

It happens every year': UK trolling ignites concerns about racist abuse of AFL, NRL players

By Chris Zappone
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Federal eSafety commissioner Julie Inman Grant says online racism remains a serious problem in Australia but new powers to remove posts and issue fines against individuals and social media giants will help the agency fight back against abusive trolls.

Concerns about racial harassment on social media flared over the weekend after players for England's football team were targeted with racist abuse on Twitter and Facebook after the team's loss in the Euro 2020 final.

Racist abuse of public figures has also been a persistent problem in Australia, and Ms Inman Grant said Indigenous football players receive the most abuse during the Indigenous rounds of the major codes. "Last year we expected it because it happens every year." The eSafety Office has worked to forewarn the AFL and other sport leagues about this problem, she said.

The long-awaited federal Online Safety Act could be passed into law as soon as this week. The legislation will expand the powers of the eSafety Office to gather information, penalise anonymous accounts and create a process to remove toxic cyber abuse "when online platforms fail to do so".



NRL player Latrell Mitchell reported online abuse he has received.

Under the new rules, if digital platforms fail to take action after a consumer complains, the eSafety Office will advocate for victims. If the platforms refuse to respond, penalties as high as \$550,000 can be assessed. Individual perpetrators can be fined as much as \$111,000.

Ms Inman Grant said the changes will give her office more powers to advocate for citizens when all the other processes fall through.

The eSafety Office can require the removal of cyber abuse material that targets an Australian, “if we are satisfied that the material is posted with the likely intention of causing serious harm – a high threshold,” she said.

“We’re not going to war with the internet, we’re not proactively monitoring the internet’



English soccer player Marcus Rashford received a torrent of abuse online.

The racist abuse in the UK has drawn widespread condemnation from prominent figures including Prince William and Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and sparked new calls for action against the individuals involved.

One British government source reportedly said: “We want real-life consequences for the people who are tweeting this abuse.” The British government is seeking information on the account holders.

Prominent targets of trolling and so-called “volumetric attacks” in Australia include human rights lawyer Nyadol Nyuon and Carlton football player Eddie Betts.

Jordan Guiao from the The Australia Institute’s Centre for Responsible Technology said the eSafety Office has recognised a massive increase in online abuse and harm over the last few years that outstrips any ability to enforce the rules.

“Enforcement is not enough.” said Guiao. “The update to the law is to encourage a culture of safety.”

Experts say much of abuse targeting indigenous AFL players and those of African descent in Britain is sent through private messaging, making it harder for the players to deal with it, as the victims have to engage with it in order to report it.



eSafety Commissioner Julie Inman Grant.

In April, two New South Wales men were arrested for posting racial abuse directed at NRL fullback Latrell Mitchell, who reported the trolling. The duo were charged for using a carriage service to menace, harass or cause offence.

Facebook, which fiercely contested the federal government's media bargaining code, said it "strongly supports" the updated Online Safety Act.

The social media giant said has also been working with the AFL and other sports leagues, anti-discrimination organisations, and public figures to develop and roll out "tools to help people combat abuse in their comments and DM's [direct messages]"

Twitter said the "abhorrent racist abuse directed at England players " over the weekend "has absolutely no place on Twitter" and that it had removed 1000 tweets and permanently suspended accounts.

The San Francisco-based platform said it supports the goals of Online Safety Act but regulating online "content requires striking a balance between protecting from harm while preserving human rights, including freedom of expression, privacy, and procedural fairness."

Twitter is reviewing the final version of the legislation, and working with the eSafety Commissioner as the law is implemented.