

Twitter accused of responding 'to tyrants quickly' but ignoring Australian government

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Twitter is being "inconsistent" with its responsiveness to government requests from Australia while complying with orders to block political tweets in Turkey, the Australian eSafety commissioner has said. Earlier this month, Twitter revealed it had blocked access in Turkey to four accounts and 409 tweets in response to a court order in the lead-up to the country's elections. The four accounts were critical of the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and reportedly included tweets from an activist, a journalist and a businessman. Twitter's owner Elon Musk – who has described himself as a free speech absolutist – defended the decision, arguing that Turkey had threatened to "throttle" Twitter in the country, and the censorship was the compromise to keep Twitter running. On Wednesday, Australia's eSafety commissioner, Julie Inman Grant, said it had been a "terrible practice" for Twitter to fail to respond to letters from her office, or that of the communications minister, Michelle Rowland, around the platform's online safety requirements under Australian law. Inman Grant told Senate estimates that the single remaining public policy contact for Twitter in the Asia Pacific region is located in Singapore. While she acknowledged the company did ultimately respond to a legal notice in February regarding how Twitter was tackling online child abuse material, she said it took almost three months and several extensions from her office. "We are still assessing that content they have responded to our legal compulsion notice around basic online safety expectations and we're assessing that content now," she said. "In terms of Elon Musk himself, other than tweeting at me around a few few issues, he hasn't formally responded either to the Safety commissioner, or to the minister to my knowledge." Sign up for Guardian Australia's free morning and afternoon email newsletters for your daily news roundup When asked by Greens senator David Shoebridge whether Musk was only responding "to tyrants quickly" and was "contemptuous of democratic governments", Inman Grant said Twitter saw the Turkey response as the "least bad decision" but it was an inconsistent approach. "I'm not defending it. It's very inconsistent the way that they are responding to different governments I would 100% agree," she said. Shoebridge asked what Australia could do to get a better response out of Twitter to legal requests, and she said regulatory processes around online safety were still under way. Twitter could face fines of up to A\$700,000 for failing to respond to requests but Shoebridge said this would be a "rounding error" for a billionaire like Musk. "I think it's like threatening the wet lettuce, a maximum \$700,000 fine. He would be laughing at that." Shoebridge suggested one option could be similar to Turkey in temporarily blocking access to Twitter in Australia for 24 hours or 48 hours for repeat offences. Inman Grant said it would be something parliament would have to give powers for. "That would be a question for government and for parliament. Those would be very significant powers," she said. Under the Online Safety Act,

however, Inman Grant already has powers to order websites hosting R18+ or over content to put their content behind a restricted access system, but the federal government is still in the process of deciding whether to forge ahead with age-restriction technology for adult content online.