Matt Hatfield, Executive Director, OpenMedia

House Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage
Re: Bill C-34, the Safe Social Media Act

Tuesday, November 17, 2026

Opening Remarks (Check against delivery):

Good afternoon. I'm Matt Hatfield, Executive Director of OpenMedia, a grassroots community of 230,000 people in Canada who work together for an open, accessible and surveillance-free Internet. I'm joining you from the unceded land of the Tsleil-Waututh, Squamish and Musqueam Nations.

Bill C-34 may end up being the most impactful legislation any of us will ever work on. It's the first serious federal effort to make our Internet a better place: not just for artists, businesses, or journalists, but for everyone. And it has taken a long time to get here for good reason. When Canadians saw the government's first online harms proposal in 2021, OpenMedia called it a blueprint for the most censored and surveilled Internet in the democratic world; and we were not alone. For once, our government listened. It paused, consulted widely, and convened an expert panel to study the issues more closely. The result, first introduced in Part 1 of C-63, and now in large parts of C-34, is a night-and-day improvement, with real sophistication about how the Internet works and how very different harms can be managed.

But the work is far from done. There are three crucial areas this committee still needs to get right.

First, the Digital Safety Commission. This new body will have extraordinary power to review, guide and make binding decisions about how platforms moderate the expression of Canadians in the online spaces we use every day. Yet it has much less structural independence than the Privacy Commissioner, and less financial independence than the CRTC, despite governing more sensitive material - the public's speech - than either body. That needs to change. Amend C-34 so the Commission can't act until it has a full quorum; so MPs from all parties can interview and vet Commission nominees before they're appointed; and so the Commission's most consequential regulations, and its annual report, come to this committee for review.

Second, we need to better defend rights in C-34's structure. The cheapest, easiest way for a service to make its users "safe" is to strip away their expression and privacy. Right now, the rules the Commission writes must take expression and privacy into account, but that's a pretty thin slice of what C-34 does. Most of C-34's impact will come through companies' internally developed digital safety plans, and whether the Commission accepts them as written, or orders changes. Today, companies are only told they aren't required to over-restrict expression. Nothing requires them to assess their impact on our rights, or keep that impact proportionate.

We're asking you to build impact on rights into that safety plan process. Companies must assess the impact and proportionality of their safety measures on users' privacy and expression in their safety plans. And the Commission must explicitly assess that proportionality when it reviews those plans and whenever it issues orders or guidance, with written analysis and reasoning.

Lastly, the elephant in the room. Canada has been carried away by the global enthusiasm for age limits, and added measures the government's expert panel did not recommend: banning young Canadians from social media, and age-checking everyone on many ordinary platforms. It's understandable to want to protect young people from the Internet's worst effects. But a crude attempt to chase them off platforms won't work, and will cause real harm. In Australia, studies find 70 to 85 percent of under-16s are still on social media. Workarounds are easy, and the social pressure to stay is intense. And once teens turn 16, their daily use rises well above where it was before the ban; from 80% pre-ban, to 87% or more since the ban came into effect. This is not how we minimize negative impacts of social media on young people.

OpenMedia's strong preference is that you drop these performative measures, and focus on what actually matters: a duty of care for all users, and a special duty of care for young Canadians. If you won't do that, at least minimize the harm of the performance. No young Canadian should be kicked off any platform until the Commission has set clear exemption criteria and that platform has had a fair chance to keep them by adopting an effective, regulator-accepted youth safety plan. And if you insist on age gates, require the Privacy Commissioner, or its successor, to evaluate and designate verification methods that genuinely protect privacy, and forbid those that don't.

OpenMedia has a unique role in this discussion; we are both a rights-defending community that will always stand up for fundamental freedoms; and a community of consumer advocates, fighting for common sense regulation that improves our online lives. If you do the work needed at this committee in the weeks ahead, you can make Bill C-34 a win on both counts. Since 2021, our community has sent nearly 28,000 messages asking our government to get online harms right. Our full written submission on how to do it will be in your hands soon. Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.