

To the parliamentary inquiry on elections and social media manipulation

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Social media manipulation is not simply the technological issue of bots and trolls, but the social dynamics and choice in ideas promoted online which can be optimised for maximum destruction. The medium affects the choice in messaging. Conspiracy theories and half true narratives as well as visceral, hot-button imagery are more likely to go viral than other material. This has implications for any liberal democracy which relies on a reason-driven discussion.

If Australian policymakers approach the problem of social media manipulation from an engineering-mindset, they will address the problem in its current form while missing the longer-term challenge. In fact, as recent news shows, the social media companies themselves are still trialling approaches to countering false information. They remain a flawed work in progress.

Consequently, Australian approaches should be similarly open-ended and dynamic, capable of constant evolution.

-The extent to which social media bots may have targeted Australian voters and political discourse in the past.

Australia, as an open, English-speaking society, is vulnerable to social media influence campaigns directed from afar. While we have not seen a major, high-profile effort to shift Australian opinion directed from abroad, conspiracy theories and weaponised narratives with overseas origins have found a receptive audience here. Members of the Australian public can then amplify and annotate these theories before recycling them. Recently, for example, the 'white genocide' conspiracy (claiming falsely that there is a plot to exterminate white people) has gained more traction after comments made by Australian politicians on the issue of white South African farmers. There is a push-pull effect, in which Australia-originated stories on white South African famers get amplified abroad, generating more attention within Australia of the 'white genocide' conspiracy theory.

-On the likely sources of social media manipulation within Australia and internationally.

The likely sources of social media manipulation within Australia would come from the so-called alt-right, and nationalist trolls and jihadists. Many of the most prolific English-language promoters of disinformation, misinformation, conspiracy theory, and weaponised narratives are in the United States, UK, and other English-language nations. To the best of my knowledge, the People's Republic of China is most active in Taiwan and within the diaspora communities abroad, including Australia. As yet, there is not tremendous evidence of PRC social media campaigns aimed at democracies.

However, one of the biggest misunderstandings about social media manipulation is that it's not simply bots and trolls organised from abroad to influence a domestic situation. Rather, these overseas efforts typically work in conjunction with groups of domestic actors who share a similar

worldview. This can be seen in the China influence debate, in which locally based people echo or defend the Chinese Communist Party views on the issue. Likewise, the alt-right, which draws rhetorically often aligned with Russia, amplifies its message with the help of local participants. So social media influence campaigns, reflecting the terrain of the internet, are not top-down productions, but rather lateral ones. Domestic actors are joined at the hip with overseas networks pushing particular messages, which can then enter Australia's political information flow.

Social media influence campaigns don't always come as a high profile torrent of posts, either. Sometimes, they are just a persistent messaging shared and annotated by local actors that don't rise to the attention of local media or the local politicians. Consequently, it receives no response. In this way, the messaging goes uncontested within Australia's social-cyber space, even as it fractures political cohesion.

Australia has politicians and public figures who routinely repost propaganda that has conceptual origins in authoritarian nations.

-How to address the spread of deliberately false news online during elections.

Given the risk of manipulation on social media, the government can adopt a position that aims to diminish the influence of social media on elections. Not so long ago, the notion of learning something "on the internet" rather than traditional, fact-checked media, carried a stigma. In the way that a central bank can "talk down" their currency when the fundamentals warrant it, a government heading into an election, can emphasize the risk of forming political opinions based exclusively on social media.

RECOMMENDATIONS

*** A comparable table of political positions.** With the structural demise of traditional media, there may be a role in the Australian Electoral Commission producing a simplified gazette of political parties' views on issues, which can be heavily publicised through multiple channels in the days before the elections. Voters can be directed to these charts that contain verified information on the views of politicians, where they can compare and contrast the positions of parties. The government could limit the word count of the statements, which would increase the importance of the statements. In a time of unrestrained information flows, the brevity of the statement would increase its value to the public.

***Defend the information space.** As laid out in an ANU policy paper 'Addressing Australia's Vulnerability to Weaponised Narratives': in a time of information overload, Australia should defend its information space by setting up a dedicated desk in the parliamentary library to track and expose weaponised narratives, propaganda, and misinformation that creeps into parliamentary debate. (Full paper attached). The idea is not to restrict speech but to add context around how certain subjects are being manipulated online.

The proposal recognises our permanently altered information environment, in which there is no scarcity to published or broadcast speech which has become structurally almost free. If such a proposal had any success in its implementations, there would be nothing stopping the role being devolved from the Parliamentary Library to an independent body with public oversight.

Consequently, trust in the public information space could improve. Similar schemes could be replicated in other institutions critical for Australia's political process.

*** Expose online disinformation aimed at an election.** The AEC should be given authority to research and expose social media influence campaigns that are targeting opinion around a campaign. The AEC doesn't have to form an opinion on the purpose of the online influence campaign, as much to flag its existence, forewarning the public of the technological and message details.

If a social media influence campaign becomes overwhelming, conclusions drawn about the technical nature of the social media campaign should be made available even at polling places. These declarations should be timely, non-partisan, subject to oversight and independent confirmation. They would draw on the expertise of political scientists, data scientists, lawyers, and the media, among others. The statements should be calibrated so as not to seek to give advantage or disadvantage to any party.

Malicious actors would likely attempt to reverse engineer this process, tainting a topic in the public's mind by acting on it. This would test the character and commonsense of domestic voting against a backdrop of artificial manipulation.

*** Educate the public.** For that reason, the broader effort against foreign-backed social media manipulation should be cast in terms of values. A goal of today's propaganda is not to promote a competing world view, as during the Cold War, as much as it is to undermine trust in all facts. Once that happens, an open democracy such as Australia's, reliant on factual exchange, cannot function properly.

Along with compulsory voting, publicly funded, non-partisan news is critical – especially at an election time. Changes in communications technology means that social media can act as a megaphone to drown out even legitimate local news. For this reason, the ABC's news-gathering funding must be maintained or increased. Given the difficulties and incentives in commercial news gathering, Australia should be able to rely on a baseline of credible, opinion-free news.

The surest way to inoculate a society against such manipulation is to ensure that it understands the fundamental principles it stands on. For this reason, education has a special role in fighting the effects of social media manipulation. The AEC should develop a course to refresh the public's understanding heritage of its democracy. The course can be disseminated at the school level, emphasizing the broad non-partisan and uncontested values that have driven democracy in Australia and beyond.

***Speak to Silicon Valley.** DFAT should open up a line of communication with the social media companies, in their home turf, to seek to influence the reforms around their platforms and make them suitable to a modern democracy. To date, representative democracy has had to accommodate the changes brought on by social media. Australia, a modern, open democracy, could provide insight on the technological changes needed to make platforms more favourable and conducive to productive and secure democratic discourse.

-Measures to improve the media literacy of Australian voters.

Efforts to increase media literacy should start first by examining the values necessary for a vibrant democracy. Before providing debunking tools to the public, the public must first have the desire to seek the truth. This is particularly true in a time when one of the biggest forces in misinformation on the global stage, Russia, pursues a “post-modern” approach in which multiple contradictory “truths” are promoted simultaneously. This has real-world effects on any open democracy in which extreme voices are amplified as the broad middle is drown out.

The Balkanising, tribalising effect of social media makes it easy for a divided public to then focus on winning a political debate, leaving behind the bigger issue of what constitutes a realistic view of the national priorities.

The belief that truth is knowable and intrinsically valuable to leading the broader political conversation is a concept going back to The Enlightenment. Such an emphasis will foster a good outcome for the nation no matter the threat level of social media manipulation. Moreover, the value of truthful discourse will positively guide the many smaller decisions around both politics and policy setting.

Selected reading:

<https://nsc.crawford.anu.edu.au/department-news/12728/addressing-australias-vulnerability-weaponised-narratives>

<https://www.theage.com.au/world/asia/is-talk-of-australia-s-anti-china-bias-a-weaponised-narrative-20180503-p4zd4a.html>

<https://www.smh.com.au/world/democracy-the-global-war-you-fear-we-may-already-be-there-20170301-gunzyb.html>