

Morrison flags new laws to stop social media platforms being 'weaponised'

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Scott Morrison is foreshadowing tough new criminal laws to crack down on social media companies which fail to quickly remove footage like that streamed by the gunman in the New Zealand massacre.

Under the proposal, it would not be just the companies that faced heavy penalties but individual executives based in Australia could be found personally liable.

The laws would make it a criminal offence for the companies to fail to rapidly take down footage filmed by perpetrators of extreme violence.

The Prime Minister will meet representatives of the social media giants in Brisbane on Tuesday. Also present will be Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, Attorney-General Christian Porter and Communications Minister Mitch Fifield.

They will discuss the responsibilities of these companies and how the use of their platforms for spreading dangerous terrorist and other harmful material can be curbed.

“We need to prevent social media platforms being weaponised,” Morrison said ahead of the meeting.

Morrison said if social media companies failed to show they were willing immediately to make changes to prevent the use of their platforms for material like the New Zealand footage, “we will take action”.

At the meeting will be representatives of Google, Facebook and Twitter.

The proposed laws would:

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Make it a criminal offence to fail to remove the offending footage as soon as possible after it was reported or it otherwise became known to the company

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Allow the government to declare footage of an incident filmed by a perpetrator and being hosted on a site was “abhorrent violent material”. It would be a crime for a social media provider not to quickly remove the material after receiving a notice to do so. There would be escalating penalties the longer it remained on the social media platform.

The government says that there cannot be special rules for these companies. They should operate under the same conditions as the print and broadcasting media, and the services they provide need to be safe.

The new laws would be based on existing offences which require social media companies to notify police of child abusers on their sites, and require content host sites to remove offending material.

Morrison has already moved to have the G20 take up the issue of getting this sort of violent content off social media. He has asked for the issue of social media governance to be put on the agenda for the June summit of the G20 in Japan.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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