervise the complaints and objections regarding sharing of intimate images without consent
- Manage the online content and coordinate "activities of Commonwealth Departments, authorities and agencies relating to online safety for Australians".
- Make rules that would regulate digital service providers along with the digital content.
- Order social media websites to take down the content.
- Send a link-deletion notice to search engines, to stop providing links to certain material as well as app distribution services, to stop letting users download an app that enables posting bullying or abusive content.
- Ensure that the content is removed, but legal action doesn't come under their jurisdiction.
- Block certain online content altogether. This could include violence, so that no one can access such content in the country.

What are the obligations placed on various stakeholders?

- Once a complaint is placed the social media service provider and the person who had posted the cyber-bullying or abuse material would be given a removal notice.
- The provider or person would also be asked to “refrain from posting cyber-bullying material or apologise for posting the material”.
- The same process would work in the case of the non-consensual posting of intimate pictures.
- The person who would post or threaten to post would be liable to a penalty.
- If the content or post is not removed within 24 hours a fine of up to
    - 500 penalty units will be applied for individuals.
    - $555,000 for organisations.

What amounts to bullying?

- The material would be considered to be bullying or abusive if it is offensive, depicts abhorrent violent conduct, immoral, indecent, threatening, intimidating, harassing, humiliating, intimate image and non-consensual image.
- Serious harm could include material which sets out realistic threats, places people in real danger, is excessively malicious or is unrelenting.

What are the other bills related to passed in Australia?

- Australian Competition and Consumer Commission in 2021 released a report targeting Google and Facebook and the advertising on these platforms.
- As a result, these tech companies faced stricter regulations on advertising and the algorithm that decides what appears in the online feeds of users.
- The report also recommended stricter regulations based on the privacy of users’ information.

Reference

1. https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-australia-online-safety-bill-7738771/

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