

X fined \$610,500 in Australia first for failing to crack down on child sexual abuse material

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X, the company formerly known as Twitter, has become the first online platform to be issued with a \$610,500 fine under Australia's Online Safety Act for its failure to meet basic online safety expectations. X has 28 days to either pay the fine, issued by the e-safety commissioner, Julie Inman Grant, or provide responses to questions X ignored from the commissioner on its work to crack down on child sexual abuse material on the platform. The legal notices were issued to X, Google, TikTok, Twitch and Discord in February following the first round of notices sent to Apple, Meta, Microsoft, Snap and Omegle last year. In a report on the tech companies' responses to the notices, released on Monday, the commissioner found many of the largest services were failing to adequately detect, remove and prevent child abuse material. "Frankly, I was surprised at how hard it was to extract precise and accurate information, and frankly, surprised that some companies that should have much more sophisticated and mature systems and resources didn't seem willing or able to be able to provide that information that had been provided by other companies," Inman Grant told Guardian Australia. "Or in the case of Twitter, to leave things totally blank, to obfuscate [from providing] inaccurate information." The commissioner also found that X and Google did not comply with the notices, with Google giving generic responses to some specific questions, while some questions to X went entirely unanswered. Google has been given a formal warning, while X was given an infringement notice. Google's director of public policy and government affairs in Australia, Lucinda Longcroft, said in a statement that protecting children was the most important work Google does, and the company had invested heavily in work to stop the spread of child sexual abuse material. "We remain committed to these efforts and collaborating constructively and in good faith with the eSafety Commissioner, government and industry on the shared goal of keeping Australians safer online." When Inman Grant issued the notices earlier this year, she noted that X's owner, Elon Musk, had indicated that child safety was his number one priority for the platform, but the report found that in the three months after Musk took ownership of the company and slashed its workforce by 80%, the automatic detection of child abuse material fell from 90% to 75%. The company told the e-safety commissioner that it had improved since then but had not provided any detail to substantiate that claim. While not marking Musk on meeting his promise, Inman Grant said it was a "pretty big deal" she was not able to even get answers from the company on how many trust and safety employees it has any more. The companies were initially given 35 days to respond to the notices, but multiple extensions resulted in the process taking seven months. "We understand that it's hard and it's probably very confronting and exposing for these companies to actually say, 'well ... we have said this is our top priority, but really, we're not doing anything'," Inman Grant said. "They've been signing up to have these voluntary principles, including the

five eyes, voluntary principles to combat child sexual abuse ... and what we found out through all 13 companies that we've questioned [is] that none of them are living up to these principles." Inman Grant said she found TikTok, above all, more transparent than the others. If X, which no longer has a presence in Australia, fails to respond to the infringement notice and does not comply with providing the information sought, the office can take X to the federal court, which can fine the company up to \$780,000 a day backdated to March this year. "That doesn't mean we're done either. We have periodic notice powers," Inman Grant said. "We want to put pressure on ... all the levers that we have [at] our disposal to make sure that they're improving and lifting safety standards." Guardian Australia sought a response from X and received the standard auto reply from the press email address.