

# Julie Inman Grant

## eSafety Commissioner

**Tom Roberts**, Graduate lawyer, MinterEllison, sits down with **Julie Inman Grant**, eSafety Commissioner to discuss her thoughts on International Women's Day, her own illustrious career, and everything in between. Julie began work as a media and technology adviser in the US Congress. Since then, she has worked as a Government Affairs Manager and a Global Director of Privacy and Internet Safety for Microsoft, as a Director of Public Policy for Twitter and she has tirelessly pushed for a greater focus on building safety into these technology platforms. Throughout her career, Julie has consistently engaged with a range of public policy issues in the technology space, including as a Director of Government Relations for Adobe, and in 2017 she was appointed as the Australian eSafety Commissioner. The Australian eSafety Commission is the world's first government regulatory agency committed to keeping its citizens safe online.



**TOM ROBERTS:** Thank you very much for agreeing to sit down with me to have a chat today. The first thing I would like to ask you is, did you always want this job? If so, what did you do to position yourself to get it? If not, how did your career path lead you here?

**JULIE INMAN GRANT:** I think it was just a happy twist of fate, if you will, I actually dropped out of computer science and studied international relations. After uni, I went down to Washington DC with big ideals and even bigger hair because it was the early 1990s and I worked in Congress at the intersection of technology, public policy, social justice before there was an internet.

In fact, in 1991 I was working on a range of social justice issues and my Congressman came to me and said "We've got this small little company in our district called Microsoft, they do software and the telecom industry was being deregulated so would you look at this?"

I was then recruited by Microsoft to be one of their early lobbyists. It was the early 1990s, so tech policy ground zero, developing the *Communications Decency Act* in the midst of the Anti-Trusts trial, meeting Bill Gates on my second day of work and taking him to the White House. So I had lots of interesting experiences and after five years of working in Congress and across the DC landscape, they sent me as far away as they could to Australia and New Zealand and I started Microsoft's Philanthropy Government Relations and Industry Affairs program here before expanding to the whole Asia-Pacific region.

After seventeen years at Microsoft I came back to Australia in 2012, and did some consulting before going to work at Twitter, which was a really interesting experience. I really got to see the good, the bad and the ugly of social media close up, before going to Adobe and then I was tapped to do this job.

**TOM:** What is it about the intersection between technology, media and public policy that appeals to you in this role?

**JULIE:** I care about human beings, and technology excites me. I started as a techno-

optimist and I believed that when I started in the industry in the 1990s that it would change the world, as I think many of us do when we join the industry with our techno-optimistic glasses. But over time I also saw the damage that technology was doing to people. I also saw that it's not entirely the tech companies' fault.

When you think about it, the issues we're dealing with now are humans weaponising the technology platforms to damage others, whether you're talking about cyber bullying or image-based abuse, the sharing of images and the proliferation of child sexual abuse images, pro-terrorist content. So it's a happy coincidence that I fell into it and I feel passionate about it.

What I've found over time in the industry is that I was this antagonist inside these companies saying "Come on, I'm sitting in these product reviews and we're looking at privacy and security and I get how that leads to customer trust (and hence sales) but what about the personal harms we're causing to people?"

So I brought the whole idea of safety by design to Microsoft over ten years ago and I kind of got the eye roll "we're becoming an enormous company" and I had a great career experience at Microsoft, it really shaped me, but I decided to leave when I knew that I wasn't going to effect change any longer.

I had a much shorter time at Twitter, and I really enjoyed that time too and I think I was able to make a much bigger impact because Twitter was about 3500 people and they had a small public policy and philanthropy team and they gave me a lot of latitude to do things. It was more than a start-up, but people tend to think that Twitter is a lot bigger and a lot more well-resourced than it is because it has such a big footprint. I ultimately left Twitter as well because I got to the point where I didn't feel like I could defend the company anymore.

What I've certainly learnt is that a commitment to safety and user wellbeing has to come from the top and it has to filter down through the company. People have to be rewarded or remunerated or measured on their commitment to safety and that's still not happening on a wide scale basis.

That's why the eSafety Commission started the Safety by Design initiative to encourage companies to change the culture and ethos around digital design from "moving fast and breaking things" to "what's being broken are people and sometimes business" to moving to more carefully considering human rights and human beings and their safety and putting that at the core of what they do, or at least making sure it's a forethought and not an afterthought.

**TOM:** Are there any law reforms in your sector that you think are desperately needed? If so, what are they?

**JULIE:** Technology is always going to outpace policy. As a regulator, you employ regulatory powers and content removal powers after the damage is done.

So I thought we need to work on both ends here. We need prevention and protection through the regulatory powers, and proactive change.

Of course the prevention is all that we do in investing in fundamental research, establishing a baseline and then developing the programs and research and awareness materials to arm our citizens with the information skills and support they need to prevent the harms happening in the first place or to anticipate the harms.

The protection is through the complaints schemes and the proactive change is through safety by design, but also we have a whole program around technology features and tech trends and challenge and we try to get out ahead. Two years ago, almost two and a half years ago we did our first Tech Trends and Challenges brief around DeepFakes.

Couldn't get anyone in the mainstream media to pick it up because it wasn't mainstream enough. Now you can't pick up a technology rag without seeing something about DeepFakes. Last year too we did a piece on immersive technologies, and now the metaverse is hot, as well as decentralisation, everyone's talking about Web 3.0. You have to get the timing right and my point is you need to be thinking about how technologies and how technology paradigm shifts can be harnessed for good and for the benefit of people, but what are the potential risks? So we can be thinking about these new worlds and building them and embedding these protections in the front end rather than waiting to see what happens. This is why we went from just designing Safety by Design principles and methodologies to actually developing tools, risk assessment tools, so that companies can assess their risks and think about how they build the safety processes and systems in at the get-go and understand what harms there are. We also work with a lot of companies to service up their best practice and their innovations so that companies can see how other more mature and experienced companies have tackled some of these wicked problems.

**TOM:** What developments do you see on the horizon in 2022 for the communications and media legal landscape?

**JULIE:** We've learned a lot, being the world's only online safety technology education coordinator for the past seven years and we of course updated the strength of our legislation. When we started, we were the Children's eSafety Commissioner and we were focused on social media.

Of course harms impact everyone online and these harms happen on more than social media, they happen on online gaming platforms and dating sites and responsibility should be held up and down the stack, on search engines and app stores and across the digital ecosystem.

The other thing we're focused on is working with other countries so that they can learn from our experiences and our mistakes. Fiji has set up their own online safety commissioner, Ireland's nearly set up their online safety commissioner, online safety legislation is happening in the UK and in Europe, Canada is looking at our model, and even Joe Biden at the State of the Union address yesterday mentioned holding big tech to account. This is one area where Australia has been a leader, but if we're really going to counter the collective power, wealth and might of the technology sector, we need pincer moves, we need to be working with other governments around the world.

We're dealing with illegal content, particularly child sexual abuse content and pro-terrorist content, that's exclusively hosted overseas because we've had our online content scheme in place here for over 20 years. So we've created a very hostile environment for hosting illegal content, but other countries haven't kept pace.

**TOM:** What recent events in the Australian media law landscape most affect your organisation?

**JULIE:** There is a focus on the recent passage of the Online Safety Act, which has been in place over the last month. There is a lot of work in adjacent portfolios, including the ACCC doing a lot in consumer protection, the Media Bargaining Code is significant, there are privacy codes, there are defamation law reforms. So there is a whole bunch of things happening and what we need to do, as a government and as a country is to architect all these policies to be clear regulatory targets for all these companies, but also for our citizens, so that they know where to go and where to get help for specific issues. We have been very safety-focussed, we haven't had our own marketing and advertising budgets in the past, so we use a lot of media opportunities and we work a lot with schools and NGOs to get the word out that there is help out here.

**TOM:** What's the best work-related advice you've ever received?

**JULIE:** That's a good question. The best advice I ever received came from my mum and I think it applies to everything in life and that was "Julie, you can be anything in life, just don't be boring!"

**TOM:** And you certainly succeeded!

**JULIE:** Yeah, well, thank you. I feel lucky, I've always felt I've had strong role models around me, strong female role models. I haven't felt constraints on what I could do and where I could go, I try and always take a fresh perspective on things. I guess I like to be disruptive in different ways, I like to be solutions-focused, rather than always focus on the ills or the problems. I've learned a lot about that over time, one thing you learn by doing and by making your own mistakes.

**TOM:** Naturally, and as this is for our IWD publication, what advice would you give to the next generation of female leaders in the industry?

**JULIE:** Well, I was just reflecting on my appearance on Q&A after the Brittany Higgins allegations came out and I talked about my own experiences with sexual assault and harassment when I was on the Capital Hill in the US when I was 22 years old and as a total abuse of power that was something that was overlooked. What I said then, and what I believe now, is that I started to see then that it was the Grace Tames and the Brittany Higginses and the Chanel Contoses of the world that were going to change the world and I feel like it is my job in a role like this to help elevate their voice and to help make sure that we're backing this in and making these changes a reality.

We often used to say in the tech industry 'you need to eat your own dog food' and what they of course mean is that you need to try your own technology. Having spent

all that time in the industry where the proportion of men to women was 70% men to 30% women (when I was single it was great, we used to say "well the odds are good, but the goods are odd") but the odds have largely stayed the same, but at the eSafety Commission we've changed that. If you look at my organisation, we're 70% women, 30% men. Maybe we need to achieve balance, but you've got to walk the talk. All the hiring I've done is all merit-based, but I think we have a set of strong female and male leaders here. I don't think there are many organisations in government or across the spectrum where you have so much female ambitious leadership behind an organisation.

**TOM:** It's incredibly important that we elevate female voices across the industry and the other spaces that we find ourselves in.

**JULIE:** You should see the research that we released this week indicating that one in three women experience abuse in their professional lives. It's not just more prevalent for women, but the way it manifests is different. It's criticisms, but also threats of rape, murder, killing children, and focusing on appearance, fertility and supposed virtue and going outside the traditional gender roles other than being a mother and that is causing women to self-censor.

Using technology and the internet as a tool for promotion and building profile, is an essential utility, it's no longer optional, and we had 25% of women tell us that they didn't take a promotion or a leadership opportunity because it would require them to have an online presence. So to me that's a very insidious way that misogynistic abuse manifests - we're encouraging women to promote their voices, but we're not protecting them. It's a wake-up call to all employers.

We work with Safe Work Australia and they have designated online abuse as a psycho-social work hazard and so employers do have a duty of care and, of course, as government we're trying to do our bit through our regulatory schemes, through our education, and our research to really surface these issues and talk about them and address them because we really don't want misogynistic online abuse to be normalised.

**TOM:** Of course, and I entirely agree. Related to this, the 2022 International Women's Day campaign theme is #BreakTheBias. What does this mean to you and how would you suggest this is implemented in our readers' work and personal lives?

**JULIE:** I think the women in the spotlight research we released this week goes to breaking the bias. There are still traditional gender norms about what women should and shouldn't be doing, how they should be expressing themselves and their opinions and women feeling like they have to self-censor, sometimes leave social media, jobs

and opportunities because they see online abuse as the cost of doing business and that shouldn't be the case.

We need to reverse this trend because gendered online abuse is entrenching inequality. Technology should be there as a great leveller, but unfortunately what social media has tended to do is surface the realities of the human condition, whether it's prejudice, racism, homophobia or misogyny. Up until now people have been able to abuse others based on these intersectional factors with relative impunity. Bias is going to exist in society, and it will take a lot of time to dismantle it and we can call it out and try to stop it and try to make sure it's not normalised online. That's what we have to do, we have to call it out.

**TOM:** Absolutely! As a final question if there is one thing you would celebrate about International Women's Day in this industry, specifically, what would it be?

**JULIE:** In the legal industry, you do happen to see more parity in the legal industry. My husband happens to work as the head of HR for a major international law firm, and I know one of the things he sees as a challenge from a work parity perspective is that not enough men seem to be taking parental leave. So when a woman does reach a partner level, which does converge with the age where you might be having children, it's really hard to keep women at a partner level on board. You need men to actually take the parental leave and take on more of the traditionally female roles such as rearing children. I think we're seeing some progress there.

There's still a lot more we need to do in the technology industry to move the bar. I've been in the industry online for 22 years and in the industry the gender gap was huge. I have got to say some of the engineering world is testosterone driven

and that also reflects the pipeline coming out of universities in math and science, so we need to do more to promote STEM and not unconsciously send young women and girls into the arts, and get them to flourish in STEM subjects. As long as there is a recognition that we need to do more to bring a diversity of gender into senior roles and into leadership, that is the only way you are going to change. It is about leadership and if you don't have a workforce that is reflective there will be unconscious or unintended bias, so let's actually walk the talk by promoting and protecting the voices of women online and in the workplace

**TOM:** Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today and to lend our readers your perspective. Happy International Women's Day!



CAMLA YOUNG LAWYERS  
*presents*

# MUSIC & THE LAW

A THREE PART SEMINAR SERIES



COMING SOON

CAMLA