

**NEWS & MEDIA  
RESEARCH CENTRE**



**UNIVERSITY OF  
CANBERRA**

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# Submission to the joint standing committee on electoral matters:

Inquiry into and report on all aspects of the conduct of the 2019  
federal election and matters related thereto

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## BACKGROUND

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The News and Media Research Centre ([N&MRC](#)) at the University of Canberra researches digital news consumption and the impacts of digital technology on public discourse and democratic participation.

Since 2015, the Centre has published the *Digital News Report: Australia (DNR: Australia)*, a national annual online survey of more than 2,000 adult Australians, which monitors changes in news consumption over time, particularly within the digital space. The Australian survey forms part of a global study of 38 news markets co-ordinated by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. The *Digital News Report: Australia 2019* can be downloaded via

<https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/faculty-research-centres/nmrc/digital-news-report-australia-2019>.

This submission is presented in two parts:

- Part 1 of the submission is based on data from the 2019 *DNR: Australia* survey about online and social media news consumption, fake news, verification, interest in politics and the political orientation of news consumers.
- Part 2 is based on an analysis of Twitter activity by China and Russia during the 2019 campaign period with expert commentary and analysis by Dr Mike Jensen of potential social media manipulation.

The aim of this submission is to provide context around the consumption of political news and information at the time of the Australian election in May 2019. The submission authors are happy to provide further information to the Inquiry if requested.

### Response to selected issues related to political advertising, disinformation and third-party actors during the 2019 federal election

Australians are increasingly accessing news and information from online sources, including via social media platforms. During the 2019 federal election there was heightened awareness of the possibility of the dissemination of political disinformation from foreign actors. This in part stemmed from the impact of fake news on the 2016 US election as well as other democracies, such as the Philippines. While there is little evidence that disinformation from foreign actors had a major impact on the 2019 Australian election result, disinformation generated by political parties and candidates in the form of political advertising and extreme spin, such as the anti-Labor tax scare campaign on TV and social media, arguably helped tipped the balance in favour of the incumbent government.

To assist the Inquiry's examination of this disinformation from local political actors and third-party actors during the 2019 federal election we have compiled two sets of relevant data; a survey of Australians' online news consumers in 2019 and a social media (Twitter) analysis related to the 2019 election. The *DNR: Australia* report provides analysis of consumer interest in politics, news use based on the political orientation of Australian citizens, fake news and fact-checking behaviour, which can help interpret the result of the 2019 election and the impact of political advertising spread via social and traditional media on vulnerable sections of the Australian electorate. The Twitter analysis of social media operations during the 2019 Australian election and the trolling efforts against Australian demonstrations in support of the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong adds to the understanding of foreign influence on social media.

## PART 1. Online news consumption in 2019

### Attitudes towards news

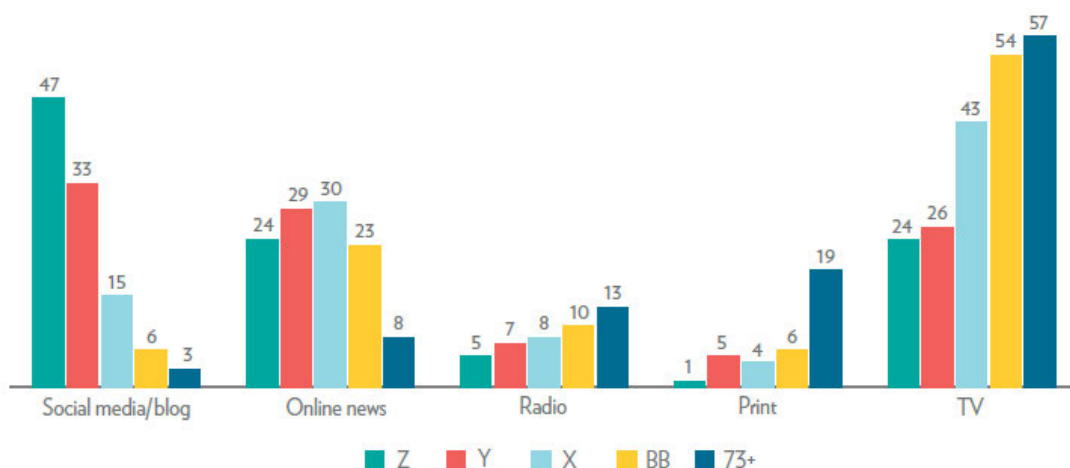
Australians are the ‘lightest’ news consumers in the world. Almost half of Australians (48%) consume news once a day or less, compared to only one third (34%) of news consumers globally. In terms of interest in news, Australians are in the middle of the pack with about 58% interested in news compared to the global average of 59%. More than one third (35%) of Australians say they are interested in politics, which is just below the global average (37%). It is against this backdrop of low consumption of news compared to the interest in politics and news that the political information consumption behaviour of Australian voters needs to be seen.

### Sources of news

The 2019 report shows the shift away from traditional offline platforms such as TV and newspapers is continuing, particularly among younger generations. However, the popularity of television as the **main** source of news remains strong. TV continues to be the primary vehicle for news delivery for 42% of Australians. In comparison, only 6% rely on print and 9% rely on radio for news. Globally the reliance on social media platforms for news has risen slightly, but in Australia it has remained relatively stable at 18%, close to the global average of 17%.

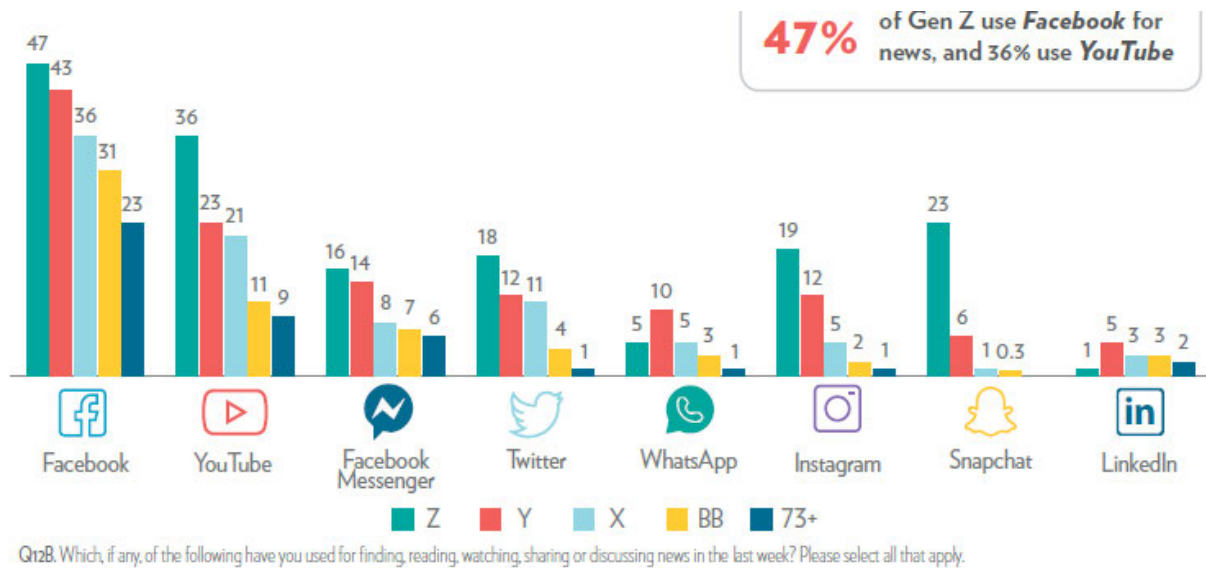
The shift away from legacy offline platforms to social media and online sources is most clearly seen when we look at the generations. For Gen Z, Social media platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, are the main gateways to news, whereas older generations still rely on TV and print sources (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Main source of news by generation (%)



While Facebook continues to be the dominant social media platform for news, YouTube, Snapchat and Instagram are rising, particularly among younger generations (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Social media platforms for news by generation (%)



These data suggest that younger Australian voters were likely to be more vulnerable to political disinformation published and shared on social media platforms, particularly Facebook and YouTube, and older generations were more likely to be vulnerable to political disinformation broadcast on TV, such as misleading political television advertising.

## Concern about fake news

In the context of the ongoing global debate about the spread of fake news, we asked news consumers again this year if they were concerned about what is real or fake on the internet. In 2019, 62% said they were concerned about discerning fact from fiction. This is in line with the *Digital News Report: Australia 2018*, which found 65% of news consumers were concerned about fake news. Australians show a higher level of concern about the veracity of online information than the global average (55%).

Significantly, the data reveals a divide along income and education lines regarding concern about what is real or fake on the internet. Those with higher education levels are more likely to be concerned than those with low or medium education. Similar to 2018 results, heavy news users and those with a higher interest in news are also more likely to be concerned about what is real or fake on the internet. Those who live in regional, rural and remotes areas are more likely to say they are concerned about what is real and fake online (65%) compared to 60% of news consumers in the cities.

The concern about fake news is also related to how news consumers find news online. The majority (70%) of those who go directly to the brand website or app as their main method of accessing online news are concerned about fake news. A similar proportion (74%) of those who mainly access news via social media are concerned. Those who mainly access news via search engines (49%) and those who mainly access online news via news aggregators (57%) are less concerned. This can be interpreted in two ways. Those who are already concerned about fake news are going directly to trusted brands (i.e. going directly to the

news site). And those who are using social media for news are exposed to an array of dubious information, which may make them worried about the veracity. Those who access news via social media are incidentally getting exposed to news while they are online engaging in other activities. This means news consumers are left to their own devices to filter and verify the information. Those who are accessing news via aggregated services are getting news that they have signed up for mainly from trusted brands. Therefore, there is a filtering mechanism already in place.

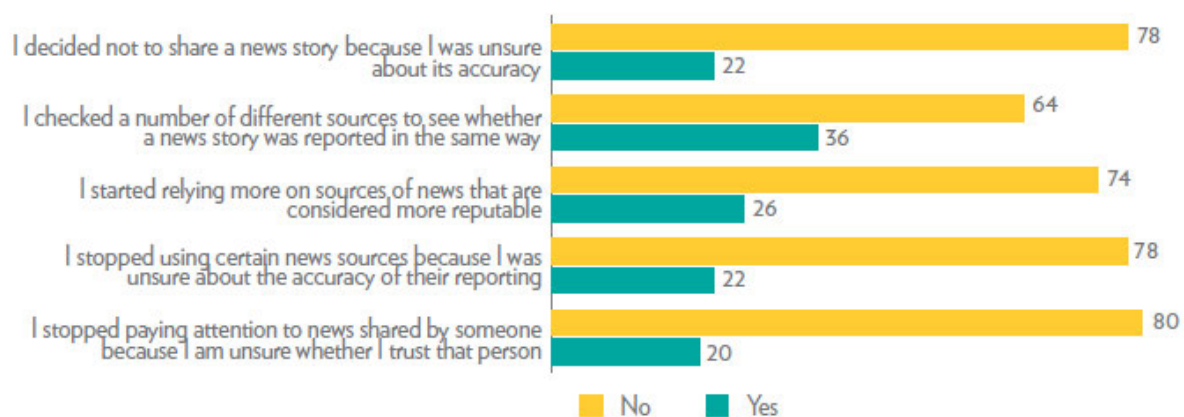
Australians who identify as right wing are more likely to be concerned about what is real or fake on the internet. As figure 3 shows, right-wing news consumers are slightly more likely than left-wing, and much more likely than centre oriented news consumers, to be concerned about what is real or fake on the internet.

However, the largest difference in levels of concern is related to interest in politics. Those with a high interest in politics are much more likely to be concerned about what is real and fake online (70%). In comparison, 58% of those with low interest in politics say they are concerned. In the context of the 2019 Australian election, this correlation between low interest in politics and low concern about fake news is important. As we will see, those with low concern and low interest are less likely to fact check.

## Fact checking

In response to the public concern about the need for citizens to verify the news they use online, we asked participants what fact-checking activities they have engaged in over the past 12 months, if any, when deciding to read or share a story online. Most Australian news consumers did not adopt any news verification behaviours. However, 36% said they did compare the reporting of a story across news outlets to check its accuracy, and 26% said they began to use more reliable news sources (see **figure 3**). It should be noted that these figures only reflect changed behaviour in the past year.

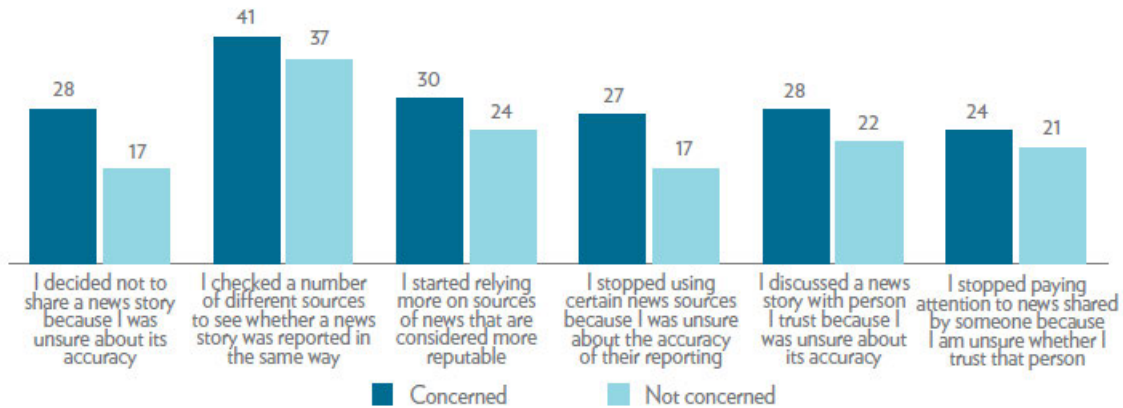
Figure 3. Verification behaviours (%)



QLIT\_2019. Have you done any of the following in the last year? Please select all that apply. I decided not to share a news story because I was unsure about its accuracy; I checked a number of different sources to see whether a news story was reported in the same way; I started relying more on sources of news that are considered more reputable; I stopped using certain news sources because I was unsure about the accuracy of their reporting; I discussed a news story with person I trust because I was unsure about its accuracy; I stopped paying attention to news shared by someone because I am unsure whether I trust that person; None of these; Don't know.

The data clearly show that Australian news consumers who are concerned about fake news, are more likely to use verification techniques than those who say they are not concerned. As figure 4 shows, 28% of those who are concerned say they would not share a story they had doubts about, compared to 17% of people who are not concerned. A similar number of those concerned (27%) say they have stopped using news sources they are unsure about, and 30% say they have started using more trustworthy news sources.

Figure 4. Concern about fake news and fact checking (%)



Those who are more interested in politics are more likely to fact-check. The majority (83%) of Australians who have high interest in politics have engaged in one or more fact-checking activities. About one-third of those who have high interest in politics stopped sharing a story because they were unsure about the accuracy, whereas only 18% of those with low interest in politics did so. Those with high interest in politics are more likely to check different sources (49%) than those with low interest (29%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Interest in politics and fact-checking

	High interest	Low interest
I decided not to share a news story because I was unsure about its accuracy	29%	18%
I checked a number of different sources to see whether a news story was reported in the same way	49%	29%
I started relying more on sources of news that are considered more reputable	40%	18%
I stopped using certain news sources because I was unsure about the accuracy of their reporting	31%	17%
I discussed a news story with person I trust because I was unsure about its accuracy	31%	19%
I stopped paying attention to news shared by someone because I am unsure whether I trust that person	27%	16%
None of these	17%	36%

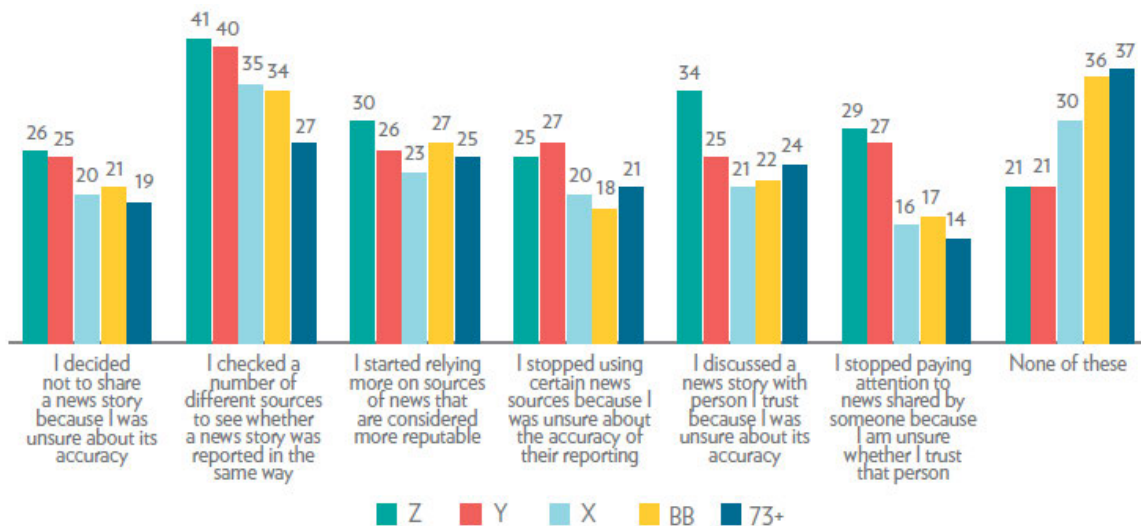
This signals a shift in news consumer behaviour and points to the possible success of attempts to raise public awareness about the online information environment. While that finding is some cause for optimism, it must be restated that around 70% of news consumers in the survey said they did not use any fact checking behaviours in the past twelve months. Compared to the 37 other countries in the survey, the data reveal Australians are less likely to employ verification techniques than news consumers in two thirds of the participating countries. Australians are less likely to check the veracity of a story by checking with alternative sources (36%) compared with 41% globally. In addition, only 22% of Australian participants say they would NOT share a story if they thought it was dubious compared to the international average of 29%.



### Which Australians say they fact check?

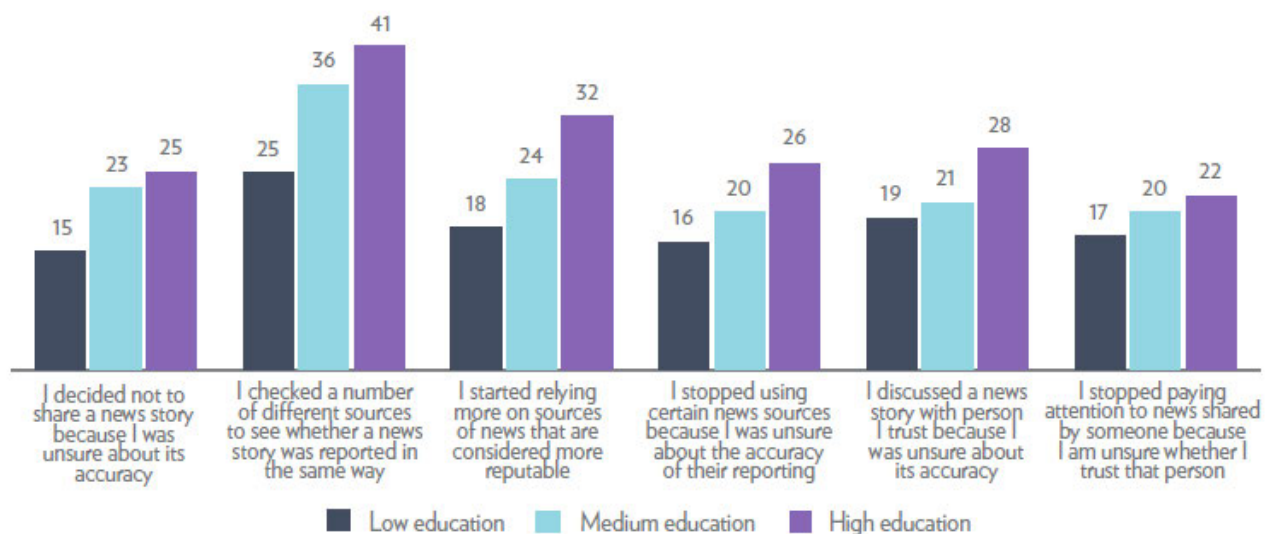
While older Australians say they are more concerned that younger, it is the members of younger generations who are the most likely to verify the news they find online (Figure 5). This largely reflects that younger news consumers are more likely to access news online and via social media platforms than older people and younger people are likely to be more confident in their digital skills. It also possibly reflects great scepticism in news among younger Australians who have lower general trust in news.

Figure 5. Verification by generation (%)



Those with higher education and incomes are most likely to engage in each of these verification activities, particularly checking a story against a range of other news outlets (see figure 6).

Figure 6. Verification by education levels (%)





The data also show that those with lower education consume fewer news brands and those with higher education consume more. This suggests that those with lower education were more vulnerable to political disinformation during the 2019 election campaign.

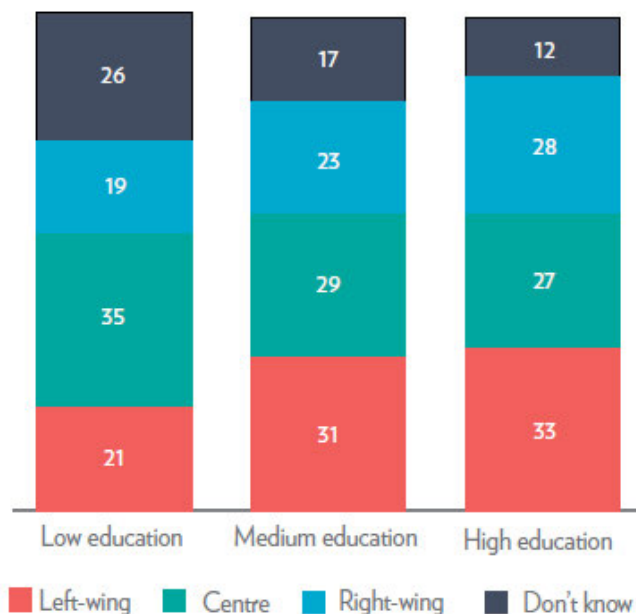
## Political orientation and fact checking

In this year's survey 30% of news consumers identified as left-wing (very & fairly left-wing, plus slightly left-of-centre); 29% identified as centre (centre only); and 24% identified as right-wing (very and fairly right-wing, plus slightly right-of-centre). A further 17% did not know their political orientation.

Following the unexpected election outcome in 2019 we did additional analysis of the data based on political orientation. The findings are revealing. Figure 7 shows that almost one third (26%) of news consumers with low education said they "don't know" their political orientation. This is a high figure compared to those with medium (17%) and high (12%) levels of education.

News consumers with lower levels of education are also more likely to identify with the centre of politics (35%) than either left (19%) or right (21%). These demographic differences are important and help explain significant variations in news consumption behaviour across the political spectrum, and which is very relevant to contexts of the 2019 election.

Figure 7. Political orientation and education (%)



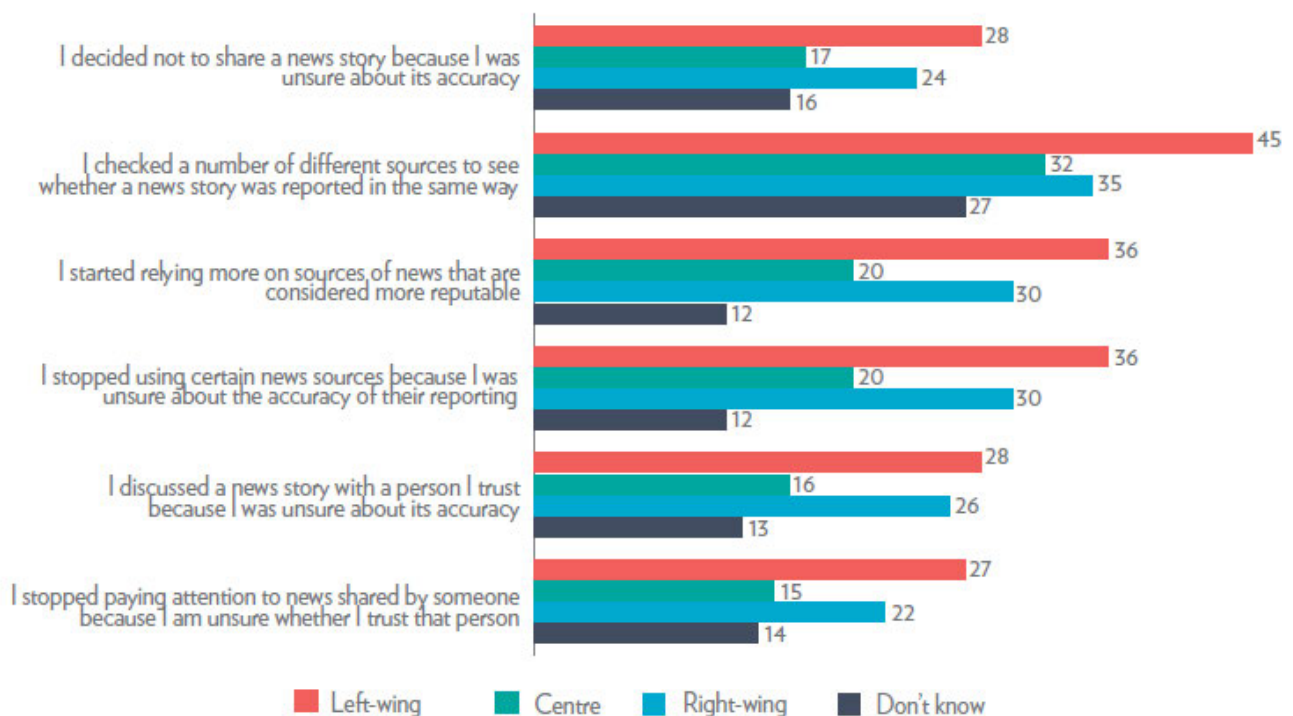
Consumers who "don't know" their political orientation use the fewest news brands. Both left-wing and right-wing news consumers use on average the same number of brands (6); whereas centre-oriented news consumers and those who responded "don't know" use the least number of news brands (4). Interestingly, the very right-wing use the highest number (8), which is more than double the average number of brands consumed by those who said they "don't know".

Similarly, those who "don't know" their political orientation access news by the fewest channels or platforms. They are more likely to use only one, such as TV, even if they consume different TV news brands.

Importantly, those who say they “don’t know” are the least likely to fact check news, those who indicate a political orientation (left, centre, or right) are more likely to take part in fact-checking and verification practices. Overall, left-wing news consumers are more likely to perform fact-checking and verification practices than both centre and right-wing oriented news consumers.

The largest difference between left and right-wing news consumers can be seen in relation to those who say they have checked several different sources to see if a news story was reported in the same way. Forty-five percent of left-wing news consumers say they have checked with different sources, compared to 35% of right-wing news consumers (figure 8).

Figure 8. Fact checking and political orientation (%)

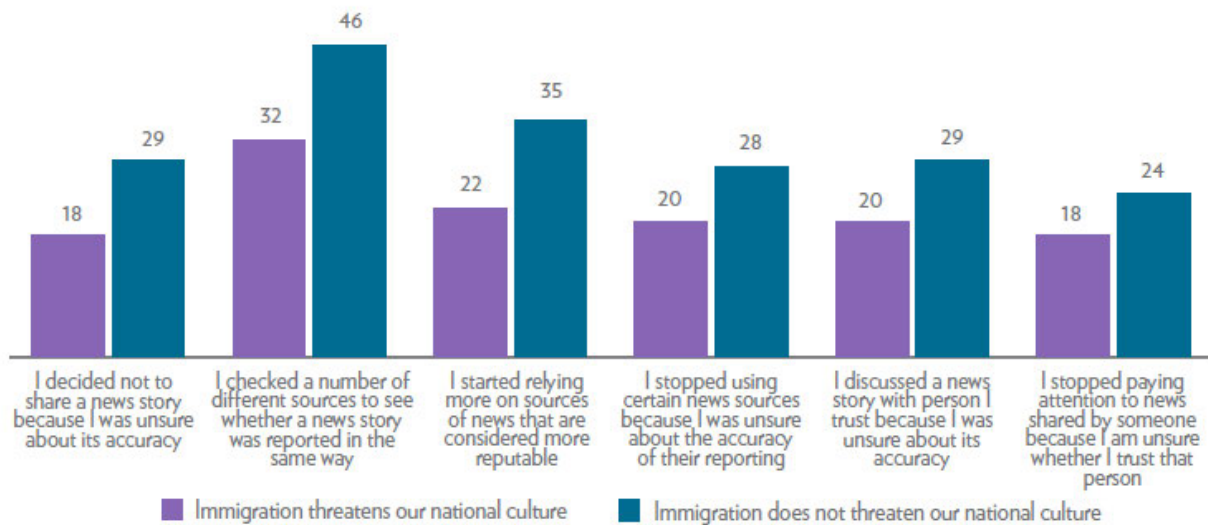


This year we also asked a series of questions about the political process. They included questions about whether news consumers agreed with a series of statements about citizen involvement in political decisions and one about immigration.

In the context of the 2019 Australian federal election, where the Liberal and National Coalition was led by Scott Morrison, who in a previous government was responsible for strict border policies, the responses to the statement about immigration take on additional interest. In **Figure 9** below, they are analysed in the context of news factchecking and verification practices.

Those news consumers who agreed with the statement that immigration is a threat to national culture are more likely to be right-wing and much less likely to perform fact-checking and verification practices.

Figure 9. Fact checking by question on immigration (%)



## Conclusion

In the context of the 2019 Australian Federal election, the findings here help provide some insights into the news consumption behaviour of Australians generally, and along partisan lines. We are the lightest news consumers out of the 38 countries surveyed, and two thirds (65%) say they have low or no interest in politics.

When analysed based on political orientation, the data reveal that left-wing oriented news consumers continue to be more interested in news and politics than centre and right-wing oriented news consumers. But there is a large section of news consumers who “don’t know” their political orientation. This group has low interest in politics and news, uses the fewest brands, and accesses them via the fewest number of news channels. These less-engaged voters are more likely to be female, younger and have low education and incomes. Importantly, in an online political environment tainted by fake news and partisan misinformation, this group also fact-checks and verifies stories the least.

Those who responded “don’t know” are possibly aligned with the population of undecided voters and may help explain their voting behaviour. According to this data, these citizens are possibly making voting decisions based on the fewest number of news sources and are the least likely to check them. This reflects a significant population of disengaged news consumers. This makes them more vulnerable to disinformation than other voters.

Further, those who identify with the centre or right of politics are less likely to fact-check, which might help explain the success of the anti-Labor tax scare campaign conducted on TV and social media. This coincides with the fact that older generations have a higher proportion identifying as right-wing than other age groups, and young generations tend to have a higher proportion of left-wing news consumers.

## PART 2. Foreign Influence and Australian Election Integrity

This submission provides evidence that the affordances of global digital technology have greatly increased the likelihood of foreign influence. However, it finds that both Russian and PRC propaganda during the 2019 Australian election were unlikely to have intervened to direct the vote one way or another. Rather, they focused on advancing specific issues. Analysis is based on Twitter social media activity by China and Russia during the campaign period. It provides a series of recommendations to increase digital media literacy including that political parties at all levels of government receive training on how to handle approaches by persons acting on behalf of a foreign principal.

### The importance of online foreign influence

During a recent address before the Lowy Institute the outgoing director of the Australian Security and Information Office, Duncan Lewis, declared espionage and foreign influence an “existential threat” to Australia and “far and away the most serious issue going forward” for Australian security (Lewis, 2019). Lewis’ comments about the threat of foreign influence combined with espionage signal that foreign influence operations themselves are often operationally connected, utilising information obtained through espionage to inform and influence activities.

The threat of foreign influence today is uniquely pressing for four reasons.

1. In contrast to conventional threats to national security, against which vast distances across oceans have protected the country, online **foreign influence** negates the security provided by geography. Attackers can carry out foreign influence from outside the country and hide their origins and activity. Further, As society becomes more differentiated and demands for responsiveness to citizens and groups forming the public sphere increase, systematic distortions in public conversations can reverberate across other domains of political decision making (Luhmann 1982; Swanson and Mancini 1996). Public decisions must often be presented and defended within these spaces which inform other aspects of coverage across the media ecosystem. Hence, **the centrality of digital networks to domestic political communication reduces the barriers and risks for a foreign adversary** and increases the salience and risks for Australia’s democracy.
2. Second, **digital networks facilitate** cost-effective access to communities which has reduced the resources and time required to execute a sustained influence operation. It also enables timely interventions into political discussions which can be decisive in shaping outcomes (Kreiss, 2014). Russia’s covert Facebook advertising operation during the 2016 US election showed that they promoted ads coinciding with events on the same day and the median duration of their ads was just one day (Jensen 2019a). **Influence operations capitalise on the fast temporalities of digital spaces which makes it hard interrupt an operation in progress by suspending accounts.** By the time they are reported, they likely have produced their intended effects. That is not to say suspending accounts is not worthwhile, particularly for accounts which have become highly influential, or as a means of slowing an operation’s capacities.
3. **Digital networks enable foreign influence operations to scale-up much quicker than in an analogue age of communication.** The creation of websites and social media posts, sometimes automated (Howard, Woolley, and Calo 2018), can participate in, and speed up cascades of memes and URLs reaching vast audiences (Starbird and Palen 2012; Zannettou et al. 2019). Fabricating images, particularly in an era of “deep fakes” (Edwards and Livingston 2018) is now easier and cheaper than in an era where documents had to be forged, physically transported to a target site,

and a compliant media outlet or influencer convinced to propagate it.

4. Finally, in contrast to other sophisticated weapons systems, **the technological threshold for influence campaigns are quite low**. Unlike the technical hurdles involved in missile defence or nuclear weapons, influence operations can be carried out using a computer screen and an internet connection. Although information warfare tactics are often classified, general theories of how to carry off such operations can be found in marketing textbooks which abound in research on how to manipulate target audiences.

Social media and other online communications are normally only one part of an influence campaign. Influence campaigns tend to be sustained, with an eye to impacting the course of a country's politics beyond the next election cycle. Information supports other activities (Armistead 2004) which often includes financing (which may be covert and illicit) and direct contacts with candidates and other party officials. It is therefore important that **political parties even at the local levels receive training on how to handle approaches by persons acting on behalf of a foreign principal**. Beyond political parties themselves, interest groups and other activist groups may be targeted through both online and offline outreach.

## Foreign Influence in the Australian Campaign

In terms of the 2019 election in Australia, research conducted for this submission found no evidence of a significant, organised operation to support or undermine any of the parties from either Russia or People's Republic of China (PRC). The data was collected between 2 April -20 May 2019.

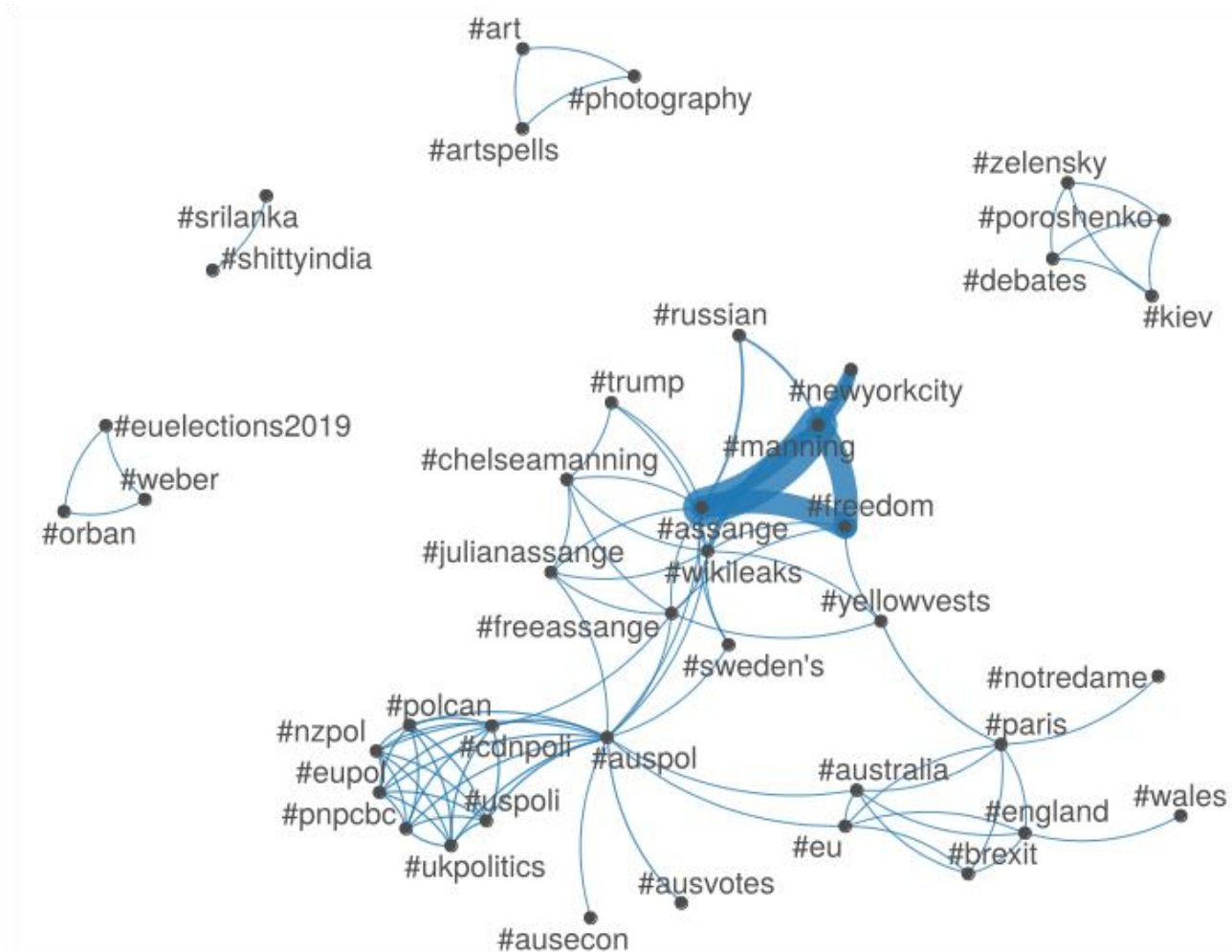
It is unlikely that Russia identified a strategic benefit in either a Labor or a coalition-led government.

PRC, on the other hand, appears to have favoured a Labor government over the Coalition given statements made in Mainland China's domestic press (Cannane and Hui 2019) and an editorial in their international English language propaganda outlet, *Global Times* (Fangyin, 2019). There are many reasons why, even if they were behind the hack on Australia's parliament and political parties (Jensen, 2019b), PRC might have held back. One plausible explanation is that, like pundits and politicians here in Australia, they may have assumed Labor was going to win, based on voting intention poll results. There was, therefore, no reason to intervene and risk potential backlash later. If this was the reason, we can expect that PRC will be more active during the term of this current government and during the subsequent election.

This analysis focuses on Russia and PRC, two countries with the most significant demonstrated abilities to carry out influence operations on a global scale (Coats, 2019). There were 3,441 tweets containing either links to or retweeting material from any of their propaganda outlets. These tweets were produced by 2,210 accounts. Russian propaganda was more common with 7,743 tweets produced by 4,757 accounts. These constitute a small fraction of the over 5 million tweets collected during the campaign. Further, to the extent that these accounts tweeted on average less than two links to these propaganda outlets indicates that they are not part of an aggressive campaign to diffuse these outlets. That does not mean that they are not part of a larger influence operation. Ruling that in or out would require a more extensive investigation beyond the scope of this submission.

Nonetheless, we can analyse the topics used by each of these sets of propaganda outlets to communicate during the election campaign. To get an overall sense of the topics covered in each set of tweets linking to Russian or PRC propaganda outlets, the top 50 hashtags from each set was examined. A hashtag map from the Russian sourced tweets appears in Figure 10.

Figure 10. Russian Propaganda Sources: Top 50 Hashtags

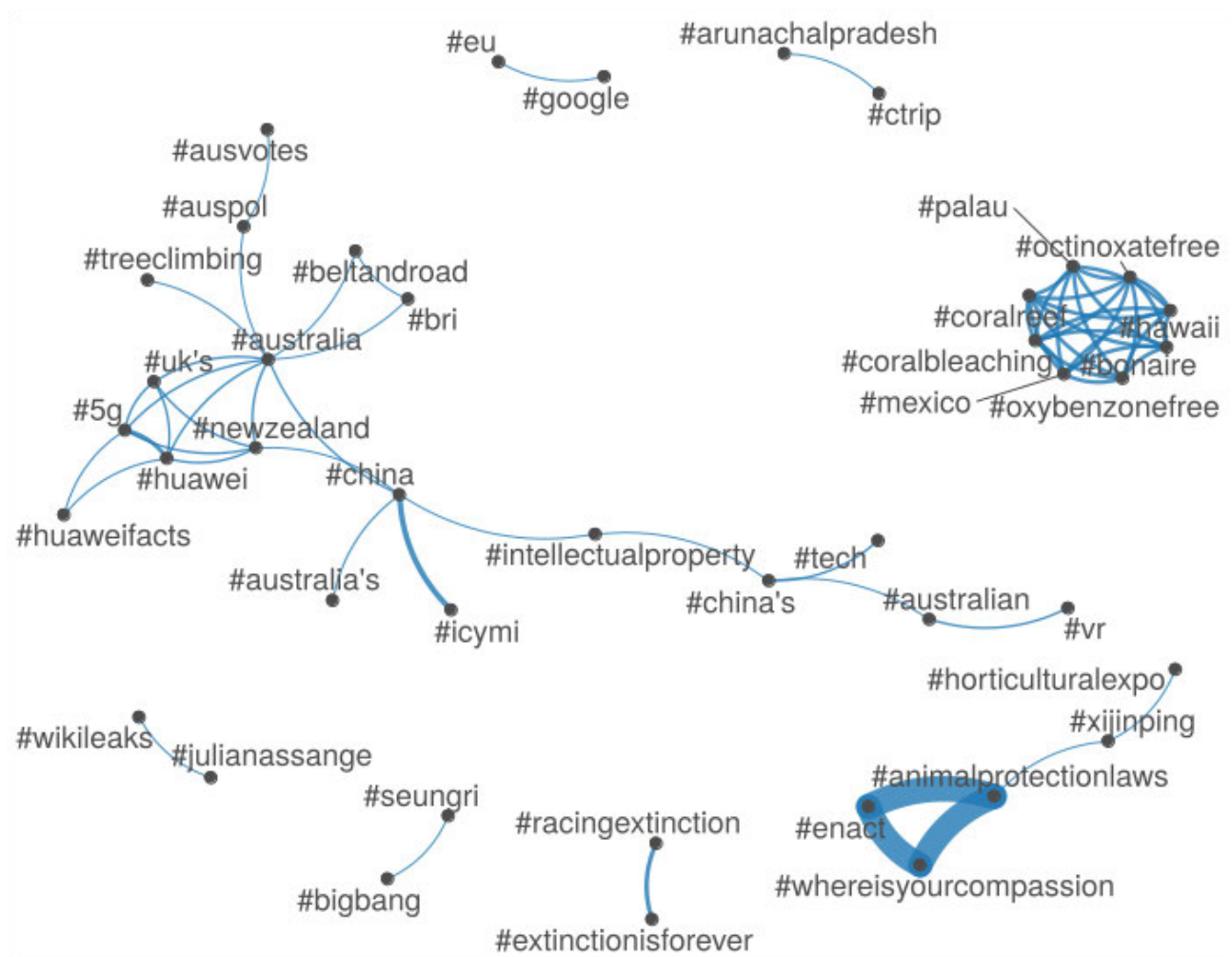


These data show that tweets linking to or retweeting Russian sources often address a range of global topics. #Auspol and #Ausvotes are not the most significant hashtags here. The most common hashtags appearing in these data concern Julian Assange and other figures related to Wikileaks.

These tweets are often efforts to implore the Australian government's intercession in Assange's legal troubles, hoping to bring him back to Australia as a free citizen. The remaining tweets focused on Australian foreign policy or related Australia to a range of international events: Brexit, the EU elections, Russia's intervention in Ukraine, Hungary under Orban, and the politics of Canada and the US.



### Figure 11: PRC Propaganda Sources: Top 50 Hashtags



The PRC data are more diffuse than the Russian tweet data, with several hashtag connections which are otherwise isolated. In the top right corner, there are a series of tweets concerning environmental issues, particularly with concern for the coral reefs around the world. In the lower right, there are a series of hashtags which are intensely connected concerning animal welfare. The intensity of this relationship stems from multiple retweets of a single tweet calling for international action in response to a case of animal cruelty captured by in a graphic video. Assange and Wikileaks both appear – again in tweets calling for Australia to intervene on Assange’s behalf, though these tweets are less salient than in the Russian data. In addition, there are two policy issues which have received attention in Australian political space: Australia’s decision to ban Huawei from its 5G network and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Huawei decision was driven by an analysis conducted by the Australian Signals Directorate, an analysis which has led to similar concerns across the Five Eyes intelligence sharing network regarding the security of Huawei-backed 5G infrastructure (Bryon-Low, 2019).

While the hashtag maps provide an overview of a subset of topics in tweets which retweet or link to foreign propaganda outlets, regression analysis can be used to determine the extent to which topics they are more likely to intervene on and which they are less likely to intervene on. The regression models provide evidence for the directions in which foreign propaganda may be involved in the distortion of the distribution of communications and narratives during the election campaign. Results from the generalised linear model



(GLM) regression for four of the most prominent topics concerning either political parties/leaders and policy issues are presented in Table 2. These topics included Clive Palmer and the UAP, climate change and the dangers it represents to Australia, support for refugees, and a topic voicing support for the Labor Party and its leader Bill Shorten, and opposition to Scott Morrison and the Liberal Party. In addition to the policy issues, a regression model is included for tweets about Assange and Wikileaks as the hashtag map indicated this was a significant concern of tweets associated with Russian propaganda.

Table 2: Foreign Propaganda and Australian Election Tweet Topics

	Dependent variable:				
	Free Assange	Pro-Palmer/UAP	Climate Change Dangers	Pro-Refugees	Anti-ScoMo/ Pro Shorten
RussianSource	0.174*** (0.001)	-0.005*** (0.001)	0.052*** (0.001)	-0.005*** (0.001)	-0.008***
PRC_source	0.012*** (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	0.042*** (0.001)	0.024*** (0.001)	-0.006***
Constant	0.010*** (0.00003)	0.010*** (0.00003)	0.010*** (0.00003)	0.010*** (0.00002)	0.011***
Observations	5,065,183	5,065,183	5,065,183	5,065,183	5,065,183
Log Likelihood	6,116,469.000	7,317,139.000	6,972,366.000	7,521,564.000	
Akaike Inf. Crit.	-12,232,932.000	-14,634,271.000	-13,944,725.000	-15,043,123.000	-

Note: \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

The results of the regression analysis confirm that communications associated with Russian propaganda are significantly more likely to support freedom for Assange. Neither set of tweets associated with propaganda were likely to voice support for Palmer and the UAP – and the Russian associated tweets were statistically less likely to support Palmer and the UAP. This is particularly interesting given the recent history of Russian support for populist and far right parties in Europe. Both sets of tweets were more likely to voice alarm over climate change. It may be that this fits with a larger pattern of Russian propaganda activating anxieties in a population or it may fit with an audience that considers itself to be Marxist in ideological orientation and taking both Russian and PRC propaganda to be contemporary exemplars of Marxist thinking. Russian and PRC-linked tweets are split on refugees with tweets referencing Russian propaganda that are negative in relation to refugees whereas tweets linked to the PRC outlets are more likely to advocate on behalf of refugees. Finally, both sets of tweets are less likely to oppose the Scott Morrison (ScoMo)-led incumbent government and favour Shorten's Labor Party.

Taking the hashtag map evidence and these regression results together, there appears to be a clear pattern that both **Russian and PRC propaganda were not intervening to direct the vote one way or another** as we saw with the Russian attacks on the 2016 US election. Rather, they focused on advancing specific issues. For Russia, there are significant appeals to the Australian government on behalf of Julian Assange and China seems mostly interested in promoting its BRI agenda and Huawei.

## Twitter analysis of Hong Kong's extradition bill

Beyond the election itself, the protests in Hong Kong provided insights into Mainland China's English language "trolling"<sup>1</sup> operation. Although much of the suspicious behaviour concerns efforts to shape understandings of events in Hong Kong, tweets also engaged persons in Australia who participated in and tweeted about demonstrations held in support of the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. The efforts to influence opinion on the motives and activities of the protesters often claimed to be a voice with a more authoritative understanding, based on the observer's proximity to the situation, than we receive via Western media.

This analysis is based on Tweets collected from 13-18 August 2019 (UTC/GMT time). In total there were 1,155,607 tweets collected mentioning "HongKong", "Hong Kong", "HK", and "antiELB" (the hashtag specifically referring to the extradition bill which was the proximate cause of the protests). The filtering of these terms was case insensitive meaning that tweets were captured containing these terms irrespective of their capitalisation. This analysis is limited to tweets using those terms in English as that would be the language used to reach both the English speakers in Hong Kong (given it is a former British colony) and populations beyond Hong Kong (Figure 12).

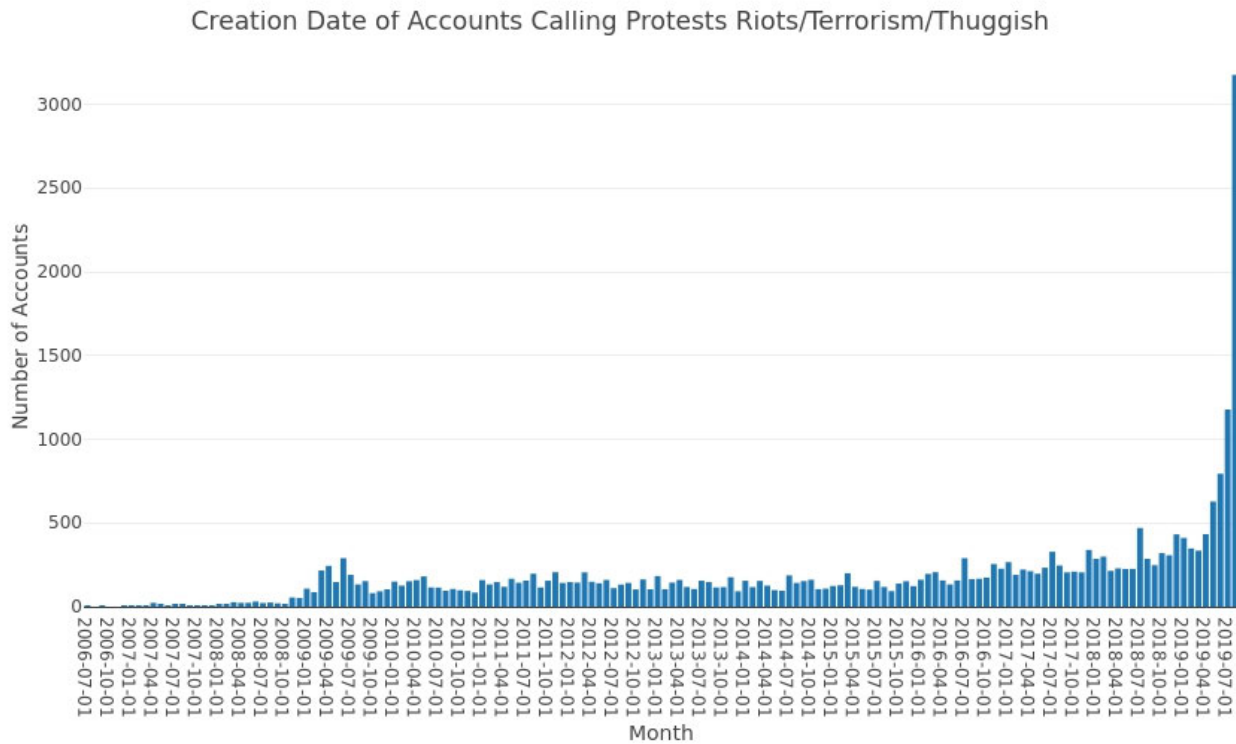
Based on reading the tweets, those critical of the protesters tended to call the participants "thugs," "terrorists," or "rioters," and they tended to describe the scenes and acts using those same terms "thuggish," "riots," and "terrorism." These terms also followed the language used by the official, "white" English language propaganda outlets in Mainland China. There were 28,040 tweets using any of these terms.

Accounts making claims that the protesters are violent (thugs, terrorists, etc.) tend to be newer. The charts below are a summation of the date that these Twitter accounts were created, aggregated on a monthly basis.

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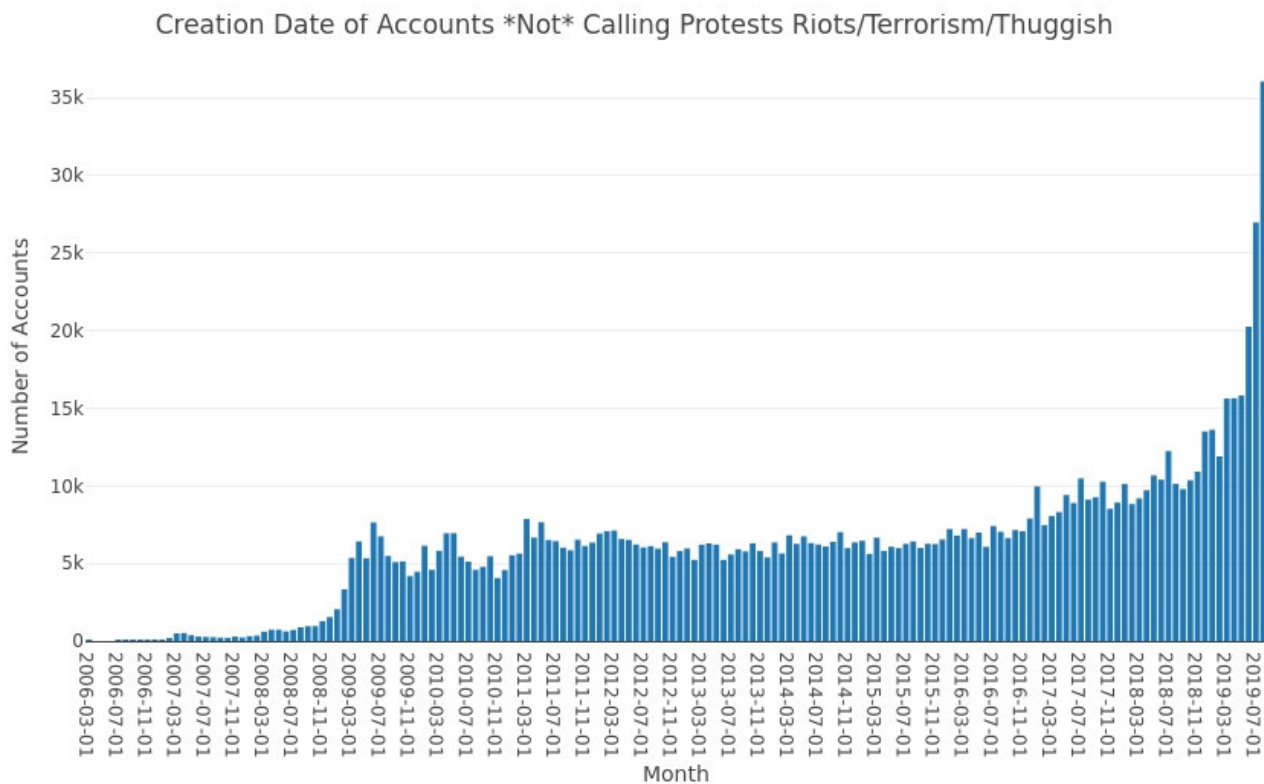
<sup>1</sup> "Trolling" is intentionally used here as the activities that will be described cannot necessarily be described as "sockpuppets" as the analysis is not able to determine if accounts are operating under false identities. Trolling in this sense draws upon its original meaning which involves agitating an adversary in an effort to goad them into engaging, a usage during the Vietnam War which was latter appropriated in online forums (Singer and Brooking 2018, 163).

Figure 12



Compared with the remaining accounts that did not term the protesters actions as violent (Figure 13).

Figure 13.



Despite collecting data for only the first half of the month of August 2019, August 2019 is by far the month with the most account creations. This means there are a lot of new Twitter accounts tweeting about this topic. For whatever reason, persons were motivated to create new Twitter accounts and tweet against the pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong in English. This is highly suggestive of inauthentic trolling activity because there is a disproportionate number of accounts defending the pro-Beijing narrative without any prior history. Further, in digging through the accounts critical of the protests, links to RT (Russia Today content) as well as several accounts which previously had propagated Wikileaks-based attacks on Hillary Clinton during the 2016 US election were discovered. Following the 2016 election, these accounts went dormant. This is consistent with inauthentic behaviour, but it is also suggestive of a convergence of Beijing's and Moscow's policy interests in relation to Hong Kong.

Although both charts have a spike in account creation in July and August, their relative distributions are different. Visually this skew is more profound in the first chart (i.e. among accounts calling protesters violent) than it is among the second. For the accounts which do not ascribe violent language to the protests, the skewness value is 3.493 times higher in the accounts indicating that the protests are violent. This means that a far greater proportion of these accounts are new than we would otherwise expect among accounts tweeting in English about Hong Kong.

## Contrasting Russian and PRC Influence operations

While there is an increasing convergence of Russian and PRC strategic interests and some evidence that is suggestive that they may be pursuing common ends through Influence operations, they often differ on a tactical level in relation to specific objectives. A consistent pattern of PRC operations concerns efforts to shift thinking around specific topics such as the status of Taiwan or their interpretation of territorial claims to more generally induce foreign perceptions favourable to PRC strategic interests (Brady, 2017; Poindexter, 2018).

Whereas the PRC has demonstrated a willingness to combine their strategies with coercive levers of power (principally economic inducements and threats), Russian information operations normally do not seek to shift the views dramatically. It would be resource intensive and likely to fail if a foreign country sought to move supporters of one party to suddenly support their opposition. Instead, they tend to take a more minimalist approach, creating resonances between their operation and segments of the public they find useful (Clark, 2017). They may seek to create or activate existing insecurities within a community which makes them more amenable to change allegiances and alliances over time (Berger, 2018; Jensen, 2018). The goal over time, then is to move these communities slowly in a direction which is supportive of the strategic interests of the foreign initiator. This may mean diluting support for centrist parties by encouraging their extremes to seek out more extreme parties or it may involve efforts to amplify positions favourable to a foreign entity which are favourable to the foreign entity.

## Conclusion

Although it appears there was no major, organised effort by foreign actors to affect the outcome of the 2019 Australian election, there is no reason to believe that foreign actors will refrain from doing so during the next election. The past election made it clear to domestic political pundits as well as foreign actors that they should not trust the polls next time. It is likely that actors will apply methods refined during the 2016 and 2020 elections in the United States in order to interfere in the next national election here in Australia.

## PART 3: Recommendations

The two pieces of research presented in this submission point to necessary government intervention in addressing the issues that are emerging due to technological changes. We recommend the following:

1. The research presented in the Digital News Report: Australia indicates significant stratifications in citizen's capacities to respond to false and/or manipulative information claims they encounter. The low rates of fact checking among Australian news consumers points to the need for targeted programs to boost news and media literacy among voting age citizens, particularly older generations. We recommend the Government invest in **news literacy strategies** to help them discern fact from fiction on the internet, encourage the use of credible information sources, and critically assess partisan content spread by political actors at all stages of the electoral cycle. These educational strategies should target school age children through to older and more vulnerable sections of the community.
2. There is a discrepancy between traditional and online media when it comes to the political advertising blackout on the eve of the poll. We recommend the **political advertising blackout be extended to social media and other online platforms**. A social media blackout could mitigate the influence on voting of some of the risk of online 'scare campaigns' and unverified news in the final hours of the campaign, and go some way to protecting more vulnerable members of the community and introduce consistency across all news media platforms.
3. **Political parties and defensive briefings**. Political parties are themselves vulnerable to foreign influence. We saw an astonishing number of contacts between Russian government officials or their proxies during the 2016 US election (Mueller, 2019). It would be appropriate for ASIO and ASD to provide defensive briefings on counterintelligence and cyber threats to Australia's political parties regularly at both national and state levels. There has been some reporting in the Australian press of contact between foreign agents and Australian politicians. However, it is likely to be happening on a scale much larger than we are aware of in public.
4. **Support for academic research on foreign influence** and other manipulation operations that can disrupt the Australian political system both during and between election campaigns. Academic research can play a unique role as academics operate outside of the partisan arena of politics and are evaluated via an independent peer-review process. This provides academics unique affordances and authority in intervening in this space. Furthermore, although academics do not have access to the variety of data available to Australia's intelligence agencies, such agencies are normally not able to share that information, particularly not in the level of detail academic researchers are free to share with the public. For that reason, academic research can play an important role in educating the public and journalists about manipulative influence operations as they are happening which can counter the systematic distortions in public political discussion that such campaigns produce. Hence, research by academics can play an important role in helping to build the public's resilience to organized efforts to distort and manipulate Australia's politics. To enable academics to assist in these activities, there should be a reconsideration of the privacy requirements in **the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research** (2018, 34).
5. **Demands on digital platforms to increase transparency**. The Australian government has been successful in obtaining greater cooperation from platforms in terms of illegitimate advertising practices. They are, however, under-resourced in this area and they depend on reporting of offending advertisements in order to act. Normally, the one to two-day interval allows offending ads to already cause harm. Requirements that Google, Facebook, and other platforms make public political advertising along with the targeting parameters for Australia would be a step forward.

These platforms already produce this information for the United States and the European Union. In addition, the tendency for social media platforms to close down their platforms to research makes it harder for researchers to carry out independent analysis to identify malicious activity on these platforms. It would be beneficial if governments placed pressure on such platforms to open up APIs again to allow researchers to track malign activity and report it so that platforms, governments, and citizens can respond appropriately.

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