Australian PM calls on social media companies to help take on cyber bullies

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Students at the Matraville Soldiers Settlement Public School are part of a program designed to teach them cyber safety and security. Credit: McAfee

Prime Minister Julia Gillard has called on Twitter to join other social media companies that have agreed to a protocol to help deal with cyber bullying.

The Prime Minister was speaking after the launch of a new cyber

education program for primary school students.

Online social media giants Facebook, Google, Yahoo, and Microsoft have all agreed to work within guidelines set by the government, including setting out information on acceptable use and behaviour, providing a single point of contact for federal agencies, and having a robust processes in place for reviewing and acting on complaints

"I think this is a step forward by these giants of social media," Ms Gillard said today.

However she said Twitter also needed to agree to the guidelines.

"It's on Twitter that so much of the damage has been done by trolls," Ms Gillard said.

The new cyber education program will include training in cyber safety, cyber security and responsible online behaviour.

"It's clear that school based interactions and learning are extremely important," said Philippa Collin, research fellow in the Institute for Culture and Society at the University of Western Sydney, and program leader at the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre.

However she said it was important measures designed to improve cyber safety recognised that children often relied on experiential learning – learning while using social media platforms.

"The Young and Well CRC is looking at how you deliver engaging campaigns that deliver information and resources and contribute to behaviour change around safe online practices to young people in the digital spaces that they're already taking part in," Dr Collin said.

She added that in her experience social media companies were genuinely interested in understanding how to minimise the risks of cyber bullying.

"There's a good business case for them to do so," she said.

However Mark Gregory, senior lecturer in electrical and computer engineering at RMIT University, said more work was required to solve the problem of cyber bullying.

"Education only works if there's an industry regime that's going to support that education," Dr Gregory said.

"When they can show a code of practice that all of the major companies and second tier companies have signed up to, then we will have, in my view, something we can all cheer about."

Dr Gregory said such a code of practice would ensure companies like Twitter didn't drag their heels, and would include education on cyber safety within the platforms themselves.

"The internet is a form of media and it needs to be brought in line with the current codes of practice that we have for the other forms of media – that's a good first step and we haven't got there," Dr Gregory said.

In the meantime, Dr Collin said it was important education programs gave children coping mechanisms to help them deal with negative online experiences, which were now a reality of life.

"The skills and understanding is not in and of itself sufficient to prevent them from having negative experiences.

"So this is a major shift from blocking or filtering to an emphasis on skills to recognise, respond, and most importantly seek help when they're

having negative experiences online."

Source: The Conversation