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Age assurance trial casts wide net for world-first scheme

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Foreign technology firms will dominate the federal government's trial of age assurance technologies, bringing with them dozens of cutting-edge solutions like hand and face scanning, and in many cases untested claims.

Around 50 organisations will take part in the trial, which the Albanese government announced (https://www.innovationaus.com/online-age-verification-pilot-gets-green-light/) last May to shield children from online pornography and, in a later expansion, age gate access to social media.

Analysis of the trial participants and public offerings reveals a breadth of players in terms of size and their solutions for determining a user's age.

One French company involved claims it can assure a person's age with only webcam footage of how they move their hands. The company, Needemand, says the method requires no personal data and is 99 per cent accurate, but is reportedly unverified (https://www.crikey.com.au/2025/02/06/teen-social-media-ban-hand-scan-age-verification-test/)

A growing pool of age assurance technologies claim to accurately estimate or verify a users age. Image: Shutterstock

Another participant, Gold Coast firm Blue Biometrics, markets "contactless" fingerprint capturing through phone cameras. The company is founded by a former police officer and promotes the product at law enforcement agencies around the world that want to "identify more offenders" and "process them more efficiently".

Others involved in the trial claim to be able to accurately estimate a user's age with phone selfie images and artificial intelligence, while some say they can strengthen age and identity claims by tracking the user's real-world location or checking images against government identity documents.

Several of the participants market their solutions as privacy preserving, including multiple participants that use 'double blind' tokens, a method favoured by Australia's online safety regulator in her sweep of the market in 2023.

The approach uses age assurance providers to verify or estimate a person's age, which is then recorded in an electronic token. The tokens are then used for access to age restricted content, but the content providers do not know the identity of a user. The age assurance service provider also does not record which sites a user visits, so neither party holds all the information on a user.

But all the solutions have tradeoffs, and experts have repeatedly warned Australia's trial will be a "minefield" of privacy, security and cost risks (https://www.innovationaus.com/experts-warn-on-minefield-age-assurance-trial/).

The trial is being conducted by a consortium led by the UK-based Age Check Certification Scheme, which this month revealed the final participants (https://media.licdn.com/dms/document/media/v2/D4D1FAQFEwz_b4g7bGQ/feedshare-document-pdf-analyzed/B4DZUTHxljHwAY-/0/1739782563757?e=1740614400&v=beta&t=kDZfd20q6ry80TgYzQyHMPf5t2bGAmoVRLxzwgHkSVo) after an expression of interest phase.

Only 14 of the responses that made the cut come from Australian firms, which will be tested alongside global giants like Meta and the technology provider it uses for age assurance. iProov, a UK multinational that already supplies biometric tech for Australia's MyGov app, is also listed, as is US firm GeoComply.

The American company has carved out a market by being able to assure users' physical location by scanning devices for anti-spoofing measures. It is mostly used to help sports betting companies know if a customer is in a state that allows gambling.

The established players are being trialled alongside smaller organisations like the Eden Game Development Centre, a grass roots effort connecting children with video games and computer programming.

The age assurance trial participants will be tested by KJR, a local technology testing company that has assisted the federal government in the past on things like COVID-19 payments.

KJR general manager Andrew Hammond said the age assurance industry is maturing quickly but many of the bold claims are still untested.

"All the indications are yes, it's mature," he told InnovationAus.com. "And certainly, industry has changed its view from a few years ago, where it was that this was never going to be possible to now it is possible.

"So we're optimistic that it is possible. But because we haven't sort of pushed the testing just yet, it is hard to say conclusively."

Around a dozen staff from KJR will effectively be acting s test customers for the trial participants, scrutinising performance, documentation and integration with a test harness to examine features in detail.

"Once we've proven that's working, then we start to get into a baseline activity where we use a controlled data set to push through each of the techs, and check the results there, where we know the individual's age and all their credentials," Mr Hammond said.

"And we'll push that through the various systems and check that it comes back and see what the efficacy of those systems is in the first instance."

The various age assurance systems use different technologies, ranging from age verification, age estimation, and age inference, to parental certification or controls, and wider software platforms. They will deliver different results, like that a user is at least 16 years old or not, an estimated age range based on a video, or if user access can be effectively controlled and managed.

The next step is a wider trial involving 13- to 23-year-olds testing the technologies in school settings and with diverse cohorts, including First Nations users.

"A lot of these systems that are developed in the UK or the US obviously are unlikely to have our First Nations people in there, so we've got a heavy focus on making sure that we don't miss any group that we think would be underrepresented in the [providers'] base solution," Mr Hammond said.

The privacy and security of the solutions are in scope, but only to an extent. KJR won't be stress testing the offerings or assessing them against the government's information security testing or essential eight cybersecurity requirements.

When the trial concludes, it will not produce a leaderboard or endorsement of

particular technologies. But it will provide analysis of what is available and each solution's strengths and weaknesses.

Australia's ban on children under 16 accessing social media (https://www.innovationaus.com/world-first-social-media-ban-for-under-16s/) is slated to be in force by next year. Ultimately it will be up to platform companies like Meta or X to deploy the tools and demonstrate to the Australian government they are complying with bans on young users or preventing access to adult content.

"From a compliance point of view... it keeps the bastards honest," Mr Hammond said.

"[The government may be able to say] don't try and tell me that you can't do it, because here's an independent trial of 60 odd solutions that to varying degrees say that you can do it."

Do you know more? Contact James Riley via Email (mailto:james@innovationaus.com).

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