Episode 22: Julie Inman Grant

Transcript

Julie Inman Grant: [00:00:00] I do feel like we've reached a collective eureka moment, but it took a long time.

Intro: Welcome to Voices Towards 2050, the official podcast series of the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission. Please be aware that this podcast discusses topics related to domestic, family, and sexual violence, which may be distressing for some listeners. Support is available. If you need assistance, please contact 1800RESPECT or reach out to your local support services.

Thank you for joining us.

Micaela Cronin: I want to begin today's podcast, as I always do, with making acknowledgement of the lands that I'm on today. And today, that's the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and pay my very deep respects to their elders, past and present, and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the country.

I've learnt so much across my career and in this role through the generosity and [00:01:00] wisdom of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, leaders, uh, and communities for the work that they do. Today, I'm joined by the leader of the world's first government agency dedicated to online safety, working across government, industry, and the community to help protect Australians from online harm.

For two decades before entering the Australian government, she worked in senior public policy and safety roles at Microsoft, Twitter, and Adobe. Earlier this year, she was awarded the Public Service Medal in, at the Australia Day Honours for her considerable public service to the improvement of online safety for Australians.

She is someone Australia is very proud is leading the world in our, in online safety. Julie Inman Grant, thank you so much for joining me today.

Julie Inman Grant: Oh, thank you, Micaela, and thank you for such a beautiful welcome to country. Um, I am joining from the land of the Gadigal [00:02:00] people, the Eora Nation, and I also pay my respects to elders past, present, and emerging.

So thank you for having me, and thank you for always sharing your grace and your wisdom, uh, with me.

Micaela Cronin: It has been such a pleasure to be in, in my role working alongside you, Julie. Whenever anyone asks me anything, um, I always, that is related to, to your area, I very confidently refer them to the work of the eSafety Commission.

So thank you for your leadership. It has been quite extraordinary. And I don't-- That's-- I wanna start there, Julie, because I don't think people really... You and I have talked about both having established the commissions, and you have been leading the eSafety Commission, um, at, at the same time as having actually shaped it and set its foundations.

Can you talk to us a bit about your role and what your office does?

Julie Inman Grant: Sure. And it's amazing because we have been established [00:03:00] for 11 years, and I was just working on a presentation- Wow ... for the Canadians who are building a digital safety commission themselves, uh, 10 lessons, um, from 10 years. And, you know, the first thing is, um, you know, we've never had an advertising budget or a marketing budget and, you know, people don't just stumble across you online-

Micaela Cronin: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm

Julie Inman Grant: uh, certainly in the age of, um, AI. Um, so I, I welcome the opportunity to talk about who we are and what we do. Um, we're essentially, um, there to help Australians have safer, more positive experiences online, and we really serve as a safety net when platforms fail to act. Um, when we started 11 years ago, um, we had written into the Online Safety Act, which is our governing legislation Two primary roles.

One as the edu- educator and coordinator of online safety be- because before we were established, it was [00:04:00] happening in different education, um, education, police, uh, the ACMA, different departments, and it, it That the, um, government felt at the time they needed a one-stop shop. So that was the, the other role that we were given as the coordinator.

Uh, and then of course, we were here as the, the protector through, uh, regulatory and complaint schemes. So what we really started with was, uh, as Australians child sexual abuse hotline. Um, we had some powers around taking other forms of reports of illegal content, including terrorist and violent extremism.

But, um, we, uh, started our first, um, o- other scheme was a youth-based cyberbullying scheme. And, um, then when I was announced in November 2016, um, my minister at the time said, "Well, we want you to come, and we're gonna announce a revenge porn portal." And I said, "Well, I'll take the job ... and I'll set up the portal, [00:05:00] but I won't call it revenge porn."

Micaela Cronin: Mm, mm.

Julie Inman Grant: And they're like, "Why?" I said, "Revenge for what? That's inherently victim-blaming. Let's call it what it is, image-based abuse." Mm. The lexicon does matter. Um, and I'll just finish by saying, um, you know, esafety.gov.au is really the window to our soul. This is where you report, uh, all forms of abuse. We now have about four complaint schemes, and we have very high rates of success.

So, um, when, um, there are intimate images shared without consent, um, and that includes deepfakes, we have about a 96% rate in terms of getting that content taken down. We have an adult cyberabuse scheme, which we tend to use in the very serious cases of cyberstalking and doxing, and any kind of targeted online abuse that can, uh, lead to, um, physical threats of harm.

Um, but the one thing that was missing was what I call our secret sauce, and that was, um, how do we [00:06:00] become an anticipatory regulator knowing that- Mm ... technology and tech trends are going to change much faster than policymakers can keep up or even regulators? So I decided to set up a division, um, uh, that we call strategy, engagement, and, and research, but this is where safety by design sits.

Micaela Cronin: Mm-hmm.

Julie Inman Grant: This is where our tech trends and, uh, challenges brief sits and our online safety advisories, our international engagement, and I can talk to you more about those functions. But, um, we take this kind of holistic public health and systems approach to online safety along the lines of protection and prevention and proactive and systemic change.

And I, I, um, would also just add partnerships and a degree of prescience so that we can look around the corners and anticipate these harms before they happen.

Micaela Cronin: Mm. Julie, it's, it's been so strategic the way that you have built such a comprehensive approach to online safety [00:07:00] and so thoughtfully, and your point about how important Language and framing of what the problem is, is really critical, I think.

Uh, a-a-and you've, you've really brought a, uh, a very intentional gendered lens and understanding about that harm to the work, um, that is so important because as you say, it's moving so fast around us that it's,

that it is very hard to keep up. So that the work that you've really led around getting out in front of it is, is vital.

We're never gonna, we're never going to if we're just always chasing our tail. So can you, can you talk a bit more about that, about what you're thinking about as technology-facilitated abuse changes so rapidly, um, and its impact o-on the way it is, uh, used in coercive control, domestic family and sexual violence, what your thinking is about what next and how, [00:08:00] how we need to keep staying out in f- getting out in front?

Julie Inman Grant: Right. Well, I think, um, you just need to continue looking at the trends, communicating what they are, and communicate it in multiple ways, um, and, and through others. Um, you know, no single regulator on their own is going to achieve that cut-through. And I think we've, we've seen, seen that evolution over the past decade.

So when I started, um, in, uh, January 2017, we were starting to do, um, some work around the first action plan. Um, and we were very much on the periphery of, uh, of domestic, family, and sexual violence, and people didn't quite understand why we were there-

Micaela Cronin: Mm. Mm ...

Julie Inman Grant: um, until we started talking about, uh, technology-facilitated, um, abuse and coercive control.

And I wanna also credit, um, organisations like Wesnet, who were [00:09:00] some of the first organisations that actually put some numbers to it. So, um, you know, they identified a- about a decade ago that about 99% of domestic and family violence cases, um, had elements of technology-facilitated abuse and violence, um, as, as an extension of this.

And so over the years, explaining that this is not an add-on-

Micaela Cronin: Mm ...

Julie Inman Grant: that this is sadly a feature, and that technology-facilitated abuse and coercive control is a way of extending and, and embedding control, and power, and surveillance, and fear, um, into, um, the, a pa- partner or a former partner and their children.

And, um, then we started looking early on at things like, um, 2020 looking at deepfakes. That's where we did our first, uh, technology, um, trends and challenges brief. And at that [00:10:00] time, we went really deep. We spent about six months and, and talked to, um, a whole range of experts, and at that time we were mostly seeing, uh, famous women like Taylor Swift or, uh, Scarlett Johansson, uh, becoming the victim-survivors of this kind of abuse because it took hundreds of images and, uh, lots of computing power and technical know-how to make a credible deepfake.

Micaela Cronin: Mm.

Julie Inman Grant: And I couldn't get anyone in the media to pick it up, but because we were thinking about deepfakes and how they could be applied to synthetic CSAM or deepfaked image-based sexual abuse or even, um, in terrorism- When our act was reformed in 2021, we were able to go to government and say, "We need to make sure that synthetic or, um, technology-facilitated, um, versions of this are covered."

And at that time is when, in, in 2021, is when we moved from a purely [00:11:00] convin- uh, complaints and investigative, uh, regulatory scheme where we were responding to the harm after it happened. We'd done all the work around safety by design, which is about, um, putting the onus back on the platforms to assess risk and harms and engineer those out or b-bake the protections in, rather than retrofit after the damage has been done.

So we were able to take all of that work and all of that thinking and apply it, um, to the Online Safety Act. So the basic online safety expectations, transparency powers, are, uh, based on all of these safety by design principles. The requirements in our codes and standards for platforms to detect, deter, a-and disrupt, um, harmful and illegal content all come from that work.

And so that, 2021, is really when we started to see that evolution. But we also s-saw a broader understanding that, uh, technology, um, w-was being [00:12:00] weaponised against women. And emerging technologies such as, um, you know, the metaverse technologies, which really didn't take off, but now we're seeing in, in the form of augmented and virtual reality through, um, smart glasses and the like, but also AI were being increasingly weaponised, um, towards women and girls.

Micaela Cronin: Mm. Absolutely. And, and Julie, the other aspect of that is the impact on young people, and young, young men and young women's attitudes, and the way the online environment is impacting on that. So the, that, we've recently seen some research out of University of Melbourne exploring the level at which the online environments are cultivating both misogyny and s- extreme attitudes that drive gender-based violence.

That, I know that your office has done some really important work in the area around young, young men, um, um, and we know the impact about [00:13:00] holding hostile attitudes towards young women that are greater than their grandfathers, young men these days. Can you talk a bit about that work that your office has been doing?

Julie Inman Grant: Yeah, yeah, sure. Um, I guess one of the, uh, big lessons that I'd learned is, um, and, uh, Dr. Kristen, uh, Ferguson talks about this in her book, Blindspotting, um, and I think she characterised me as having something called a seeker mindset, uh, trying to look around, uh, corners- Mm. Yes ... uh, her, uh, in her blo- Blindspotting book, um, was that, um, when there was a, a women's, um, national safety summit, um, I think in 2021, when we were still in the midst of COVID and it was all online, and the Plymouth shooting in the UK had just happened, um, where the, the shooter actually- Yes

I believe, um, took the life of his, um, former partner and, and mother. Um, but then of course it came out [00:14:00] that he had been involved in what was then called the incel sphere.

Micaela Cronin: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Julie Inman Grant: And so I guess it was controversial what I said back in, uh, 2021, was that, hey, um, these online communities with incels are starting to breed, um, a form of grievance, um, that is playing out into real world harm, and we need to be alive to it.

And I think people were just a little bit nonplussed that I was taking a- attention away from, I think, what was really me- meant to be about domestic and family violence. But it did spur something in me, and I said, "Well, okay, we need to look more closely at this." So, um, m- my investigators in the illegal and restricted content team, um, can have own motion, uh, powers, and we can do some, some operations and some further analysis.

So we did one of, of terrorism manifestos and found that women in LGBTQ, um, I- I-A plus [00:15:00] communities were a focal point for extremist grievances in, particularly in 13 of the, um, most prevalent Manifestos, um, you know, on the dark web and on the internet right now, and misogynistic rhetoric was identified in half of the manifestos, and homophobic rheto-rhetoric in about three-quarters.

Um, and these views were not necessarily held by people on the fringes. And so you would be familiar with a recent University of Melbourne story published this year that found that, um, young people are more likely than older generations to hold h-hostile attitudes towards women. And the study found something to the effect that one in four boys between the ages of 13 and 17 believe feminism is damaging to our society and should be resisted with violence if necessary.

So we see this sort of zero sum, um, game that's k- kind of becoming normalised. You know, if, if women and girls are achieving, then that means boys and men [00:16:00] must be losing, which I don't think any of us believe. Um, but you know, that is, that is taking hold and has taken hold in some of the, um, geopolitical, um-rhetoric that's been, um, uh, pretty re... It has been mainstreamed, uh, I think since, uh, early 2025. Um, and, uh, that's when we actually start, in 2024, started talking to young men about what their experiences were online and then, um, to, to men that were supporting men about what they were seeing. And you know, I was really impressed, uh, with the honesty and the self-knowledge that so many of these young men, um, you know, really talked about.

Um, "Yeah, sometimes we're looking at porn, and sometimes we're looking for fitness tips. We think this look m- looks max-maxing thing is taking things to another level, and while I like Andrew Tate's fitness tips, I don't like the way he speaks about women." So that they, [00:17:00] they obviously do have critical, uh, reasoning skills, but we...

You know, the other big th-theme or takeaway from that research was we're looking for male role models, and we can't find them. Um, and you know, part of that, as we know, is, um, is that vicious circle and the way that the attention economy, um, and influencers, you know, they, they, the benefit in, through that vicious circle, the more controversial you are, the more followers you get, the more advertisers you get-

Micaela Cronin: Mm

Julie Inman Grant: the more money the platforms get and, and so it is that, um, vicious spiral. Um, but you know, they, they s- they're told about what they shouldn't be and what they shouldn't do, but not what they can be. And so that's where I do think some of this strength-based focus, um, could really help, um- Put things back on the right path.

Micaela Cronin: Hmm. It's absolutely, I, I 100% [00:18:00] agree, Julie. It's absolutely critical. I think what you-- I really liked the way you described, uh, what your approach has been in terms of being a seeker and being-- and, and I have observed that of you as well. You've been ahead of the game in noticing things in many instances.

Um, and I think my observation and, and kind of my thinking about how to approach that too is, is, is deep listening, right? Is really listening for and watching for signals, seeing, seeing when, and, and interpreting that, um, in ways that other people might not necessarily do that. And I think, again, one of the things I've really observed in the way you've set up the office is, is doing exactly that, is listening to people who have experienced harm, who-- people who have experienced tech-facilitated abuse, listening to young men about what their experiences are, what you're describing about what your approach is.

Can you talk a bit about that, [00:19:00] about the way you've built that into the Commission's work, what your thinking is about how we all, including tech companies, should be listening and including people who have their own personal experiences?

Julie Inman Grant: Well, first of all, thank you, uh, for saying so, and I think, um, building a culture where curiosity is rewarded is important, and, you know, that means focusing on, um, what I would have described as sort of underdeveloped functions.

Hiring, um, the right people who have the right, um, I guess, combination of, uh, of, of passion and again, that, that curiosity, um, to really think about, um, what are some of the solutions rather than focusing solely on what the problems are. You know, how, how do we, how do we lift up above that? But one of the things that, um, I did was build a, a [00:20:00] stronger research team so that we could actually build an evidence base where it didn't exist, and to have them work closely with our education prevention and communities teams, and to make sure that we were co- deeply co-designing, um, materials that were authentic and were designed with the people that we were trying to reach.

So, um, you know, one of the things that we noticed, I've also kind of built, um, an intelligence function. It's now tactical intelligence that, you know, really draws from the complaints that come in from the public so

that we can use that in our systemic regulatory investigations. But also it helps us build these online safety advisories, which are these shorter form, um, sort of trends papers where we can say-

"Hey, this is what we're seeing [00:21:00] in, in schools around AI abuse. Uh, image-based sexual abuse is happening to young people, but we're seeing other forms of, um, AI manipulation that is defamatory and slanderous, targeting teachers and principals, and these are the types of things, uh, we think, um, schools need to consider."

Um, but one of the things that, um, we, we did notice, um, and w- we used research to sort of bear some of this out, was that, um, it appeared to us that, um, young people weren't really seeing, um, drawing that distinction between what digital care and digital control, uh, looks like. Um, and so we did some behavioural research, um, looking particularly at Australians between the ages of 18 and 24, um, through our Track, Harass, Repeat, um, research.

And we started [00:22:00] with a hypothesis that, you know, uh, young people of this generation were growing up with things like Life360, Find My, and Snap Maps.

Micaela Cronin: Mm.

Julie Inman Grant: And so they're almost used to, um... We've always encouraged parents, if they're, um, you know, tracking their children, to talk about t- to let them know that it's happening and why it's a, a s- a safety issue, rather than, um, you know, having them feel surveyed or doing it covertly.

But what we found, um, is that now that young people are starting to, um, go into, um, these romantic relationships, almost one in five young adults think it's reasonable for, um, a romantic partner to expect to track them whenever they want.

Micaela Cronin: Mm. Mm.

Julie Inman Grant: Um, they expect, you know, um, almost instantaneous response to, um, messages and, you know, access to their Strava or, um, you know, Find My-

Micaela Cronin: Mm

Julie Inman Grant: or Snap Maps and this sort of thing. And, um, this really [00:23:00] concerned me because that kind of, I guess, normalisation rather than indoctrination does mean it may, may be harder, um, for those young people to understand when a behaviour like this is controlling rather than y- you know, showing a degree of care.

Micaela Cronin: Yeah. There has been very significant changes in behaviour and attitudes, um, driven by, by the s- the, the, the, um, the reach of the online environment, I think much faster than we've been used to, and that's kind of evident in that research that you were, uh, uh, uh, talking about, about the changes in a, in, in a sh- in a generation in attitudes.

In that, in that context, Julie, what, what do you, what gives you hope about the future? What is it you're thinking about when you think about, uh, and clearly are really driving to help [00:24:00] shape a safer digital Australia and a safer future for generations to come? What, what, what is it that you see that that looks like, and what gives you hope that we can get there?

Julie Inman Grant: Well, when I think back on 2017, um, I did feel a little b- uh, a bit like a lone voice in the wild and, um, almost had to fight, um, for a seat at the table, um, for people to listen. Uh, I can tell you the phone did not ring. Uh, we had a very small media team. Um, and, um, one of the other first tasks I was given when I started this role is the Senate committee asked me to, um, put together an expert panel and, um, make some recommendations to government around how harmful, uh, pornography might be, um, impacting-uh, young people.

Micaela Cronin: Mm-hmm.

Julie Inman Grant: And it's a long story, not [00:25:00] one that I've told very often, but w- we put together, I think, a stunning piece of work. Um, I briefed cabinet on it. Cabinet was supporting it, and then I got called into a department and told, "Well, you're not a policy department. You're an agency." And the expert panel-

Micaela Cronin: Oh, wow

Julie Inman Grant: didn't even get to see the final version of what we wrote. But, you know, in the subsequent work that we had done, you know, working for two years on the age verification roadmap and background paper and everything that we've done that has informed the social media minimum age and, um, even our, um, harmful codes, um, the, the recommendations we were making there were the same ones that we're making today.

Micaela Cronin: Mm.

Julie Inman Grant: Um, and so we lost so much time. Yeah. And for a very long time, I felt like a wowser. It really wasn't until, I remember very distinctly, um, going to the premiere of, I think it was Jess Hill's second season of, um, uh, [00:26:00] See What You Made Me Do.

Micaela Cronin: Mm.

Julie Inman Grant: And she, she came up to me and she said, "I've been meaning to talk to you because I'm very porn positive, but I'm really concerned about how violent this is and, um, you know, how this might be playing into family, domestic, and sexual violence," which was kind of music to my ears, and she and others, including yourself- Once, uh, those of you in the, the women's sector started getting behind me, and it wasn't just, "Oh, let's just protect the children. This is actually pl- you know, being reflected in harmful sexual behaviors." Once that groundswell started, and then when I heard the prime minister speaking on the House floor about choking and strang- strangulation and seeing how, um, really vocal, um, and compelling Minister Plibersek has been, um, and so focused on these issues, I do feel like we've reached a [00:27:00] collective eureka moment.

Micaela Cronin: Mm.

Julie Inman Grant: But it took a long time.

Micaela Cronin: It took a long time, Julie, and it is distressing to hear about time lost like that. But I am, I am in awe of the leadership, um, that you have shown and the foresight and really how fortunate we've been to have you in this role for, I can't believe it's nearly 10 years now. And I really very much wanna thank you for that work, but also really looking forward to what you continue to w- to hearing and listening from you as you continue to be really a Cassandra for us, right?

Calling out- ... what the future is when people are a little uncomfortable about hearing about it. But you are just so... It, it's, it's very motivating and, and gives me hope, Julie, the way you approach this work. Thank you so much for speaking to me today.

Julie Inman Grant: Well, thank you. I prefer Cassandra to Humanoid Lizard, or my [00:28:00] favourite, Captain Tampon.

Micaela Cronin: Well, I think you're an inspiration, and- ... many Australians are very proud. It might have taken many of them a while to catch up, but are very proud of the work that you have done. Thank you for the legacy that you are giving us and continue to, Julie.

Julie Inman Grant: Well, thank you. I, I wish you the best of luck, and I have absolutely the same plaudits to deliver to you.

We're so lucky to have you as the, uh, first domestic sexual and family violence commissioner in Australia, and you have just done a mon- monumental job.

Micaela Cronin: Thank you, Julie. Thank you.

Female Voiceover: Thank you for listening to "Voices Towards 2050: Ending Gender-Based Violence." Subscribe and join us for future conversations as we work together to achieve a future free from domestic, family, and sexual violence. To learn more about the commission, visit our website at dfsvc.gov.au. If you need support, contact 1-800-RESPECT or call 1-800-737-732. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander [00:36:00] people, you can call 13YARN or 139276. The views expressed in this podcast are those of the guests and do not necessarily represent the views of the Australian government or the commission.
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