

New Zealand is facing unprecedented challenges in the digital age

New Zealanders can access almost any digital content on their devices, anywhere and anytime. This presents vital opportunities and benefits but there are also costs. In recent years we've seen major technology and social changes around the world, together with a sharp rise in real-world harm from digital media – and this is only accelerating.



The Christchurch terrorist attacks on 15 March 2019 were a wake-up call to how digital platforms can be weaponised by violent extremists. The terrorist's livestream video and manifesto document were shared virally online, and inspired subsequent attacks around the world.

We're seeing a clear pattern emerge of digital technology being used by violent extremist groups to lead people 'down the digital rabbit hole', where they are intentionally recruited and radicalised.



Social media is increasingly being used as a platform to spread fake news and dangerous disinformation.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic we've seen a big rise in conspiracy theories globally and in New Zealand, which are being fed by disinformation online.



Algorithms used by digital platforms like Facebook and YouTube are designed to capture people's attention in order to make a profit – with insufficient consideration of harm.

These platforms serve us more and more of what we engage in and can become a harmful 'echo chamber'.



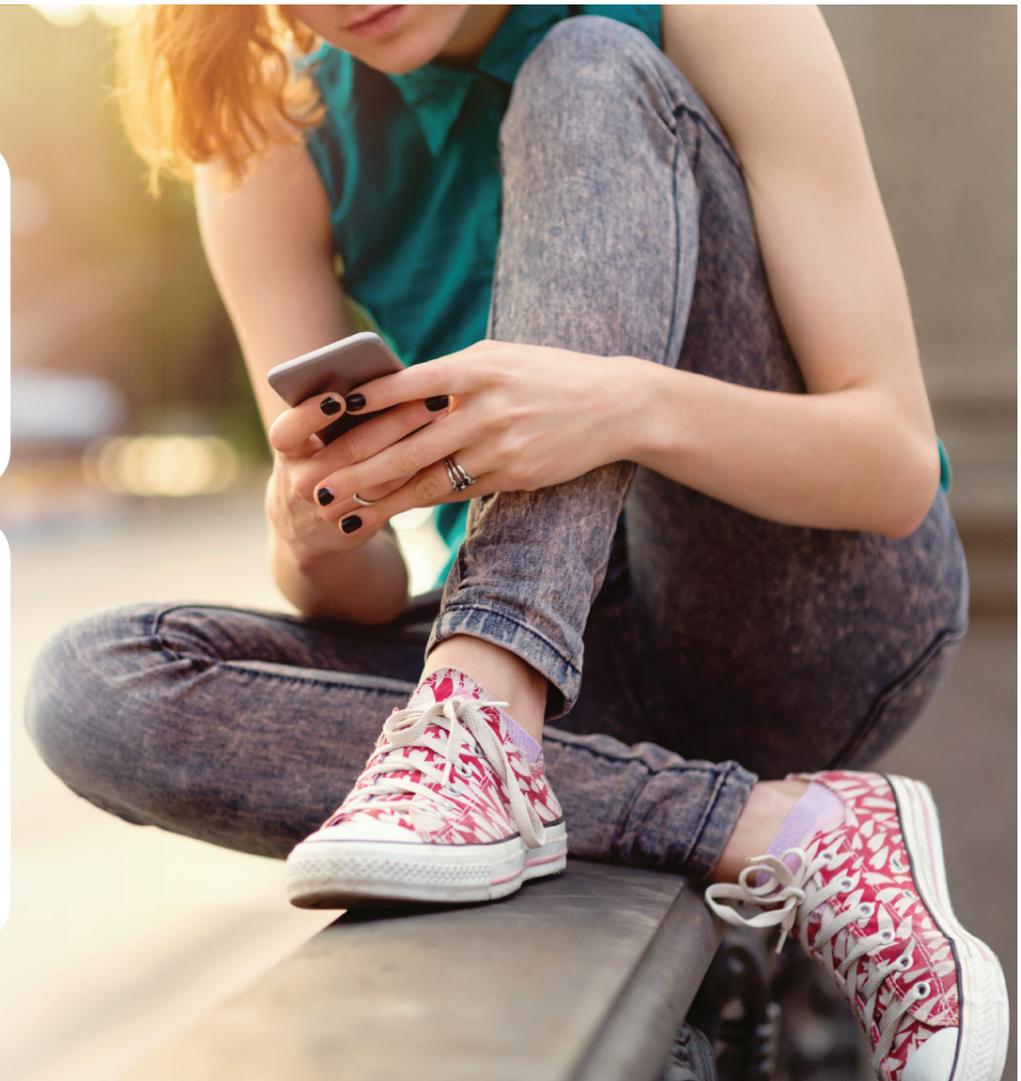
We're seeing a concerning rise in entertainment content tapping into the vulnerabilities of young people – especially around mental health (eg *13 Reasons Why*).

Potentially addictive gambling devices in online games – such as loot boxes – are increasingly commonplace.



Young New Zealanders have unrestricted access to commercial porn online. We know from research that many are using it for sex education and that a large number of children come across porn online – whether they're seeking it out or not.

This can have damaging impacts on individuals and others through their attitudes to sex, behaviours and relationships.



New Zealanders need help to navigate the complex and changing digital world.

And they need better support and tools to help their kids stay safe online. Our existing regulatory system for media was designed for a different era, and our tools are 'ambulance at the bottom of the cliff' solutions. **It's time for change.**

Fresh thinking for a fast-changing digital world

The Classification Office has been doing cutting-edge work to address harms from digital media, and we're building momentum. However the digital world moves fast and the issues are snowballing: New Zealand urgently needs up-to-date laws and regulation, and a unified strategy with a strong focus on youth.



Research into how online porn impacts young New Zealanders

Our research into how and why young people in New Zealand use online porn has provided a strong evidence base on this issue, and shone a light on how it impacts them. Working closely with our partners in the Pornography Working Party, we have produced and collaborated on a suite of practical solutions including: resources for parents, educators and young people; updated curriculum guidelines; workforce development content for health service providers; and advised on a major national information campaign 'Keep It Real Online'.



Coming soon: Clear and consistent consumer information on commercial video on-demand platforms

We've played a key role in driving regulatory change to bring commercial video on-demand and streaming platforms into New Zealand's classification system. These platforms will soon be required to display New Zealand age ratings and content warnings on all films and shows available to New Zealanders.

As part of this work, we've digitised our classification process, creating an opportunity for it to be used across a wide range of digital media platforms in the future.

We are working hard to ensure the implementation of these changes is streamlined, modern and effective.



Tools to support New Zealanders to watch safely and think critically

We've ramped up our focus on education and outreach, including developing practical resources for parents, to help them make safe choices for their whānau and support their tamariki and rangatahi to think critically about content. We're also producing evidence-based resources and training for educators and service providers, and actively engaging with young people through our Youth Advisory Panel, social media and other activities.



A first-principles review of media regulation

A broad review of media regulation was signalled by the Government last term. We support this review and believe it should:

- Take a first-principles look at how the regulatory system for media meets the needs of the digital age.
- Make it easier for New Zealanders and the digital sector to engage with government, with simple pathways for accessing help and information.
- Connect and coordinate regulatory effort, focussing on the areas that matter most to New Zealanders.
- Put young, Māori and Pacific people front and centre, by listening to their perspectives and what they need.

An integrated strategy for violent extremism and dangerous disinformation online

The amount of extremist material and dangerous disinformation online is rising fast. There is growing concern worldwide about the impacts on crime, social cohesion, public health, and how online platforms are used by violent extremists to recruit and radicalise people.

We believe New Zealand needs a unified strategy to:

- Ensure government (regulators and enforcement agencies), the digital sector, NGOs and academics are all acting in alignment on these issues, and working in collaboration with the public, other governments and international experts.
- Create a common framework to share and evaluate information, collaborate, ensure that the legislative settings are up to date, while informing and educating the public.
- Identify a range of interventions outside of regulation, including education on media effects and media literacy, nudge notifications, warnings, and public information.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss with you our thinking on what an integrated strategy could look like in this area, and how research can help inform policy, tools and education.

