

Australian leader has 'constructive' talk with Google boss

February 4 2021, by Rod McGuirk



This Thursday, Jan. 3, 2013, file photo shows Google's headquarters in Mountain View, Calif. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said on Monday, Feb. 1, 2021, that Microsoft was confident that it could fill the void if Google carried out its threat to remove its search engine from Australia. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)

The Australian prime minister said he had a "constructive" meeting on Thursday with the head of Google after the tech giant threatened to remove its search engine from Australia over plans to make digital platforms pay for news.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison also welcomed the support of Google rival Microsoft, which has touted Australia's proposed laws that would make Google and Facebook pay as an example for the rest of the world.

Sundar Pichai, chief executive of Alphabet Inc. and its subsidiary Google, initiated the online meeting with Morrison to discuss the draft laws that were introduced to Parliament in December.

"I thought it was a constructive meeting," Morrison said. "I think I've been able to send them the best possible signals that should give them a great encouragement to engage with the process."

Google regional director Mel Silva told a Senate hearing last month that the company would likely make its [search engine](#) unavailable in Australia if the so-called News Media Bargaining Code forced Google and Facebook to pay for Australian news.

Google has not explained how Australians would be excluded or from what services.

A Senate committee will report to the government on its review of the draft legislation on Feb. 12.

Morrison said he was clear with Pichai that "Australia sets the rules for how these things operate."



People walk past the Microsoft offices in Sydney, Wednesday, Feb. 3, 2021. Microsoft says it supports Australia's plans to make the biggest digital platforms pay for news and would help small businesses transfer their advertising to Bing if Google quits the country. (AP Photo/Rick Rycroft)

"We discussed some of the specifics of elements of the code and they raised those matters, I think, very respectfully," Morrison said. "But I think we've been able to get that into a much more positive space about the ability to continue to provide services here in Australia."

Google declined to comment on the meeting.

While Google and Facebook have condemned the legislation as unworkable, Microsoft President Brad Smith said his business would be willing to pay for news if its search engine increased Australian market

share.

The law would initially only apply to Google and Facebook, but the government could add other platforms in the future if Google abandoned Australia.

Although Bing is Australia's second most popular search engine, it has only a 3.6% market share. Google says it has 95%.

Smith said Microsoft would invest in Bing in Australia to improve its quality so that it would be on par with Google as it was in North America and Britain.

"This is an opportunity, whether people use Bing or not, to put a stake in the ground to support the importance of news and publishing and rectify what is ... a real imbalance, say, between search and technology and traditional news," Smith told Australian Broadcasting Corp.

"We applaud the government for taking this kind of step. I think it's needed, not just in Australia but in other places too," he added.

Technology was having two "adverse effects on the health of democracy"—spreading disinformation and sapping the economic foundation of [news](#) media, he said.

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