Digital Media Research Centre

QUT DMRC Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

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Overview

As a leader in social media, communications, digital humanities, and social science research globally, the **Digital Media Research Centre** (DMRC) welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the *Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society*.

Our submission is detailed and extensive: our investment in this contribution reflects the level of importance we assign to this inquiry and the need to provide the latest scientific evidence to policymakers. In brief, we have **deep concerns about the framing of this inquiry**, the **flawed assumptions inherent in the terms of reference**, and some of the **unintended pernicious outcomes** that could result for Australian users of digital communication tools, and particularly for young and already marginalised people.

Our key concerns

Social media services, like all other technologies, can be used for both good and ill. However, we have already seen certain mainstream media outlets attempt to whip-up an engagement-driving moral panic, targeting parents with inaccurate and one-sided claims from armchair experts and divisive political voices. The timing of this campaign and this inquiry has followed Meta's unsurprising decision not to enter new deals with Australian media companies, and occurs in the lead-up to a federal election.

Even for the most well-intentioned, it can be tempting to point the finger at 'social media' – a term itself that is unhelpful considering the vast breadth of platforms, each with their various communities, content moderation approaches, and communicative affordances. However, offering a quick-fix 'solution' that assuages the purported 'scourge' is likely to result in hastily developed and flawed digital media regulation that not only fails to address the underlying societal problems, but further disadvantages the already disempowered, risking further disconnection in an already challenging world.

Key recommendations:

Based on the detailed feedback we provide in this submission, we make the following high-level recommendations. However, further topic-specific ideas and solutions are provided under each term of reference for consideration.

- **Recommendation 1:** Focus on protecting children *within* the digital environment rather than protecting children *from* the digital environment. One way to do this is by incentivising and investing in free, high-quality, age-appropriate, digital products and services for young people, co-designed with young people.
- **Recommendation 2:** Instead of the inherently flawed and unsustainable News Media Bargaining Code model, support Australian media companies in both the public-interest and corporate sectors of the industry that demonstrably engage in public-interest journalism activities with corporate tax from very large online platforms to boost their efforts.

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- **Recommendation 3:** Create digital media literacy programs for media workers to minimise their instrumentalisation as amplifiers and disseminators of mis- and disinformation. Australian journalists must think more deeply about how they use information from digital and social media, and how this information could be amplified for problematic purposes.
- **Recommendation 4:** Improve democratic and social outcomes by addressing the lack of transparency and observability of computational advertising. This relatively straightforward regulatory intervention would enable insight into the mechanisms and cultural impacts of targeted advertising on platforms, which currently affords very little transparency.
- **Recommendation 5:** Linked to the above, there is a clear and present need in Australia to introduce more comprehensive platform data access provisions for critical, independent, public-interest research, similar to those created in Europe by the *Digital Services Act*. This move would allow greater transparency and support fit-for-purpose policy interventions were needed.
- **Recommendation 6:** The inquiry should carefully integrate and align with ongoing policy reforms and regulatory measures to avoid undermining or duplicating existing efforts. Overlooking these established processes risks marginalising their nuanced and evidence-based outcomes, while unnecessarily politicising and complicating the current policy landscape.

Submission structure

We have addressed each term of reference in detail in this submission. For ease of reading, we have provided a brief summary under each heading, and some ideas for solutions and further discussion points for each topic. These highlights are then supported by a detailed discussion with references to relevant scientific research. This tiered approach is intended to provide as much context and evidence as possible to assist with informing the Joint Committee's inquiry. We of course welcome any opportunity to provide further information, clarification, or to present specific evidence, including at future public hearings.

Yours sincerely,

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About the DMRC

Based at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), the Digital Media Research Centre (DMRC) conducts world-leading communication, media, and law research for a flourishing digital society. Established in 2015, we are the top ranked Australian centre for media and communication research, and consistently rank in the top 20 of similar centres worldwide.

Our centre is strongly interdisciplinary, drawing together researchers from six schools and three faculties to investigate the digital transformation of the media industries, the challenges of digital inclusion and governance, the growing role of AI and automation in the information environment, and the role of social media in political polarisation. The DMRC incorporates the QUT node of the Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making & Society (ADM+S), is aligned with Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child, and most recently supported the establishment of the Generative AI Lab led by Distinguished Professor Jean Burgess.

The DMRC has an international reputation for both critical and computational methods, supported by access to cutting-edge research infrastructure and capabilities through the QUT Digital Observatory, and the recently launched Australian Internet Observatory, in partnership with the Australian Research Data Commons.

We actively engage with industry and international partners in Australia, Europe, Asia, the US, and South America; and we are a member of the global Network of Centers – a group of academic institutions with a focus on interdisciplinary research on the development, social impact, policy implications, and legal issues concerning the Internet.

Acknowledgment

We acknowledge the Turrbal and Yugara, as the First Nations owners of the lands where QUT now stands. We pay respect to their Elders, lores, customs and creation spirits. We recognise that these lands have always been places of teaching, research and learning. QUT acknowledges the important role Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people play within the QUT community.

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Responses to Terms of Reference

1. The use of age verification to protect Australian children from social media

Summary

The concept of employing automated processes to manage access to social media is fundamentally misconceived, and we have concerns about this approach from a privacy, security, accuracy, and inclusivity aspect. Age assurance technologies are a serious diversion of resources that could be spent on proactive and effective measures to empower young people and meet their age-appropriate needs in the digital environment. Furthermore, the framing of this term of reference is problematic in the way it assigns agency to the amorphous 'social media', fails to specify what social media are, or what children need protection *from*, and ultimately seeks to adopt an approach that would further disempower young people.

Proposed solutions

- **Enhance digital literacy:** The best way to support young people in a digital context is through increased education to bolster media literacies and digital rights. This includes education for children, as well as parents and carers. All approaches should be co-designed with young people and education curriculum developers with digital platform expertise.
- **Focus on user-centred design:** Policy should be child-centred and focus on children and young people's perspectives in the use of digital media in their lives.
- **Achieve consensus on standards and implement:** Drawing on young people's input and perspectives, governments, industry, educators and researchers need to work together to develop public consensus about high-quality children's Internet products and experiences for children of different ages. Once developed, quality standards should be endorsed and widely implemented with transparency and accountability.
- **Enable with guardrails:** When legislation and policy is being developed there needs to be more emphasis on improving guardrails within the digital environment rather than excluding children from accessing it. Rather than focusing on how to protect (i.e., lock out) children *from* the digital environment, it is more effective to focus on protecting children *within* the digital environment by investing in free high-quality age-appropriate digital products and services for children.
- **Empower with information:** Young people have a human right to access appropriate, relevant, targeted sex education and information, including visual material. Rather than seeking to restrict access to all sexually-themed material, including educational content, we need to empower and support young people with a comprehensive sex education syllabus in Australia that attends to and incorporates the realities of the digital environment.

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Detailed discussion

Protecting children *from* social media

We have concerns about the framing of this term of reference. We need to move away from a deficit model when considering children's engagement with the digital world. Our focus must shift from protecting children *from* the digital environment and more to protecting them *within* the digital environment. The Internet provides children with a multitude of positive and pleasurable opportunities, including entertainment, social connection, and learning opportunities. The Internet has enhanced children's lives in many ways and we need to recognise that it will continue to play an important role as they move through childhood, into their teen years and adulthood. Online experiences will continue to be central to how children learn, the careers they undertake and how they experience everyday life throughout the 21st century.

Across many facets of life – whether on or offline – there are bad actors, but assuming that young people need safety 'from' harms and threats, rather than safety 'to' act in one's interests and flourish[1] foregrounds attitudes of distrust and disempowerment, which could pose more legitimate threats to mental health. Having 'blanket' protection approaches, like age-gating mechanisms, also limits children's access to important information, meaningful connections with peers, and may not equip children with the resources and skills to develop 'online resilience'[2]. Therefore, when legislation and policy is being developed, **more emphasis is needed on improving guardrails within the digital environment rather than excluding children from access to the digital environment**. **Policy should be child-centred** and focus on children and young people's perspectives in the use of digital media in their lives.

Empowering and enriching

For instance, recent work by researchers at the University of Sydney, in collaboration with Youth Action and Student Edge (Youth Insight), has shown that 12-17 year-olds take charge of their online safety; are sophisticated platform users; have a repertoire of digital safety skills, and they want to have a seat at the table in policy consultations[3]. While young people have some negative and challenging encounters online, their level of sophistication and understanding of digital platforms, as well as their awareness of actions needed to build positive and safe relationships online, is a trend that is increasing.[4]

Furthermore, given that social media spaces are forums where young people can express positions, political views, and become involved in collective action at a time where they have access to very few other democratic processes, access should not be overlooked from an

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[1] Rosalie Gillett, Zahra Stardust, and Jean Burgess, "Safety for Whom? Investigating How Platforms Frame and Perform Safety and Harm Interventions," *Social Media + Society 8*, no. 4 (2022): 1, https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221144315.
[2] Joanne Orlando, "We Know Social Media Bans Are Unlikely to Work – So How Can We Keep Young People Safe Online?" *The Conversation*, June 25, 2024, https://theconversation.com/we-know-social-media-bans-are-unlikely-to-work-so-how-can-we-keep-young-people-safe-online-232594.
[3] Justine Humphry, Olga Boichak, and Jonathon Hutchinson, "Emerging Online Safety Issues – Co-creating Social Media with Young People – Research Report" (Sydney: The University of Sydney, 2023), 5-6, https://hdl.handle.net/2123/31689.
[4] eSafety Commissioner, "The Digital Lives of Aussie Teens," eSafety research, February 2021, https://www.esafety.gov.au/research/digital-lives-of-aussie-teens.

empowerment and enrichment perspective. Boulianne and Theocharis[5] found that digital media use among youth has positive impacts on their engagement in civic and political life, challenging the prevalent fears surrounding new technologies. **Their study reveals that while there is little evidence suggesting dire impacts of digital media, the positive outcomes are particularly significant when digital media are used for direct political activities such as blogging, reading online news, and participating in online political discussions**. All of which are also happening within social media platforms. These activities translate into offline democratic civic actions like contacting officials, discussing politics, volunteering, and protesting. The study also highlights a strong relationship between online political activities (for example, joining political groups, signing petitions) and offline political engagement, which counters claims of slacktivism among youth. Furthermore, the research underscores that while traditional assumptions often suggest a causal flow from digital media use to increased participation, the evidence also supports the reverse: already engaged youth are more likely to use digital media for political purposes. This has different implications for designing interventions aimed at boosting youth engagement in civic and political life.[6]

Age-gating: unintended impacts

Blocking participation outright, as well as restricting certain content, prevents young people getting accustomed to the ways in which social media platforms operate, and delays the development of online safety skills. Furthermore, policing problematic content distribution and social media usage cannot blanket the legitimate ways in which people interact, explore, and learn from their online peer communities; be it sharing or socialising over fringe or niche content, or consuming conventional digital media products. Importantly, social media are generational, with each age cohort easily migrating to wherever a critical mass of peers is present — the moment technical measures are implemented people have readily moved on, especially when the 'social' aspect of platforms becomes second to user data harvesting and perpetual growth/scaling. This endless back-and-forth of tightening technical controls is a surefire way to drive users to alternative channels of even lesser visibility, shifting rather than solving problematic social media uses. Fostering healthy peer communities is key, rather than breaking them up, driving them underground, or preventing them from forming in the first place.

Our goal as a society ought to be about creating high-quality digital products and services for children, which can include social media that provides age-appropriate experiences. To this end, researchers at the Australia Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child have created the *Manifesto for a better Children's Internet*[7] which outlines 17 actionable principles to improve, what can be described as, the Children's Internet. The Children's Internet is made up of an array of digital products and services that are both intended for, and not intended for, children and the term acts as a unifying concept to remind us that children have a right to playful, exploratory, fun, entertaining, positive, educational, and safe experiences online.

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[5] Shelley Boulianne and Yannis Theocharis, "Young People, Digital Media, and Engagement: A Meta-Analysis of Research," *Social Science Computer Review* 38, no. 2 (2020): 111-127, https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439318814190.
[6] Boulianne and Theocharis, "Young People, Digital Media, and Engagement."
[7] Michael Dezuanni et al., "Manifesto for a Better Children's Internet," Digital Child Working Paper 2023-11 (Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child, Queensland University of Technology, 2023).

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This resource can be found here: https://digitalchild.org.au/research/publications/working-paper/manifesto-for-a-better-childrens-internet/.

A key recommendation is the need for governments, industry, educators and researchers to work together to develop public consensus about high-quality children's Internet products and experiences for children of different ages. Once developed, quality standards should be endorsed and widely implemented with transparency and accountability. This would help to address some of the concerns expressed in the next section.

Lack of clarity

It is not clear from this term of reference what exactly children need protecting from on social media, nor what the term 'social media' encompasses. As noted in our opening, is the Committee concerned about a select few apps and vendors, or all forms of digitally mediated social life? To what degree do popular (but perhaps more peripheral) apps such as Bluesky, Linked-in, Slack, Twitch, Zoom and Discord fall under the scope of this inquiry? Popular but non-English apps such as WeChat, VK, Line, KakaoTalk, and Zalo, which are used by Chinese, Russian, Japanese, Thai, Korean and Vietnamese communities[8]? What about the clandestine usages of Gumtree, Telegram and Signal? Online games and the buying and selling of virtual goods via voice chats or in-game markets? Distributed or blockchain-based social networks? Anonymous bulletin-style messaging via 4Chan, Reddit? Online dating? Social betting? Liking or leaving a comment? Having a personal site or blog? AI? Are Australian children to be 'protected' from all of these? Considering that social media is part of a much larger system of entertainment, and that today's children consume content and story experiences across an ever-evolving array of official and unofficial channels, there is a danger that seeking to protect children 'from' could turn into a complex, Herculean, and ineffective task when considering the breadth and variety of products and services that children access.

Much of the vagueness in defining 'social media' within this inquiry reflects a similar moral panic discourse regarding children and video games in the 2000s[9]. Back then, as today, politicians and media figures whipped up fear and anxiety regarding what they erroneously claimed to be a link between video games and violence. In the decades since we have seen the bulk of evidence point to the contrary: video games provide abundant educational[10], social[11] and cultural enrichment[12], and indeed are also a significant contributor to positive economic activity[13].

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[8] Vincenzo Cosenza, "The World Map of Social Networks," *Vincos Blog*, January 2023, https://vincos.it/world-map-of-social-networks/.
[9] Patrick M. Markey and Christopher J. Ferguson, "Teaching Us to Fear: The Violent Video Game Moral Panic and The Politics of Game Research," *American Journal of Play* 10, no. 1 (2017).
[10] James Paul Gee, "What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy," *Computers in entertainment (CIE)* 1, no. 1 (2003): 20.
[11] Matthew Barr and Alicia Copeland-Stewart, "Playing video games during the COVID-19 pandemic and effects on players' well-being," *Games and Culture* 17, no. 1 (2022): 122-139.
[12] Daniel Kardefelt-Winther, "Responsible Innovation in Technology for Children: Digital technology, play and child well-being," UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight (2022).
[13] Interactive Games & Entertainment Association, "Aussie Game Developers Pull in $345.5 Million for Local Economy," IGEA (Interactive Games & Entertainment Association), December 18, 2023, https://igea.net/2023/12/2023-agds/.

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The right to sex education

Mandatory age verification and restricted access systems are based on a flawed 'exposure narrative' that incorrectly assumes that sexually explicit media is inherently harmful to young people. This narrative treats pornography as a monolithic genre and young people as passive victims endangered by media, and it does not reflect the diversity of explicit media and the variety of ways in which young people interact with, use and produce it. Any regulatory reforms should be driven and informed by young people's experiences and needs, rather than the assumptions of adults. Young people have a human right to access appropriate, relevant, targeted sex education and information, including visual material.

In Australia, we have no comprehensive sex education syllabus nor any standard age that sex education is required to begin. A thorough sex education curriculum would teach students about gender diversity, homophobia, transphobia, and human rights that have a significant effect upon health and wellbeing. LGBTIQA+ health relies upon 'the promotion of progressive sexuality education messages in classrooms addressing homophobia, sexual autonomy, sexual experimentation'.[14] The Australian Government can support young people to navigate risks, de-code pornography, develop media literacy, and negotiate ethical, respectful relationships through providing pleasure-focused information, education, conceptual tools, resources and open dialogue.

Mandatory age verification: limited effectiveness

Existing age estimation software is not even close to being able to reliably distinguish between people who are under and over sixteen years old. While it remains a common refrain in computer science that such systems simply require better training data, more sophisticated algorithms or other incremental improvement, a recent analysis by DMRC researchers showed that age estimation solutions from facial scans cannot ever be expected to achieve acceptable levels of accuracy[15]. In 2023, the eSafety Commission announced that the age assurance market was immature with significant gaps, citing feasibility and technical concerns, and instead recommending media literacy and education, which we support[16].

Furthermore, age verification and restricted access systems are unlikely to stop young people from accessing sexually explicit content. Research from the UK, where an age verification system was introduced and subsequently abandoned, suggests that teenagers can easily avoid age verification.[17] An independent content producer notes that "age verification will not only be ineffective, it will also put young people at greater risk (for instance, of encountering illegal child abuse images) if they use the Dark Web to get around age checks."[18]

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[14] Tiffany M. Jones and Lynne Hillier, "Sexuality Education School Policy for Australian GLBTIQ Students," *Sex Education* 12, no. 4 (2012): 437–454.
[15] Zahra Stardust et al., "Mandatory Age Verification for Pornography Access: Why It Can't and Won't 'Save the Children'," *Big Data & Society* 11, no. 2 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1177/20539517241252129.
[16] eSafety Commissioner, "Age Verification," eSafety Commissioner, last modified August 31, 2023, https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/consultation-cooperation/age-verification.
[17] Majid Yar, "Protecting Children from Internet Pornography? A Critical Assessment of Statutory Age Verification and Its Enforcement in the UK," *Policing: An International Journal* 43, no. 1 (2019): 183-197.
[18] Pandora Blake, "Age Verification for Online Porn: More Harm Than Good?" *Porn Studies* 6, no. 2 (2018): 228-237.

However, the most significant problem with age verification is not a technical but a political one: As we discuss below, even if the system can be made to work, it should not.

Age verification: entrenching marginalisation and inequality

While age verification technologies are currently unreliable, they are likely to have disproportionate negative impacts on marginalised communities. Machine learning approaches replicate human age estimation practices that are already problematic and biologically determinist. More research is needed on this topic, but in a recent analysis by DMRC researchers[19], a popular facial data set revealed how a leading machine learning model (convolutional neural network – CNN) more accurately classified 'Caucasian' faces. Faces in the 'African' category were frequently misclassified, sometimes by as much as 40 years. In the 0-12 category, boys were more likely to be misclassified than girls.

Concerningly from an inclusivity and access perspective, existing research shows:

- Algorithms that seek to identify and categorise human characteristics such as gender, race, sexual orientation and age **cannot reliably classify complex and intersecting identities**. Gender recognition systems have been developed without the consultation, collaboration or involvement of marginalised communities, and have been demonstrated to "misrepresent complex gender identities and undermine safety."[20]
- **Facial recognition technology has high rates of error** when purporting to recognise the age and gender of people, and has been proven to have **significant racial bias**, with the highest error rates when used among women of colour.[21]
- Existing facial recognition technologies are usually trained on data sets that are biased towards Caucasian faces with **significant underrepresentation of non-white faces**, which limits their applicability for use among the general population.[22] There can be significant differences in human age estimators across gender and race.[23]

As it is not possible to design a machine learning age classifier that affects all populations identically, software engineers are required to make decisions about what constitutes an acceptable rate of collateral damage – decisions that have significant trade-offs and implications, including incorrectly shutting certain populations out of digital services.

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[19] Stardust et al., "Mandatory Age Verification."
[20] Morgan Klaus Scheuerman and Jed R. Brubaker, "Gender Is Not a Boolean: Towards Designing Algorithms to Understand Complex Human Identities," (paper presented at the Participation + Algorithms, CSCW'18 Workshop, Jersey City, NJ, November 3, 2018), https://cmci.colorado.edu/idlab/assets/bibliography/pdf/Scheuerman2018a.pdf.
[21] Joy Buolamwini and Timnit Gebru, "Gender Shades: Intersectional Accuracy Disparities in Commercial Gender Classification," *Proceedings of Machine Learning Research* 81 (2018), http://proceedings.mlr.press/v81/buolamwini18a/buolamwini18a.pdf.
[22] Kimmo Kärkkäinen and Jungseock Joo, "FairFace: Face Attribute Dataset for Balanced Race, Gender, and Age," Preprint, submitted August 14, 2019, https://arxiv.org/abs/1908.04913.
[23] Guodong Guo and Guowang Mu, "Human Age Estimation: What Is the Influence across Race and Gender?" (paper presented at the IEEE Computer Society Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition Workshops, San Francisco, CA, June 13-18, 2010), https://doi.org/10.1109/CVPRW.2010.5543609.

Marginalisation can also occur in other ways. While most websites will use external software for age verification, low-income websites – including those providing niche and diverse queer, fetish and feminist content – are less likely to be able to afford the costs of age verification than large, commercial porn websites. This means that age verification will disproportionately harm people with marginalised sexualities.[24] Additionally, some adults may not have the documentation, or digital skills needed to verify their age. People without the required digital skills to provide documentation digitally rely on community services like libraries and community centres to provide ad hoc support to identity verification. This is further complicated by people who do not have, or do not have access to, typical identity documentation such as drivers' licences or passports[25]. Age-verification will create an additional digital labour burden on already stretched community organisations. Further to this, mobile devices in some families are shared, with multiple members of a household using the same device and accounts.[26]

Age verification: privacy and security concerns

Age verification and restricted access systems also raise serious privacy concerns for those who are considered old enough to access the platforms in question. Mandatory age verification would require users to either verify their age each time they access content, or save their details for future access. The storage of identity documents or other identifying information by websites or third-party identity verification systems will almost certainly result in data breaches, which we have already seen in recent times. Leaks of information like addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, and other personal information with facial recognition data would pose an even greater threat to privacy and security. The databases of sensitive identity records would also become highly valuable (and in many cases, easily-exploitable) targets for criminal actors engaged in blackmail and identity theft, or for hostile states engaging in foreign interference and assaults on intelligence and defence assets and other elements of our national security apparatus. How do all the personal credentials people need to juggle on various platforms in the future add to their already complex data footprints? Are these added complexities and risk vectors factored into when considering all Australians' Web safety and mental health? The danger is that, just as we have seen with the early onset of 'information overload' or more recent cookie fatigue, people may opt to tune out the sign-on noise, later needing to deal with the fallout of leaks, which may involve Government support. It is our contention that this proposal does not stand up to any dispassionate risk assessment, when all relevant factors are weighed.

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[24] Blake, "Age Verification for Online Porn."
[25] Michael Dezuanni et al., *Digital Inclusion Is Everybody's Business: Key Findings from the ARC Linkage Project Advancing Digital Inclusion in Low-Income Australian Families* (Brisbane: Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology, 2023), https://apo.org.au/node/324660.
[26] Amber Marshall et al., "Connecting in the Gulf: Exploring Digital Inclusion for Indigenous Families on Mornington Island," *Information, Communication & Society* 26, no. 12 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2023.2230262.

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2. The decision of Meta to abandon deals under the News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code

Summary

The News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code (NMBC) was severely flawed legislation from the outset and should be abandoned at the earliest opportunity. The NMBC was built upon incorrect assumptions about the causes of revenue decline in the news media industry; misunderstood the role and importance of news content on Meta's key platforms (Facebook and Instagram); and it was entirely predictable that Meta would seek to avoid entering new deals with Australian media companies.

Proposed solutions

- **Abandon the NMBC:** Should the Australian government choose to formally designate Meta under the NMBC in response to its choice not to renew existing arrangements with news publishers, there is a substantial risk that this will backfire by leading Meta to reinstate a total news ban on its platforms – as it did in Australia in February 2021 and has done in Canada since August 2023. Such a development is not in Australia's interest.
- **Support Australian media companies with corporate tax from platforms:** Instead of the flawed hands-off approach of the NMBC, use the corporate tax generated from very large online platforms (VLOPs), as it is or as bolstered by an additional Windfall Advertising Revenue Tax imposed on these platforms, to support public-interest journalism activities undertaken by Australian media organisations in both public-interest and corporate sectors of the industry.
- **Establish clear standards and accountability:** To support appropriate use of these subsidies, charter obligations should be created – similar to those that govern ABC and SBS – as well as regular quality audits of the journalistic outputs produced with the help of the government subsidies funded by the corporate taxes raised from VLOPs. The Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA) would be well placed to operate such audits.

Detailed discussion

NMBC background

Meta's decision earlier this year not to renew the temporary deals it struck with a selection of Australian news publishers following the brief banning of news on its platforms in Australia in February 2021 was clearly telegraphed and entirely foreseeable. These deals were always only a stop-gap measure aimed at de-escalating the 2021 conflict and enabling the then Australian federal government to save some face following the news ban debacle. It was even then abundantly clear that Meta's long-term strategy was to drive down the circulation of news on its platforms, and to promote other, less problematic forms of content instead.

Meta continues to pursue this strategy globally[27]. This is not even because it is concerned about the costs that may arise under the NMBC and similar regulations, but because the circulation and discussion of news (including poor-quality and 'fake' news as well as heated, abusive discussions) create more problems than benefits for its platforms. As news content becomes less prominent on Meta's platforms, or even disappears altogether, the very logic of the NMBC – that the circulation of news on social media platforms siphons advertising revenue from news outlets to social media platforms – becomes increasingly questionable.

The news industry's unprofitability: a false premise

Central to the NMBC's flaws is the assumption that the revenue decline in the news industry is primarily due to changes in the flow of advertising revenue away from news publishers and towards search and social media platforms. This much-repeated claim is favoured by the news industry itself, but fundamentally ignores a far more impactful decision by news publishers at the start of the Web era. This was to make previously for-pay news content (bundled in print newspapers and magazines) available for free on their websites.

That decision, made in the mid-1990s when the success of the World Wide Web as a global information and entertainment platform was not yet foreseeable in its entirety and publishers still believed in the long-term survival of print editions, established user expectations that news was going to be available online for free, supported at best by ancillary advertising (which many users soon removed from display, using popular ad-blocking tools). Additionally, it also led users to expect direct access to the specific news stories they were interested in, from any and all available online news services, instead of having to subscribe to the news produced by any one news outlet as they once had in the newsprint age[28].

Since the mid-1990s, news publishers have unsuccessfully tried to turn back time and undo the paradigm shift that occurred as a result of these decisions. Their attempts to do so have included Website paywalls that require user subscriptions, and bespoke smartphone apps that recreate the experience of reading a newspaper edition. None of these have been particularly successful: according to the latest *Digital News Report Australia*, fully 57% of Australians say they would not consider paying for news at all.[29] Online news audiences now expect unobstructed and free access to news articles, and this is unlikely to change any time soon. The news industry – in Australia and around the world – fatally undermined its existing business model as it embraced the Web and has failed to find a new sustainable approach to revenue generation ever since.

It is self-evident that the NMBC resulted to a substantial extent from the sustained lobbying of successive Australian governments by major players in the Australian news industry. Faced with severe challenges to their own profitability, they sought to attract income support from other sources. This in itself is legitimate: governments in Australia and elsewhere have often

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[27] Jessica Riga, "Seeing Less Political Content on Instagram? It's a Deliberate Move from Meta, Which Experts Say Could Impact Democracy," *ABC News*, March 26, 2024, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-03-26/instagram-limiting-political-content-threatens-democracy/103629990.
[28] Amanda D. Lotz, Media Disrupted: Surviving Pirates, Cannibals, and Streaming Wars (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), 55-91.
[29] Sora Park et al., *Digital News Report: Australia 2024* (Canberra: News & Media Research Centre, Uni. of Canberra, 2024), 12.

subsidised commercially unprofitable industries (such as childcare or nursing) when there was a clear public interest argument for doing so, and the availability of balanced, diverse, quality news is unquestionably in the public interest. However, the mechanisms for such news industry subsidies that the NMBC sought to implement were from the start fatally flawed in their justification and implementation, and must now be abandoned.

The importance of news on and to social media platforms: a false assumption

The NMBC's justification for its attempts to pressure search and social media providers and news industry operators in Australia to establish revenue-sharing agreements is unsound. As we have shown, while online platforms have certainly reaped substantial revenue from online advertising, the root cause of the news industry's business model failure is its fateful mid-1990s decision to give its products away for free, and not the subsequent shifts in advertising interests. Even so, the remarkable profitability of leading online platforms could still position them as useful targets for the extraction of surplus revenue that could be redirected as subsidies to struggling news publishers. However, the publicly expressed logic behind NMBC's arms'-length implementation of such a subsidy scheme undermined this effort: it provided ample opportunity for online platforms, and especially for Meta, to change their operations in order to evade that logic.

Publicly, ahead of its implementation in 2021, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) and its then-chair Rod Sims sought to explain and justify the proposed logic of the NMBC by incorrectly positioning the redirection of online advertising revenue towards online platforms and away from news publishers as the root cause of the news industry's unprofitability. Their argument was that if Australians now predominantly accessed news from search and social media platforms, and encountered revenue-generating advertising on those platforms rather than on the sites of the news publishers themselves, then this justified the transfer of a portion of those revenues to news publishers under yet-to-be-struck revenue sharing agreements between the two sides.

However, this assumes that platforms are interested in, and even depend on, their continued role as conduits connecting users and news content: this miscalculation has proven to fatally undermine the NMBC by now. As Meta threatened to remove all news content from its platforms if the NMBC were implemented, Sims himself pointed to *Digital News Report* figures from 2020 that showed that "39% of Australians use Facebook for general news, and 49% use Facebook for news about COVID-19"[30].

In his appearance before the present Parliamentary Inquiry on 21 June 2024, News Corporation CEO Michael Miller used the same inherently flawed logic: "Meta says that news makes up less than three per cent of what people see on Facebook. That is also not true. … Actually 48 per

[30] Hannah Blackiston, "'Ill-Timed and Misconceived': The Industry Responds to Facebook's Threat to Ban News in Australia," *Mumbrella*, September 1, 2020, https://mumbrella.com.au/ill-timed-and-misconceived-the-industry-responds-to-facebooks-threat-to-ban-news-in-australia-641475.

cent of Australians get their news using a Meta platform", Mr Miller claimed.[31]

But the fact that many Australians encounter the news – intentionally or serendipitously – through their Facebook activities does not mean that it is important *to Meta* that they do so, or that such news engagement constitutes a significant component of all the things that Australians do on such platforms.

In these statements, Sims and Miller unhelpfully and misleadingly conflate two entirely separate statistics. Their claims are equivalent to arguing that just because 48% of Australians get their tomatoes from Woolworths, it cannot be true that tomatoes still only account for 3% of the total volume of products that Woolworths supplies to Australians.

The NMBC model is founded on such selective and distorting readings of available statistics. Meta's claim that Australian news accounts for a tiny fraction of all content on its platforms is entirely plausible; for the United States, the company's quarterly *Transparency Report* for Q1/2024[32] stated that only 3.5% of all the posts that users see in their personal Facebook feeds contain links to any kind of source, and only a fraction of these will be links to news sites. This aligns with the everyday experiences of ordinary Facebook users.

Indeed, the statistics provided in the Meta *Transparency Report* refer to the prevalence of links of any kind in users' Facebook feeds. Analysis for this submission by the QUT Digital Media Research Centre, using data available from Meta through its URL Shares Dataset, indicates that less than one quarter of the already very small number of links that users encounter in their personal feeds are links to Australian news content. **By our estimation, less than one percent of all the posts viewed by an ordinary user of Facebook in Australia are likely to contain links to *Australian* news sources.**

Such calculations support Meta's statement ahead of the NMBC's introduction that:

> *the ACCC presumes that Facebook benefits most in its relationship with publishers, when in fact the reverse is true. News represents a fraction of what people see in their News Feed and is not a significant source of revenue for us.*[33]

If engagement with Australian news URLs indeed accounts for less than one percent of all the posts encountered by an Australian Facebook user, it is not difficult to see why Meta would rather ban such content altogether. It did this, briefly, during its Australian news ban in February 2021, and has done so, permanently, in Canada since August 2023, after the Canadian government introduced its bill C-18 that (following Sims's advice) replicated the flawed logic of the Australian NMBC.

Further, indeed, our analysis also shows that while Australian news URLs make up for a vanishingly small percentage of all content encountered by Australian users, they attract

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[31] Jack Quail, "Media bosses demand social media clampdown, Meta commercial deal renewal," *Daily Telegraph*, June 21, 2024, https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/technology/online/media-bosses-address-social-media-inquiry/news-story/71b125bd9b9c1d676d409702d0b3be9b.
[32] Meta, "Widely Viewed Content Report: What People See on Facebook," Q1 2024 report, accessed June 20, 2024, https://transparency.meta.com/en-gb/data/widely-viewed-content-report/#what-people-see.
[33] Will Easton, "An Update about Changes to Facebook's Services in Australia," *Facebook Newsroom*, August 31, 2020, https://about.fb.com/news/2020/08/changes-to-facebooks-services-in-australia/.

disproportionately high controversy. Of all URLs seen by Australian users in August 2019, nearly 33% of all 'angry' reactions and 28% of all comments were directed at posts containing Australian news URLs. **Not only is Australian news a minute subset of all Facebook content, then, but it also generates an outsized amount of unhappiness and controversy.**

We note, however, that while we find Meta's claims plausible, the very limited availability of detailed content and activity data from Meta makes it difficult to rigorously and independently verify them. There is a clear and present need in Australia to introduce more comprehensive platform data access provisions for critical, independent, public-interest research, similar to those created in Europe by the *Digital Services Act*.

Bad policy produces bad outcomes

Foolishly, the ACCC and the federal government at the time chose to ignore Meta's warnings. Then Attorney-General Christian Porter described it as a "heavy-handed … bluff" that was "totally unpersuasive to the government."[34] But, as it turned out, Meta was not bluffing, and did exactly what it had threatened to do. The government could save face only by agreeing not to formally designate Meta under the NMBC, in exchange for a vague commitment to voluntarily strike some (opaque) revenue-sharing agreements with selected news outlets.

As has been noted elsewhere,[35] these deals were commercial-in-confidence and temporary; covered only a limited section of the Australian news industry, predominantly benefitted legacy national and metro publishers rather than innovative, emerging, and/or regional and rural outlets; and carried no obligation than the revenue transferred was to be reinvested in public-interest journalism rather than passed on to shareholders. **As such, few of the public benefits the NMBC had been intended to produce were realised**. Even the benefit of the temporary cash injections that Meta's voluntary agreements with some news publishers might have generated is outweighed by the pause in any meaningful long-term policy development aimed at sustaining Australia's public-interest journalism that the failed NMBC experiment has caused.

Overall, therefore, the News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code can only be described as policymaking by wishful thinking: it severely overestimated both Meta's dependence on the availability of Australian news on its platforms, and the federal government's ability to compel it to do so on an ongoing basis. Subsequently, responding to both the NMBC and similar legislation in Canada and elsewhere, Meta has further extended its efforts to remove news content from its platforms, publicly announcing the algorithmic

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[34] Daniel McCulloch, "Australia Accuses Facebook of News Bluff," *The West Australian*, September 2, 2020, https://thewest.com.au/politics/australia-accuses-facebook-of-news-bluff-ng-s-2027888.
[35] Caroline Fisher, Kerry McCallum, and Sora Park, "Is the News Media Bargaining Code Fit for Purpose?" *The Conversation*, November 29, 2021, https://theconversation.com/is-the-news-media-bargaining-code-fit-for-purpose-1722; Public Interest Journalism Initiative, "News Media Bargaining Code Review Shows Need for More ACCC Information Gathering," media release, November 10, 2022, https://piji.com.au/piji-media-releases/news-media-bargaining-code-review-shows-need-for-more-accc-information-gathering/; James Purtill, "Facebook Ate and Then Ignored the News Industry. It's Hard, but We Should Leave It Be," *ABC News*, March 8, 2024, https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2024-03-08/why-not-enforce-news-media-bargaining-code-meta-facebook/103554982; Diana Bossio, Andrea Carson, and James Meese, "A Different Playbook for the Same Outcome? Examining Google's and Meta's Strategic Responses to Australia's News Media Bargaining Code," *New Media & Society*, (March, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448241232296.

downranking of news content in the feeds of Instagram and Facebook users.[36]

In doing so, the company has further strengthened its argument against any designation under the NMBC: even in the absence of a renewed outright ban of news content on Facebook or Instagram, if it carries only a limited amount of Australian news content – and if that content is increasingly invisible to users of its platforms – why should it need to share revenue with Australian news publishers? Both in the court of public opinion and in any legal proceedings it may pursue, such an argument is likely to prove highly persuasive.

Should the Australian Government choose to formally designate Meta under the NMBC in response to Meta's choice not to renew existing arrangements with news publishers, there is a substantial risk that this will backfire.

An alternative model

No matter its severely flawed execution, however, the underlying intent of the NMBC remains valid: to provide subsidies to an industry of national importance that – as a result of decisions it made 30 years ago – is now no longer profitable and lacks an obvious pathway back to profitability. It is a key function of government to create such subsidy frameworks where it is in the public interest to do so; indeed, even in the media sector the Australian government does so regularly by providing funding to the non-profit, public service media organisations ABC and SBS. Here, such support comes with significant quality obligations under their respective charters, and both outlets' adherence to these obligations is rewarded by the Australian public by reliably ranking them amongst the most trusted media outlets in the country.[37]

Such subsidies are drawn from tax revenue, however, and the same is true for subsidies in other unprofitable sectors (childcare, health, aged care, etc.). Tax revenue, in turn, is raised from personal as well as corporate taxes. The distribution of subsidies is generally decided on the basis of identified needs, and assessed against clearly defined performance and outcome indicators.

By contrast, the government does not attempt to compel major corporate taxpayers to negotiate directly with leading childcare providers, for example, about the amount of cross-industry subsidy to be transferred from one to the other. Yet this is precisely the system that the NMBC sought to put into place between leading online platforms and Australian news publishers. In adopting this hands-off construction, the ACCC and Federal government abrogated their responsibility to identify worthy news media operators to support, and to assess the return on subsidy investments. The unwillingness to confront these difficult tasks might have been momentarily expedient but produced severe adverse effects in the longer term.

The alternative is clear: to **use the corporate tax generated from very large online platforms (VLOPs), as it is or as bolstered by an additional Windfall Advertising Revenue Tax imposed on these platforms, to support public-interest journalism activities undertaken**

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[36] Annika Burgess, "Meta Is Ending Its Deals to Pay for Australian News Content. This Is How It Could Change Your Facebook and Instagram Feeds," *ABC News*, March 2, 2024, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-03-02/facebook-google-news-media-deal-media-pay-meta/103534342.
[37] Park et al., *Digital News Report: Australia 2024*, 121.

by Australian media organisations in both public-interest and corporate sectors of the industry. This accepts that VLOPs generate outsized revenues from their domination of the online advertising market, and taxes these revenues appropriately and fairly in the name of Australian citizens and in the national interest, generating the funding that can then be used to support struggling Australian news operators.

As the explicit aim of distributing this funding is to support public-interest journalism, however, it also requires an undertaking from the prospective recipients of such subsidies that they be used appropriately. This should include the creation of charter obligations similar to those that govern ABC and SBS, as well as regular quality audits of the journalistic outputs produced with the help of the government subsidies funded by the corporate taxes raised from VLOPs. Building on its current initiative towards the development of a Media Diversity Measurement Framework[38], the Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA) would be well placed to operate such audits.

It is clear that the Australian commercial news media industry will dislike such a model, since its imposition would hold the industry and its outputs to the higher standards that apply only to our public-service media organisations, ABC and SBS. It is likely, however, that a quality assurance regime for private-sector news media would meet with widespread public approval. We are, in any case, rapidly running out of alternatives. **The NMBC is effectively dead, brought undone by its inherent flaws, and any attempts to resurrect it by designating Meta under the NMBC will only result in protracted court action that Meta has a very good chance of winning.** This will have the further knock-on effect of failing to fund the struggling news industry in the meantime. There are no silver bullet solutions that will provide helpful sources of funding for the news industry.

Finally, therefore, if all other attempts to achieve sustainability fail, the last resort for the support of a nationally important industry whose business model is irretrievably broken is public subsidy. In the interest of good governance, however, such subsidy cannot and must not be provided without appropriate quality controls.

[38] Australian Communications and Media Authority, "Media Diversity Measurement Framework," last modified December 12, 2023, https://www.acma.gov.au/media-diversity-measurement-framework.

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3. The important role of Australian journalism, news and public interest media in countering mis- and disinformation on digital platforms

Summary

We enthusiastically agree that quality, public-interest journalism has a crucial role to play in countering mis- and disinformation, both online and offline. However, the implication in this term of reference that news media always convey accurate information – and social media are always a source of mis- and disinformation – must be firmly rejected as simplistic and inaccurate. Mainstream media in Australia and elsewhere often make significant and unfortunate contributions to amplifying and disseminating mis- and disinformation, elevating harmful content from fringe sources to much larger, and sometimes global, audiences. We need to focus on the systems and processes that allow this to occur, while examining solutions that support the quality, independent, and trustworthy journalism that the public wants, needs, and deserves.

Proposed solutions

- **Strategic collaboration:** News media operators from both the public service and commercial sectors need to jointly develop more effective strategies for improving how mis- and disinformation is understood and handled at the level of the journalists and news organisations, noting their substantial role in enabling fringe content from social media and elsewhere to reach mass audiences. This could draw on already-established initiatives like First Draft, which offers information and media literacy training to journalists and the general public alike.

- **Mandatory training and reporting:** Media literacy training needs to be compulsory for news workers employed at all Australian news outlets, and must be updated on an annual basis. In the interest of transparency and to enable the public to make better judgments on which news outlets to place their trust in, news organisations should be compelled to report on the media literacy standards of their workforces in annual transparency reports.

- **Fund public interest fact-checking:** As of 30 June 2024, Australia is without dedicated publicly-funded, public-interest, political and media fact-checking. Independent fact-checking is another tool which promotes accountability and evidence-informed commentary in public debate. Media literacy efforts are supported by well-resourced and independent fact-checking efforts, and these should therefore be publicly funded because they are in the public interest.

- **More government responsiveness and transparency:** As well as committing to supporting quality journalism and fact-checking efforts, government also has a role to play in the information ecosystem and needs to make serious re-investment of resources and commit to data access and transparency to help support Australian journalism, news, and public-interest media in their efforts to counter mis- and disinformation across all platforms, online and offline.

- **Restrict problematic accounts:** Social media platforms also need to do more, particularly through prompt take-downs and suspensions of accounts with large numbers of followers. These approaches have proven successful in the past, especially in curtailing and preventing the spread of such content from fringe to mainstream visibility and impact.

- **Greater consequences:** More severe sanctions are needed for news outlets whose coverage wittingly or unwittingly amplifies and disseminates mis- and disinformation. The Australian Press Council's standards on the amplification of disinformation by news media outlets should be sharpened and more consistently enforced. Alternatively, statutory federal bodies such as the Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA) should take on this crucial task.

Detailed discussion

Mis- and disinformation amplifiers

Quality, public-interest journalism can help to counter problematic information, online and offline. This can take a variety of forms: from evidence-based and unbiased reporting and investigative journalism that is free from fear and favour to well-resourced fact-checking initiatives that address falsehoods and misrepresentations in the statements of public figures and the rumours that circulate amongst the general public.

All too often, however, news production as actually practiced in Australia and elsewhere in the world falls well short of these high journalistic ideals. This is reflected in Australians' levels of distrust in the media, which are at their highest since 2016[39]. How this decline can be addressed is equally clear: a recent survey of Australian news consumers found that high journalistic standards (81%), transparency about the editorial process (80%), and unbiased reporting (77%) are key drivers of trust[40]. Additionally, Australian audiences experience news fatigue, avoid the news, are more concerned than ever about misinformation (and more than news consumers in other countries), and want more local news, particularly in regional areas.[41] Often, and especially in regional and rural areas, community groups and organisations, many of them organising on social media, fill the voids that a lack of resources and effort from professional news organisations has left.

In contrast to the framing of this term of reference, much of the mis- and disinformation that does unquestionably circulate on social media platforms reaches mass audiences only when it is picked up and amplified – wittingly or unwittingly – by mainstream news organisations that fail to consider the societal implications of what they cover and how they cover it. This profound lack of communicative nous is in turn exploited in increasingly sophisticated ways by public actors – from fringe and extremist politicians to hyperpartisan propaganda operations masquerading as 'news outlets' – with a vested interest in circulating their disinformation. The strategies and

[39] Park et al., *Digital News Report: Australia 2024*, 16-19; 113.
[40] Park et al., *Digital News Report: Australia 2024*, 117.
[41] .Park et al., *Digital News Report: Australia 2024*, 16-19; 151.

practices of such bad actors are by now very well recognised in the scholarly literature in Australia and around the world, but have yet to lead to adjustments in the operation of mainstream news organisations.

Learning from the mistakes of COVID-19 coverage

There have been many earlier precedents of mis- and disinformation campaigns including the 2016 Brexit referendum and US 2020 Presidential election. However, the circulation of mis- and disinformation and the strategies and tactics of disinformation actors have been turbocharged by sheer volume of problematic information circulated during the COVID-19 pandemic. This coincided with major subsequent compounding crises that have allowed very limited time for analysis by journalists and academics. However, lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic have not been fully understood, articulated and absorbed.

We begin by focussing on a key example here: QUT DMRC researchers completed an extensive study of the spread of a major and distinctive conspiracy theory in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was the false claim that the roll-out of 5G mobile telephony technology was in some way responsible for creating or deepening the COVID-19 pandemic.[42] This study was conducted as part of the Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery project *Evaluating the Challenge of 'Fake News' and Other Malinformation* (2020-23; Chief Investigators: Axel Bruns, Stephen Harrington, and Daniel Angus).

We traced the global dissemination of the COVID/5G conspiracy theory, which led to physical attacks on 5G towers and technicians in Australia and elsewhere, across public Facebook pages and groups,[43] finding that the conspiracy theory remained confined to minor and marginal spaces with a very small number of participants until some entertainment and sporting celebrities began to endorse the claim. Its spread further escalated when entertainment and sporting *news media* began to report – without any attempts to debunk the claims – on the celebrities' endorsements for the conspiracy theory. Further mainstream news media reporting subsequently covered this rise of a previously obscure conspiracist claim to widespread public visibility, and finally also published some belated fact-checks of the conspiracy theory.

In other words, while the disinformation certainly first appeared on social media, it was celebrity endorsement which provided it with credibility in the eyes of a wider public, and mass media coverage which provided it with the amplification required to reach a large global public.

More distinctly Australian examples are similarly easy to identify: on 6 August 2021, for instance, the *Daily Telegraph* and other papers in the News Corporation network carried an article in print

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[42] Axel Bruns, Stephen Harrington, and Edward Hurcombe, "'Corona? 5G? Or Both?': The Dynamics of COVID-19/5G Conspiracy Theories on Facebook," *Media International Australia* 177, no. 1 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X20946113; Axel Bruns, Stephen Harrington, and Edward Hurcombe, "Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories: Tracing Misinformation Trajectories from the Fringes to the Mainstream," in *Communicating COVID-19: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Monique Lewis, Eliza Govender, and Kate Holland (Cham: Springer, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-79735-5_12; Axel Bruns, Edward Hurcombe, and Stephen Harrington, "Covering Conspiracy: Approaches to Reporting the COVID/5G Conspiracy Theory," *Digital Journalism* 10, no. 6 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1968921.

[43] Bruns, Harrington, and Hurcombe, "'Corona? 5G? Or Both?'."

and online that presented "Australia's Top Misinformation Superspreaders,"[44] including photos, screenshots, and a brief profile of each of the ten top disinformation actors (Fig. 1).

As many scholars and civil society organisations involved in the fight against the scourge of mis- and disinformation remarked at the time, this was exceptionally problematic and irresponsible. Published in a mass publication, not only did this leaderboard make these top disinformation sources substantially more visible to audiences who were already confused and frightened by the unfolding pandemic (and therefore especially vulnerable to disinformation and propaganda aimed at undermining public health measures), it also significantly emboldened these disinformation operators themselves. It validated their efforts at changing public perceptions of crucial COVID-19 mitigation measures, and incentivised them to rise even further up the leaderboard in the next superspreader ranking.

Fig. 1: The Daily Telegraph*'s 6 Aug. 2021 feature on "Australia's Top Misinformation Superspreaders", in print and online.*

Even if we assume that the article was a genuine attempt to 'name and shame' these disinformation actors, its execution was fatally flawed: disinformation sources that actively seek visibility should not be named, and conspiracy theorists who thrive on controversy cannot be shamed. The journalists and outlets involved failed abjectly to consider the public impact that the amplification of these sources would have. In this, it is emblematic for a substantial amount of news media coverage of mis- and disinformation in Australia and around the world: this is by no means an isolated case.

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[44] ,The Daily Telegraph. "*Australia's Top Misinformation Superspreaders*", August 6, 2021, paywalled content, https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/coronavirus/australias-top-10-misinformation-spreaders-use-facebook-to-share-dangerous-unproven-vaccine-data/news-story/1ce058d305f3d3f1ca22fcb48897d536

Media literacy for media workers

This and a plethora of similar cases point to a profound lack of advanced media literacy amongst journalists and other media workers, or at least to their sustained failure to *exercise* the media literacy they may possess while in the thick of a highly demanding working environment. As our COVID/5G case shows, news content checks and balances appear to be especially underdeveloped amongst entertainment and celebrity news workers (who are often generalist 'clickworkers' rather than professionally trained, experienced journalists). However, the *Daily Telegraph* misinformation leaderboard article, and other news reporting like it, also demonstrate that there is a critical need for more responsible and considered editorial decision-making in Australian mainstream media, too. This is especially true in times of crises (such as natural disasters), where research shows journalists can be spreaders of false information, but can also, vitally, prevent and correct it.[45]

Such media literacy development must centrally include a focus on greater digital literacy, of course: Australian journalists must develop more considered and responsible approaches both to deciding how and to what extent they source information *from* digital and social media, and to anticipating what impact and appropriation their journalistic output may generate *on* digital and social media when it is published.

Both failed in the cases we have discussed: entertainment journalists' sourcing of COVID/5G conspiracy content from celebrities on social media provided the crucial amplification that these stories needed to reach mass audiences and generate significant physical and informational damage, and *Daily Telegraph* editors' apparent failure to consider the way a leaderboard of 'misinformation superspreaders' would further embolden those problematic actors and their communities similarly added fuel to the fire of COVID-19 disinformation.

These observations are neither limited to Australia nor to mis- and disinformation on the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the traditional role of journalists and new media organisations as trusted arbiters of information, the complex nature of the modern information environment has meant that information is often not appropriately vetted before its reported. This is also the case for the 'Ukraine biolabs' conspiracy theory, which began on Twitter (now X) in 2022 and asserted that Russia invaded Ukraine in order to gain control of 'US-funded bioweapons laboratories'. While it was initially assumed that this conspiracy theory was predominantly spread by hostile, potentially Russian-backed actors, a detailed investigation by QUT DMRC researchers[46] found that the conspiracy had been amplified and popularised entirely by mainstream media outlets and official US Government representatives.

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[45] Kate Starbird, Dharma Dailey, Owla Mohamed, et al., "Engage Early, Correct More: How Journalists Participate in False Rumors Online during Crisis Events," in *Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1145/3173574.3173679.

[46] Daniel Whelan-Shamy and Timothy Graham, "'Ukraine Biolabs': How Attempts to Debunk a Conspiracy Theory Only Helped It Spread," *The Conversation*, April 4, 2022, https://theconversation.com/ukraine-biolabs-how-attempts-to-debunk-a-conspiracy-theory-only-helped-it-spread-180403.

Similarly, a study of 'mail-in voter fraud' disinformation and conspiracy theories in the aftermath of the 2020 US Presidential election, conducted by the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, concluded pointedly that

> *the primary cure for the elite-driven, mass media communicated information disorder we observe here is unlikely to be more fact checking on Facebook. Instead, it is likely to require more aggressive policing by traditional professional media, the Associated Press, the television networks, and local TV news editors of whether and how they cover Trump's propaganda efforts, and how they educate their audiences about the disinformation campaign the president and the Republican Party have waged.*[47]

This study also highlights that the lack of media and information literacy amongst professional media workers has left mainstream and public-interest media organisations vulnerable to exploitation by propaganda operations. The authors conclude that the Trump campaign, in particular,

> *has perfected the art of harnessing mass media to disseminate and at times reinforce his disinformation campaign by using three core standard practices of professional journalism. These three are: elite institutional focus (if the President says it, it's news); headline seeking (if it bleeds, it leads); and balance, neutrality, or the avoidance of the appearance of taking a side.*[48]

The same patterns remain evident in the 2024 campaign.

Combatting the propagandist exploitation of news media shortcomings

Importantly, these strategies for the insertion of propagandist rhetoric into mainstream media coverage predate the advent of social media by several decades. Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi, Viktor Orbán, Geert Wilders, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and other successful populists merely employ and update a rhetorical technique named the 'Gish Gallop'[49] (after US creationist Duane Gish, who pioneered it in public debates) that consists of making so many false statements so quickly that even dedicated fact-checkers are unable to debunk them all, and are prevented from engaging in higher-level tasks by their commitment to the effort. (Former Trump advisor Steve Bannon described this technique more bluntly as "flooding the zone with shit".[50])

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[47] Yochai Benkler et al., "Mail-In Voter Fraud: Anatomy of a Disinformation Campaign" (working paper, Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, October 1, 2020), https://cyber.harvard.edu/publication/2020/Mail-in-Voter-Fraud-Disinformation-2020.
[48] Benkler et al., "Mail-In Voter Fraud."
[49] Wikipedia, "Gish gallop," last modified June 11, 2024, , https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gish_gallop.
[50] David Remnick, "Trump vs. the Times: Inside an Off-the-Record Meeting," The New Yorker, July 30, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/trump-vs-the-times-inside-an-off-the-record-meeting.

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A useful demonstration of the consequences of the Gish Gallop is the *New York Times*' attempt to debunk all lies told by Donald Trump in his first year as US President.[51] Although an impressive effort, it is as exhausting as it is exhaustive, and will inevitably have consumed a substantial amount of workload that might have been spent more productively on other tasks. And while the *New York Times* clearly did have the resources to commit several journalists to this year-long exercise in futility, most other US and Australian news outlets do not – their reporting on the Trump Presidency will therefore have reproduced many more of Trump's falsehoods without challenge.

Few news organisations anywhere in the world appear to have found a response to this now widespread technique. Neither of the most prominent options – stenographic reporting of politicians' statements, falsehoods included, that leaves audiences to make up their own minds; or curtailing the coverage devoted to politicians known for egregious falsehoods (which some US TV networks briefly experimented with after the 2020 election whenever Trump launched into a tirade repeating debunked voter fraud claims) – are particularly satisfactory.

At a time when democracy in Australia and the world is severely threatened by the rise of a new generation of populist, propagandist disinformation actors, **there is a profound and urgent need for quality, public-interest, responsible news media operators from both the public service and commercial sectors to jointly develop more effective strategies for addressing these actors' attempts to exploit the weaknesses of mainstream news media.** Notably, these weaknesses stem predominantly from a substantial lack in the development and application of media literacies, especially with respect to digital and social media, coupled with the significant economic and operational pressures that affect an industry without a sustainable business model.

Potential solutions

In light of the complexity of the problems we have sketched out here, there are no easy solutions; however, the present policy-making focus on the policing of social media content distracts from the fact that **much of the emphasis needs to be on improving the handling of mis- and disinformation at the level of the journalists and news organisations: they play a substantial role in enabling fringe social media content to reach mass audiences**. Government could mandate these quality improvements through charter obligations imposed upon both public and private-sector news organisations, under arrangements for the latter as countenanced in the previous section.

That said, **clearly social media platforms can and must do more to combat significant and egregious mis- and disinformation, and the accounts that spread such content.** Available measures include take-downs and suspensions, both of which have proven successful in the past especially in retarding and preventing the spread of such content from fringe to mainstream visibility and impact. The focus here needs to be especially on information and accounts with a substantial reach. It is considerably more effective to take down the account of one political

[51] David Leonhardt and Stuart A. Thompson, "Trump's Lies," *The New York Times*, June 23, 2017, updated December 14, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/23/opinion/trumps-lies.html.

agitator who spreads disinformation designed to undermine public trust in the electoral process than it is to take down thousands of the account's followers.

Media literacy and transparency

Much more effort must also be invested, however, into developing sufficient literacy in journalists, editors, and other news workers to prevent them from falling prey to the strategies of propagandists, populists, conspiracy theorists, and other mis- and disinformation sources, and from becoming unwitting amplifiers and disseminators of their messaging. Here, we point to initiatives such as First Draft, which offer information and media literacy training to journalists and the general public alike[52], in Australia and elsewhere in the world. **Such training should be compulsory for news workers employed at all Australian news outlets, and must be updated on an annual basis**; in the interest of transparency and to enable the public to make better judgments on which news outlets to place their trust in, **news organisations should be compelled to report on the media literacy standards of their workforces in annual transparency reports**.

Fact-checking: a critically important but severely endangered public service

Such media literacy efforts should be further supported by well-resourced and independent fact-checking efforts. While fact-checking is not a silver bullet for mis- and disinformation by any means, it has been shown to positively influence factual understanding and reduce belief in false information.[53]

Comprehensive, timely, readily available, and reliable fact checks on a broad range of topics and claims can play a critical role in informing journalists and other news workers who are charged with covering those claims, and in influencing the thrust of their reporting – especially once those news workers have developed the literacies required to know about, look for, process, and incorporate those fact-checks into their own reporting.

Australia has recently faced significant challenges in maintaining robust independent fact-checking mechanisms. While the phrase "can I get a fact check?" has become ubiquitous in Australia's civic debate, including on programs such as the ABC's *Q&A*, the ABC has recently ended its ABC RMIT Fact Check partnership with RMIT University. News coverage has stated that this partnership would be replaced with an internal fact-checking team known as "ABC News Verify",[54] but this suggests a broader shift away from independent fact-checking funded by media outlets and takes place against the historical backdrop of crippling funding cuts to the ABC in 2016 that devastated previous in-house fact-checking efforts[55].

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[52] First Draft, accessed June 20, 2024 – website is archived, https://firstdraftnews.org/.
[53] Nathan Walter, Jonathan Cohen, R. Lance Holbert, and Yasmin Morag, "Fact-Checking: A Meta-Analysis of What Works and for Whom," *Political Communication* 37, no. 3 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1668894.
[54] Daanyal Saeed, "ABC Ends Fact-Check Partnership with RMIT," *Crikey*, February 20, 2024, https://www.crikey.com.au/2024/02/21/abc-rmit-fact-check-partnership-abc-news-verify/.
[55] Myriam Robin, "ABC Fact Check Crushed by Govt Cuts," *Crikey*, May 18, 2016, https://www.crikey.com.au/2016/05/18/abc-fact-check-to-close-with-12-news-jobs-to-go/.

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Like journalistic organisations, independent fact-checking organisations continue to experience significant funding precarity.[56] This leads them to form private funding partnership arrangements with platform companies (e.g. Meta, through the Meta Third-Party Fact-Checking Program) and universities (e.g. RMIT University). While these arrangements provide critical resourcing for fact-checkers, they also affect the focus of fact-checking efforts.[57] With the shift away from ABC RMIT Fact Check and towards a verification model, this leaves Australia without publicly funded, public-interest political and media fact checking.

There is an urgent need for more, and more reliable, funding for fact-checking efforts. When understood as a public-interest and public-service effort, these efforts could be funded in a similar way to, but independent of, Australia's public service media. They could release their outputs publicly under Creative Commons licences so they can be readily utilised by all Australian media outlets as well as the general public. They should also be enabled to seek additional funding from other institutions acting in the public interest, including universities and philanthropic funders, subject to rigorous and transparent conflict of interest protocols.

Finally, there is also a need to introduce considerably more severe sanctions for news outlets whose coverage wittingly or unwittingly amplifies and disseminates mis- and disinformation, even in spite of fact-checks and media literacy training designed to prevent this. The mis- and disinformation of publics on public matters erodes democratic processes.[58] Articles such as the leaderboard of "Top Misinformation Superspreaders" thus materially threaten societal cohesion and (in the COVID-19 context) public health by directly facilitating the visibility and spread of egregious disinformation; the publication or amplification of such deeply problematic material is inherently counter to the public interest, and should have consequences. **The Australian Press Council's standards on the amplification of disinformation by news media outlets should be sharpened and, indeed, more consistently enforced**; if the Press Council is unable to do so, statutory federal bodies such as the Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA) should take on this crucial task instead.

The role of an enabling government in the information ecosystem

Professionals across the Australian media ecosystem are frustrated at the erosion of public resources while they face increasing demands and pressures from citizens and governments alike.[59] In recent interviews, many of these professionals, including journalists, public servants, academics, and consultants, drew particular attention to how often the Australian government stood in direct opposition to their efforts to produce, interpret, and validate information for the

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[56] Lucas Graves, *Deciding What's True: The Rise of Political Fact-Checking in American Journalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), https://doi.org/10.7312/grav17506.
[57] Lucas Graves, Valerie Bélair-Gagnon, and Rebekah Larsen, "From Public Reason to Public Health: Professional Implications of the 'Debunking Turn' in the Global Fact-Checking Field," *Digital Journalism* (2023), https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2023.2218454; Silvia Montaña-Niño, Michelle Riedlinger, Ned Watt, et al., "Fact Checking the Pandemic in the Global South: Correction Strategies by Latin American and African Meta Fact Checkers," *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, 2022, https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2022i0.13057.
[58] James H. Kuklinski, Paul J. Quirk, Jennifer Jerit, et al., "Misinformation and the Currency of Democratic Citizenship," *The Journal of Politics* 62, no. 3 (2000), https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-3816.00033.
[59] Samantha Vilkins, "Faith in Australian Numbers: New Pressures on Public Data Communication in Australia as a Result of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Communication Research and Practice* (2024), https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2024.2351778.

public. These impediments ranged across interactions with and within Parliament and the Australian Public Service and were unanimously seen as worsening over time: such as Ministers' offices requesting shorter and shorter briefs; declining resourcing for public data production and communication; or restricted accessibility and interoperability in public data access.

Various illiteracies in government – in statistics, data, news media, and social media – were suggested as key factors contributing to misinformation in Australia. This occurs directly by either purposefully or inadvertently misrepresenting or misinterpreting information, or indirectly through restricting resourcing.

Therefore, as well as committing to supporting quality journalism and fact-checking efforts, government also has a role to play in the information ecosystem, and needs to make a serious re-investment of resources and commit to data access and transparency to help support commercial and public-interest Australian news media in countering mis- and disinformation across all platforms, online and offline.

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4. The algorithms, recommender systems and corporate decision making of digital platforms in influencing what Australians see, and the impacts of this on mental health

Summary

Equitable and inclusive access to digital media technologies is central to a well-functioning democracy and for citizens' wellbeing. Platforms provide social and cultural connection, and serve important and multi-faceted informational, entertainment, spiritual, and pleasurable needs. While the general principles underlying search engines and content recommendation systems are now well-known, the specifics of their configuration often remain commercial-in-confidence. Despite these platforms being characterised as 'black boxes', we already have considerable insights into the impact of algorithms and recommender systems on what information is shared and consumed. These have been generated by our work at the QUT Digital Media Research Centre (DMRC) and the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision Making & Society (ADM+S), which has a node at QUT. Researching, understanding, and sharing knowledge about the broader operation and social impact of these systems has been a key focus for both centres via numerous ARC-funded grants, including multiple Discovery Projects, Linkage Projects, and Laureate, Future, and DECRA Fellowships, which are listed in the additional resources section of this submission.

On the framing of this term of reference, we stress that it is not possible to isolate social media platforms from the broader social (information, communication, and media) environment. We have ample evidence from our research – that also builds on decades of communication and media theory – that shows how information flows across media systems and platforms. In other words, while the wording of this term of reference assumes a direct causal relationship between algorithms or recommender systems and mental health, these elements are merely components in a much larger socio-cultural ecosystem. There is certainly a need for greater transparency to understand how information is algorithmically amplified and targeted at individuals both as organic content and paid advertising. But we emphasise the point that information consumers are not passive and powerless against algorithms, and that recommender systems can both diminish and enrich the online experience.

In responding to this term of reference we have chosen to focus on areas of platform recommendation and algorithmic ecosystems that deserve greater attention in the current regulatory moment: the transparency and observability search engines, computational advertising systems, and recommender systems, as well as user privacy, and opt-in/opt-out provisions.

Proposed solutions

- **Greater data access for public-interest research:** There is a clear and present need in Australia to introduce more comprehensive platform data access provisions for critical, independent, public-interest research, similar to those created in Europe by the *Digital Services Act*. This would allow greater transparency about the impacts of platform algorithms, even where platforms themselves fail to provide such transparency of their own accord, and will support more appropriate policy interventions where needed.

- **Greater transparency for platform advertising:** Along similar lines, addressing the lack of transparency and observability of computational advertising is critical for improving overall democratic and social outcomes. This relatively straightforward regulatory intervention would enable greater insight into the mechanisms and impact of targeted advertising on online platforms, which currently suffers from a lack of transparency and accountability.
- **Privacy reform:** The current initiative to reform the Australian Privacy Act presents opportunities to close gaps in privacy legislation to protect all Australians from the invasive data gathering processes of major digital platforms.
- **Opt-in/out of recommendations:** Notwithstanding the fact that commercial recommender systems can significantly improve consumer experience within platform environments, consumers should be given greater flexibility to decide how to engage with platforms. In particular, they should be provided with the ability to opt-out from algorithmically targeted content, including advertising and promotions.

Detailed discussion

Search engines: bursting the 'filter bubble'

Search engines are a crucial tool for everyday information discovery: Internet users rely on search engines for finding information on topics from news and current affairs through professional and personal life choices to entertainment, sports, and beyond. It is therefore critical that the information recommended by such tools is accurate, relevant, and reliable. It is also important that the public understanding of these systems is enhanced, given their essential role in the contemporary media and information landscape[60].

Many search engines attempt to anticipate the information needs of their users by developing individual user profiles based on previous search histories, and by shaping their recommendations at least to some extent to meet these personal interests and preferences. This has led to concerns about "filter bubbles".[61] This idea is based on the speculation that if different groups of users – distinguished for instance by their demographics, political orientation, personal interests, or other attributes – are provided with widely divergent search results on the same query, this could encourage the formation of diametrically opposed and irreconcilable worldviews and thus result in a fragmented, polarised society. In this view, people with specific political interests would mostly receive information that reinforces their existing views, and would not encounter diverging, counter-ideological views.

However, our research and work by other leading scholars strongly suggests that concerns about the 'filter bubbles' that may come to fragment society and increase political polarisation are vastly overstated.[62]

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[60] Axel Bruns, *Australian Search Experience Project: Background Paper* (Brisbane, Australia: ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, 2022), https://apo.org.au/node/316976.
[61] Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011).
[62] Damiano Spina et al., "Human-AI Cooperation to Tackle Misinformation and Polarization," *Communications of the ACM* 66, no. 7 (2023); Axel Bruns, *Are Filter Bubbles Real?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019).

For instance, the ADM+S collected over 350 million search results from more than 1,000 participants over a year as part of a citizen science-inspired data donation model where Internet users anonymously donated a tightly controlled and scoped suite of search data[63] – this approach addresses the limitation that such data are otherwise unavailable due to the lack of data availability from search engines themselves. **Known as the Australian Search Experience, this ARC-funded project found that personalisation of the results for generic queries in major search engines is minimal, and generally limited to ensuring geographic relevance for users.** Instead, the considerable *lack of diversity* in the information sources recommended by the major search engines is a greater concern. Particularly in the case of news recommender systems, users are more likely to be served blandly uniform than hyper-targeted information, bursting the filter bubble myth.

That said, a somewhat overlooked aspect in understanding the role of search engines in society is the impact of how Internet users structure their search queries. Emerging evidence suggests that search result variation is more likely to stem from users' query construction rather than search engines' algorithmic results personalisation[64], and that many users lack the skills necessary to formulate precise and effective search queries. These findings reinforce the critical role of increased media literacy and education in addressing concerns about algorithmic systems, centrally including search engines.

A key understanding that has emerged from this work is about how information is sought and found by users with various ideological perspectives: **it is not necessarily the algorithmic systems that are driving ideological differences; rather, these systems are often simply reflecting the pre-existing biases and partisan views that users express in formulating their search queries.** Such biases, however, formed within a much wider societal context, and not simply through users' encounters with algorithmic systems. Further research efforts must therefore focus on the role that Australian Internet users themselves play in determining what information they encounter, and how their information seeking and engagement behaviours differ by demographics and other attributes.

Online advertising and the limits of transparency

The advertising market has been progressively reshaped by the computational advertising models facilitated and controlled by digital media platforms.[65] Meta (Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, Meta Audience Network) and Alphabet (Google, YouTube) have emerged as two

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[63] Tobias D. Krafft et al., "Filterblase geplatzt? Kaum Raum für Personalisierung bei Google-Suchen zur Bundestagswahl 2017 (1. Zwischenbericht)" (AlgorithmWatch, 2017), https://algorithmwatch.org/de/filterblasegeplatzt-kaum-raum-fuer-personalisierung-bei-google-suchen-zurbundestagswahl-2017; Tobias D. Krafft, Michael Gamer, and Katharina A. Zweig, "Wer sieht was? Personalisierung, Regionalisierung und die Frage nach der Filterblase in Googles Suchmaschine" (Algorithm Watch, 2018), https://www.blm.de/files/pdf2/bericht-datenspende---wer-siehtwas-auf-google.pdf; Tobias D. Krafft, Michael Gamer, and Katharina A. Zweig, "What Did You See? A Study to Measure Personalization in Google's Search Engine," *EPJ Data Science* 8, no. 1 (2019): 1, https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-019-0217-5.

[64] J. Shane Culpepper et al., "Topic Difficulty: Collection and Query Formulation Effects," *ACM Transactions on Information Systems* 40, no. 1 (September 2021): Article 19, https://doi.org/10.1145/3470563.

[65] Samuel Kininmonth and Ramon Lobato, "Partners, Competitors, Frenemies: How Australian Advertising Professionals Understand the Market Power of Facebook and Google," *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023), https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/19906.

dominant players in this advertising ecosystem, where they operate as a duopoly.[66] Despite their outsized presence in everyday consumer society, and the significant amounts of user data consumed and generated via everyday platform use, the operations and impacts of their advertising systems remain opaque and difficult to observe.[67] Advertising revenue is clearly the golden goose for such digital platforms, yet they are extremely effective at avoiding sanctions even when they advertise illegal or problematic services or products to vulnerable groups.[68]

Meta and Alphabet have responded to increasing pressure from researchers, civil society, and government regulators by creating transparency tools and features available on their websites or as part of their social media app interfaces. At the user interface side, individual users of these platforms are now provided with some details about the adverts they see, and about why they are seeing them; this includes Facebook's WAIST (Why Am I Seeing This) feature, which is embedded in the graphical interface of Facebook. These explanations usually provide basic claims about the link between a user's interests or behaviour and the placement of a particular ad, but do not explain the pattern of ads a user will encounter over time, how the individual user's ad experience compares to other users of the platform, or how data is shared between advertisers, data brokers, and platforms.

Our own examination of Facebook's WAIST system reveals that the explanations provided are insufficient, and largely abstracted from the more likely algorithmic mechanisms involved in deciding what ads users see[69]. In short, some Australians are inundated with gambling, alcohol, and/or unhealthy food advertising, and they may be entirely unaware that their experience is uncharacteristic and potentially problematic.[70]

The advertising transparency libraries provided by platforms are also severely limited from an accountability and transparency perspective. Their information is largely provided in the form of dashboards and functionally limited APIs (Application Programming Interfaces) which display the adverts published on the platform, paid for by advertisers. **In our audit of ad transparency libraries, we find a number of limitations: for instance, the archive of ads is not permanent or easily searchable; the ads cannot be easily extracted for independent analysis; and in most cases no, or only severely limited, information is provided on targeting, volume, spend, or reach.**[71] As we write in a forthcoming article:[72]

> *These (ad) libraries were largely a response to regulatory requirements for the disclosure of political advertising, especially in the United States and European*

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[66] Kininmonth and Lobato, "Partners, Competitors, Frenemies."
[67] Jean Burgess et al, "Australian Ad Observatory: Background paper," 2022, https://apo.org.au/node/318616
[68] Christine Parker et al. 2023, "Addressing the Accountability Gap: Gambling Advertising and Social Media Platform Responsibilities," *Addiction Research & Theory*, October, 1–7, doi:10.1080/16066359.2023.2269852.
[69] Jean Burgess et al, "Why am I seeing this ad? The affordances and limits of automated user-level explanation in Meta's advertising system," (in press), *New Media and Society*.
[70] Kiah Hawker et al, "Advertisements on digital platforms: How transparent and observable are they?" (2022), Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, https://fare.org.au/transparency-report/
[71] Nicholas Carah et al. "Observing "tuned" advertising on digital platforms." *Internet Policy Review* 13, no. 2 (2024). https://doi.org/10.14763/2024.2.1779.
[72] Daniel Angus et al. "Computational Methods for Improving the Observability of Platform-based Advertising." (under review). *Journal of Advertising*.

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Union, starting with Facebook, Twitter and Google in 2018[73]. In the European Union the Digital Services Act *(EU 2022, Article 39) now requires designated 'very large online platforms' such as Meta and Alphabet to 'compile and make publicly available' a repository of all ads. These must be available through APIs for one year from when the advertisement first appeared and include information about 'whether the advertisement was intended to be presented specifically to one or more particular groups of recipients and if so, the main parameters used for that purpose' and 'the total number of recipients of the services reached' (EU 2022, Article 30). Under the* Digital Services Act *(Article 40), 'vetted researchers' may also be provided access to data 'for the sole purpose of conducting research that contributes to the detection, identification and understanding of systemic risks … and to the assessment of the adequacy, efficiency and impacts' of risk mitigation measures. However these provisions have been criticised for maintaining secrecy of data as to the operation of the design and functioning of the algorithmic recommender systems at the heart of the advertising models and privileging self-regulation as to the degree of information provided and access to researchers.[74] To date, Meta and Alphabet are the only platforms to offer ad transparency libraries outside of the European Union, albeit with extremely limited information for advertising that falls outside of the category of political (or 'issues-based') advertising.[75]*

Key issue 1: Access difficulty to historical ads

In Australia, the Meta Ad Library only publishes and indexes *general* (non-political/issue) ads while these ads are still active on any of Meta's four advertising-enabled platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, and Meta Audience Network which facilitates ads in the wider mobile app ecology). Meta promises that *political and social issues* advertising will remain available for seven years after publication, but this is voluntary and not legislated. The situation is broadly similar for Alphabet, although its Ads Transparency Center search interface is significantly less developed even in comparison with Meta's, which hampers our ability to locate advertising for independent scrutiny.

Key issue 2: Limited metadata for most ads

Another key transparency limitation of Meta's Ad Library dashboard is that metadata on audience targeting (for example, age or interests), ad spend, and reach is only available for political ads. This means that – for the vast majority of advertising – there is no additional information available beyond the ad copy itself. Importantly, for critical categories such as gambling, alcohol, health

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[73] Paddy Leerssen et al, "Platform ad archives: promises and pitfalls". *Internet Policy Review* 8 no. 4 (2019). https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1421.
[74] Marta Maroni, "'Mediated Transparency': The Digital Services Act and the Legitimisation of Platform Power," in *(In)visible European Government: Critical Approaches to Transparency as an Ideal and a Practice*, ed. Päivi Leino-Sandberg, Maarten Zbigniew Hillebrandt, and Ida Koivisto (forthcoming), Helsinki Legal Studies Research Paper No. 77, last modified March 22, 2023, https://ssrn.com/abstract=4413531.
[75] Hawker et al. "Advertisements on Digital Platforms: How Transparent and Observable Are They?"

services, financial products, unhealthy foods, and more, this means that ads can only be seen while they are active, and there is no way of identifying whom (e.g., vulnerable or underage groups) they target.

Key issue 3: Clunky interfaces

Further worsening this opacity, the available access tools and environments add another layer of difficulty. For example, the critical categories of products and services mentioned above are difficult to single out from the overall flood of advertising content as the dashboard interfaces require users to search by the Meta Page ID or name that bought the ad, or – in the case of Alphabet – the trading name registered with Alphabet for the advertiser. This may be different from the more recognisable brand names featured in the ads themselves. Additionally, only political advertising can be accessed and downloaded through official APIs for further analysis, and – in the case of Meta – this requires prior approval from the platform.

For both Meta and Alphabet, the data and affordances of their ad archives produce a very perfunctory form of transparency that limits the independent, public-interest scrutiny of their advertising systems and prevents a thorough analysis of advertising patterns and practices at scale. Platforms refer to these transparency initiatives as 'archives', but they lack many of the fundamental properties that we would expect an archive to have, including data permanence, completeness, and discoverability. A more fitting analogy is that of a private library where access is tightly monitored, patron movement significantly inhibited and monitored by the library owner, and most of the books are unindexed, randomly shelved, glued shut, difficult to copy, and shredded after a short space of time.

A better way forward

The significantly more forceful online advertising transparency policies implemented in the EU, which include requirements to provide additional advertising metadata not only for political ads, and retain online advertising information for up to one year, demonstrate that greater transparency is possible. **It is entirely technically feasible for platforms to provide such additional data in Australia, too, and it is beyond time for government to force disclosures of this key information, given the centrality of advertising in the digital platform user experience.** By failing to provide such data here, digital platforms are actively evading the scrutiny of Australian public-interest research and regulation.

Additionally, Meta and Alphabet's ad transparency tools offer only limited, high-level ad targeting information, failing to address how ads are constructed and sequenced or to allow scrutiny of how consumer groups are profiled and targeted. They provide abstracted geographic and demographic data, but omit crucial details about ad construction and audience profiling. This omission creates a gap in our understanding of how groups are targeted, and risks the use of discriminatory targeting practices.

Moreover, there is a pressing need to reinstate the independent verification of claims about audience, reach, and ad costs. Currently, these platforms withhold such essential information from independent scrutiny, a concern that is shared also by businesses and the advertising industry. While the EU Digital Services Act mandates Meta, Alphabet, and other major online

platforms to disclose geographic and demographic details for ads shown in the EU, we note that this requirement fails to ensure independent verification of the data provided, as these transparency dashboards lack external validity – they are the only available source of this information, and there are no frameworks for the verification of these data by independent data gathering and analysis. To ensure greater accountability, platforms must provide mechanisms for true observability, not just superficial transparency.

Data Privacy and User Agency

Data privacy

Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) hold some of the most comprehensive databases of social data relating to geolocation (where we are and where we go in the world), economic activity, cultural tastes and preferences, and other highly private and personal data. While these VLOPs provide value to Australian consumers in terms of the provision of a range of essential services from maps to eCommerce and entertainment, they are pervasive in terms of the data gathered and brokered in the provision of such services. Australians should not have to make Faustian bargains with VLOPs, trading their private and personal data for access to basic services.

The Australian Privacy Act is a key piece of legislation presently under review that can be updated to protect all Australians from unnecessary overreach by VLOPs in terms of the data required to access and utilise their services, particularly with respect to geolocative data.[76]

In the current digital ecosystem, consumers face significant challenges in opting out of digital platforms that collect this extensive personal data. Despite increased awareness and concerns over data privacy, several structural and practical barriers make it exceedingly difficult for individuals to exercise meaningful control over their personal information, making it necessary for governments to intervene on their behalf.

Many VLOPs, especially those offering essential services such as social media, email, and online shopping, have become monopolies or oligopolies in their respective markets. Australian consumers often have no realistic alternatives to these dominant platforms. Opting out typically means forfeiting access to essential digital services, thereby impeding participation in everyday social, economic, and professional activities. Major digital platforms also frequently bundle their services in ways that make it challenging for users to opt out of one service without losing access to others. For instance, opting out of a data-intensive service might require users to forgo interconnected features or linked accounts, disrupting their ability to manage their online interactions efficiently.

VLOPs are vague regarding their data collection practices, making it difficult for consumers to fully understand what data is being collected, how it is used or could be used, and what are the implications of opting in or out, as evidenced in the case of advertising mentioned earlier in this

[76] Peta Mitchell, Jessica Megarry, and Lucinda Nelson, "Location data as sensitive information. QUT Digital Media Research Centre submission in response to the Privacy Act Review Discussion Paper," (2022), https://eprints.qut.edu.au/227650/

submission. A lack of meaningful transparency inhibits consumers from making informed choices about their participation in such platforms. Platforms also typically default to 'all-in' data collection settings that are favourable to their business models. Changing these settings can be a cumbersome process, perhaps deliberately so, leading to inertia where Australian consumers, even if aware of their options, may not take the steps necessary to opt out due to the perceived effort involved.

User agency and knowledge

We conclude this section with an important point to remember when considering algorithms and recommendation systems: users are not powerless. As we noted in the first term of reference in relation to younger users, through research, experimentation, and interaction with others, social media users of all ages gain vernacular knowledge about the inner workings of algorithms through their online experiences.[77] This knowledge can be used for various purposes; for example, recent DMRC research showed how social media users harnessed their understanding of recommender algorithms to respond to disinformation efforts about Russia's war on Ukraine.[78]

Yet while social media users are adept at exercising control over content recommendations, further empowering these same users with additional tools to more directly tune recommendations and take even greater ownership of how sponsored and non-sponsored content is presented to them would substantially enhance their online experiences. The EU *Digital Services Act* (DSA) introduced a significant provision allowing users to opt out of algorithmic feeds. This measure empowers users to select content feeds that are not personalised through algorithms, which are often used to tailor content based on past behaviour, preferences, or demographic data. Instead, users can choose to view content in a chronological or non-personalised format, often called a 'temporal feed'. This option addresses growing concerns over the impact of algorithmic recommendations on privacy and user autonomy, providing users with greater choice about the information they see, and choose to engage with, online.

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[77] Bishop, "Managing Visibility on YouTube through Algorithmic Gossip," *New Media & Society* 21, no. 11–12 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819854731; Kelley Cotter, "Playing the Visibility Game: How Digital Influencers and Algorithms Negotiate Influence on Instagram," *New Media & Society* 21, no. 4 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818815684; Kelley Cotter, "Practical Knowledge of Algorithms: The Case of BreadTube," *New Media & Society* 26, no. 4 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221081802.

[78] Kateryna Kasianenko, "Boosting the Distant Other: Visibility Practices on Japanese Twitter During Russia's War on Ukraine" (manuscript submitted for publication, 2024); Kateryna Kasianenko and Olga Boichak, "Canonizing Online Activism: Memetic Iconography in the North Atlantic Fella Organization" (manuscript submitted for publication, 2024).

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5. Other issues in relation to harmful or illegal content disseminated over social media, including scams, age-restricted content, child sexual abuse and violent extremist material

Beyond the mainstream: alternative social media platforms

Alternative Social Media (ASM) platforms have evolved alongside mainstream or popular social media platforms. These ASM platforms often respond to the limitations to participation or free speech imposed by mainstream platforms. In an operational or technical sense, ASM platforms are 'copycat' versions of their mainstream counterparts.[79] However, they lack the resources to maintain the steady growth of their user bases. Specifically, they are under-resourced to configure a robust governance system.

ASM platforms have rudimentary content moderation or rely on user-driven content moderation to govern participation and content. The low barriers to participation and lean platform governance have made them spaces of extreme hate speech and harmful discourse.[80] Although the number of users may not be significantly high, these smaller communities have inspired real-world violence (e.g., the Charlottesville attacker was an active member of Gab).[81] In contrast, trust and safety measures on mainstream social media platforms have become sophisticated and capable of filtering problematic content significantly. This could be observed in the case of Twitter; however, since his takeover of Twitter, Elon Musk has removed nearly all content moderation measures in pursuit of his understanding of free speech, which has led to a marked increase in hate speech and bot activities.[82] This in turn has led to a drop in advertiser presence on the platform.[83]

Noting the above, preventing users – of any demography – from mainstream or popular social media platforms could result in pushing them to other alternatives that may be situated outside Australian jurisdiction, and may not adhere to local policy. This is likely to mean that Australian users end up encountering more harmful and illegal content than they would have on the more regulated and moderated mainstream platforms.

We therefore explicitly warn policy-makers that attempts to exclude entire demographic groups from mainstream social media access, and thereby leading them to instead seek out alternative and unregulated social media spaces, will only make these groups more vulnerable.

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[79] Huatong Sun, "Sina Weibo of China: From a Copycat to a Local Uptake of a Global Technology Assemblage," *International Journal of Sociotechnology and Knowledge Development* 5, no. 4 (2013), https://doi.org/10.4018/ijskd.2013100103; Wilfred Yang Wang and Ramon Lobato, "Chinese Video Streaming Services in the Context of Global Platform Studies," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 12, no. 3 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2019.1584119; Andrea Geissinger, Christofer Laurell, and Christina Öberg, "Copycats among Underdogs—Echoing the Sharing Economy Business Model," *Industrial Marketing Management* 96 (July 2021), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2021.06.006.

[80] Savvas Zannettou et al., "What Is Gab: A Bastion of Free Speech or an Alt-Right Echo Chamber?" in *Companion of the Web Conference 2018* (Republic and Canton of Geneva, Switzerland: International World Wide Web Conferences Steering Committee, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1145/3184558.3191531; Yuchen Zhou, Mark Dredze, David A. Broniatowski, and William D. Adler, "Elites and Foreign Actors Among the Alt-Right: The Gab Social Media Platform," *First Monday* 24, no. 9 (2019), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v24i9.10062.

[81] "Social Network Gab Back Online After Shooting," *BBC News*, Nov 5, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-46097048.

[82] Daniel Hickey et al., "Auditing Elon Musk's Impact on Hate Speech and Bots," Preprint, submitted January 28, 2024, https://arxiv.org/html/2304.04129v3.

[83] Sheila Dang, "Musk-Owned X's Content Moderation Shift Complicated Effort to Win Back Brands," *Reuters*, September 7, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/technology/musk-owned-xs-content-moderation-shift-complicated-effort-win-back-brands-former-2023-09-07/.

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6. Any related matters

Shifting the gaze: Politicians' use of social media in the Australian context

We encourage the Committee to review the public communication of Australian politicians during their time as elected Members of Parliament, and how their actions on social media have influenced news media and public discussions.

Politicians have a privileged and outsized role in public discourse and the Committee should be cognisant of the potential for politicians' social media messaging to produce harm and deteriorate the quality of online discussions. Specifically, we draw to attention the role that some politicians have in eroding trust in democratic institutions and authorities, undermining the work of scientific institutions responsible for public health and the environment, and promoting anti-deliberative politics. That is, a style of political messaging that stymies civil debate and promotes polarisation. In the context of COVID-19, certain content posted and amplified by politicians had the potential to cause harm to public health, for example, by discouraging vaccination and encouraging civil unrest. Politicians were also called upon by activist groups during the lead up to the Voice referendum in 2023 to engage in respectful debate,[84] during a time when social media and political discussion was significantly impacting the mental health of First Nations people.[85] Some politicians failed to heed these calls, as evidenced by the divisive political messaging on social media which will be covered later in this section.

Our recommendations are grounded in research supported by hard data. In a mixed-methods analysis of over 400,000 tweets, Graham and colleagues[86] found that Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews was attacked vehemently on social media by political opponents on a state and federal level throughout 2020 and 2021. In his criticism of Premier Daniel Andrews, Liberal Party MP Tim Smith was one of the key actors in making the hashtag #DictatorDan become a trending topic.[87] While political attacks are not noteworthy in and of themselves, the state opposition leader was utilising social media to undermine the lockdowns and public health measures in place during the

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[84] Ethan French and James Vyver, "'Like You're under the Microscope": First Nations People like Cecilia Are Feeling the Mental Health Impacts of the Voice Debate," *ABC News*, October 2, 2023, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-03/indigenous-mental-health-impacts-of-voice-referendum-debate/102923188.

[85] Australian Human Rights Commission and IndigenousX, *Minimising Harm in Conversations about the Referendum* (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023), https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/minimising-harm-conversations-about; Black Dog Institute, "Indigenous Mental Health Groups Call on Politicians to Champion Respectful Referendum," Black Dog Institute | Better Mental Health, September 6, 2023, https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/media-releases/indigenous-mental-health-groups-call-on-politicians-to-champion-respectful-referendum/; Josh Butler, "Voice Will Have Positive Impact on Aboriginal Mental Health, Says Peak Psychiatric Body," *The Guardian*, May 31, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/may/31/voice-will-have-positive-impact-on-aboriginal-mental-health-says-peak-psychiatric-body; Anton Nilsson, "Referendum Mental Health Toll on First Nations Communities Won't 'Miraculously' Ease on Saturday," *Crikey*, October 13, 2023, https://www.crikey.com.au/2023/10/13/referendum-mental-health-toll-first-nations-community/.

[86] Timothy Graham et al., "#IStandWithDan versus #DictatorDan: The Polarised Dynamics of Twitter Discussions about Victoria's COVID-19 Restrictions," *Media International Australia* 179, no. 1 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X20981780.

[87] Graham et al., "#IStandWithDan versus #DictatorDan."

peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Victoria.[88] By advocating for an accelerated reopening to appeal to their political base, politicians – rather than medical experts – were influencing how citizens viewed the COVID-19 lockdown measures, with the potential for trickle down effects on public health more broadly.

Politicians also need to consider how they may spark conspiratorial style thinking with their posts on social media. Similarly, former MP Craig Kelly – who was a member of the Liberal Party, an independent, and part of the United Australia Party during his time as representative for Hughes – was a key figure in spreading health disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic until his defeat at the 2022 federal election. In January 2020, Craig Kelly was one of the most influential politicians on Facebook, with higher levels of engagement than the then Prime Minister Scott Morrison or then Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese.[89] Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this elected politician was gaining notoriety and high levels of engagement on social media for his stances on climate change denial, which were allowed to continue relatively unchecked while he was a member of the Morrison government with minimal consequences.[90]

Continuing the discussion of how Australian politicians' use of social media can negatively impact society, Graham and FitzGerald[91] conducted a mixed-methods analysis of tweets from and interactions with Craig Kelly's Twitter account and his network of followers. The authors analysed 4,317 tweets and 5.2 million interactions using a novel empirical approach and found that Craig Kelly was a central part of a disinformation campaign and a key driver of unverified health misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic.[92] Additionally, during his time as an MP, Craig Kelly frequently undermined the government's stance and acknowledgement of man-made climate change by denying the role of humans in global warming and climate science more generally.[93]

In addition to public health concerns, we highlight the role that politicians on social media played in exacerbating political and racial tensions during discussion of the 2023 Voice referendum. One of the conspiracy theories that emerged around the Voice referendum was that the United

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[88] Graham et al., "#IStandWithDan versus #DictatorDan."
[89] Michael Koziol, "Liberal MP Backs Right-Wing Group's Bid to Deride Climate Change in Classrooms," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 23, 2020, https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/liberal-mp-craig-kelly-backs-advance-australia-s-climate-change-resources-in-classrooms-20200221-p54366.html.
[90] Koziol, "Liberal MP Backs Right-Wing Group's Bid."; Anna Henderson, "Prime Minister Scott Morrison Dresses Down MP Craig Kelly Over Coronavirus Claims," *ABC News*, February 2, 2021, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-02/scott-morrison-dresses-down-craig-kelly-over-covid-19-claims/13114764.
[91] Timothy Graham and Katherine M. FitzGerald, "Exploring the Role of Political Elites in Post-Truth Communication on Social Media," *Media International Australia*, (2024), https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X241244919.
[92] Graham and FitzGerald, "Exploring the Role of Political Elites."
[93] Dana McCauley, "Coronavirus Australia: Craig Kelly Accused of Pushing 'Dangerous' Hydroxychloroquine COVID-19 Conspiracy Theory," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 27, 2020, https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/craig-kelly-accused-of-pushing-dangerous-covid-19-conspiracy-theory-20200827-p55pw4.html; David Rector, dir., "Craig Kelly Falsehoods," Media Watch, *ABC*, 2021, https://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/episodes/kelly/13479832; David Rector, dir., "Dangerous and Misleading," Media Watch, *ABC*, 2021, https://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/episodes/jones/13450962; Anna Henderson, "Morrison Chides Kelly over Coronavirus Claims, but MP Vows to Keep Pushing Controversial Line," *ABC News*, February 2, 2021, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-02/scott-morrison-dresses-down-craig-kelly-over-covid-19-claims/13114764; Nicholas Barry and Raul Sanchez-Urribarri, "Populist Politics, COVID-19, and Fake News: The Case of Craig Kelly," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 3 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2022.2122775.

Nations would take over Australia if the Yes campaign was successful. This conspiracy theory gained such traction that Prime Minister Anthony Albanese was forced to address it in a press conference. As Chen and colleagues write, this narrative framed the Voice as a 'Trojan horse' that would allow the UN to steal land and restrict individual rights[94]. Evidence suggests that the conspiratorial term 'Trojan horse' was adopted by prominent anti-Voice campaigners, including federal shadow minister for Indigenous Australians Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, former federal Member of Parliament (MP) George Christensen, as well as former Neighbours actress Nicola Charles.[95] Likewise, Peter Dutton's consistent framing of the Voice throughout the leadup to the referendum as a shadowy 'elite' campaign that serves vested interests arguably provided strategic resources for conspiratorial discourse circulating in the media ecosystem.[96] It is unacceptable that misleading assertions from politicians, which go viral on social media and have the potential to negatively impact Indigenous Australians and social cohesion, are allowed to spread with limited government fact-checking or intervention.

Inquiry exhaustion

We close this submission by noting that we have concerns regarding inquiry duplication across the sector at large. We are in a significant moment with regard to policy development in the digital platform space, but the volume and pace of policy development regarding online safety, digital privacy, copyright, digital platform services, artificial intelligence, and more is tending towards the overwhelming. With so much activity already occurring within this policy realm, we have concerns that the number of simultaneous inquiries risks compromising the quality of submissions, of policy deliberations, and indeed of the outcomes of these processes.

[94] Esther Chen, Eiddewen Jeffery, and Maryam Mahvash, "UN Conspiracy Theory Evokes Fear in Voice Voters," RMIT Australia, November 14, 2023, https://www.rmit.edu.au/news/crosscheck/un-conspiracy-theory-evokes-fear-in-voice-voters.
[95] Chen, Jeffery, and Mahvash, "UN Conspiracy Theory."
[96] Bernard Keane, "It's an Older Meme but It Checks Out: Dutton Ramps Up 'Elites' Voice Conspiracy Theory," *Crikey*, July 7, 2023, https://www.crikey.com.au/2023/07/07/indigenous-voice-parliament-dutton-elites-conspiracy-theory/.

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Resources and Projects

Below are the resources mentioned earlier in the submission, and more information about some of the DMRC's key work that aligns with this inquiry.

Resources

Manifesto for a Better Children's Internet

Australia Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child have created the *Manifesto for a better Children's Internet* which outlines 17 actionable principles to improve, what can be described as, the Children's Internet.

Access here: https://issuu.com/digitalchild/docs/childrensinternet_interactive-1

First Draft: resources for journalists and the public

Explore a free library of training content provided by First Draft's highly experienced team. These online courses, toolkits and resources are designed to help both journalists and the public build expertise and stay one step ahead of misinformation. Note: In June 2022, First Draft announced it was closing its doors, and the website was archived in perpetuity by the Internet Archive.

Access here: https://firstdraftnews.org/training/

Projects

Dynamics of Partisanship and Polarisation in Online Public Debate

Australian Research Council (ARC) Laureate Fellowship (FL210100051)

Professor Axel Bruns

Rapidly increasing partisanship and polarisation, especially online, poses an urgent threat to societal cohesion in Australia and other established western democracies; polarisation is also a critical cybersecurity concern when actively promoted by bad-faith actors to undermine citizens' trust in democratic institutions. By introducing an analytical framework that distinguishes four key dimensions of polarisation, the Fellowship aims to conduct the first-ever assessment of the extent and dynamics of polarisation in the contemporary online and social media environments of six nations, including Australia. The evidence is expected to enable an urgently needed, robust defence of our society and democracy against the challenges of polarisation.

Access here: https://research.qut.edu.au/dmrc/projects/determining-the-drivers-and-dynamics-of-partisanship-and-polarisation-in-online-public-debate/

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Regulating and countering structural inequality on digital platforms

Australian Research Council (ARC) Future Fellowship (FT210100263)

Professor Nic Suzor

This project aims to find legal, ethical, technical, and commercial opportunities to counter inequality online. It uses machine learning and custom data collection tools to create new knowledge about how digital platforms—including search engines, social media, peer economy, and news platforms—can help to tackle misogyny, racism, and other forms of structural discrimination. It uses this knowledge to investigate the extent to which private sector digital platforms can be expected to monitor and regulate the actions of their users, what responsibilities they have to avoid contributing to discrimination, hatred, intolerance and abuse, and how the law should develop to ensure that our digital environment is more equal and fair.

Access here: https://research.qut.edu.au/dmrc/projects/platforms/

Taking humour seriously for online safety

Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Early Career Research Award (DE230101558)

Dr Ariadna Matamoros Fernandez

Harmful humour impacts on women's wellbeing online, but is poorly managed by social media platforms, and has not been integrated into online safety regulation and policy. This project aims to bring together sociocultural theory, social media analysis, and interviews to better understand the dynamics of harmful humour online in Australia. It will work with users, community leaders and industry stakeholders to evaluate current platform and policy responses and how they could be improved. The anticipated outcomes include theoretical advances, workable principles for better content moderation processes that reduce harm without restricting healthy expression, and evidence-based contributions to debates on online safety regulation.

Access here: https://research.qut.edu.au/dmrc/projects/taking-humour-seriously/

Combatting Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour on Social Media

Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Early Career Research (DE220101435)

Associate Professor Timothy Graham

Online disinformation is a global problem that threatens national security and is harmful to society. However, current methods are not suited to detect coordinated disinformation operations that conceal their activity by co-opting and cultivating regular users, groups and social movements. This project develops cutting-edge methods and workflows to accurately distinguish genuine activity from coordinated inauthentic behaviour, and to trace and evaluate the adoption of material spread by malicious actors across multiple platforms.

Access here: https://research.qut.edu.au/dmrc/projects/combatting-coordinated-inauthentic-behaviour-on-social-media/

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Reconceptualising copyright to improve access to screen culture

Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Early Career Research (DE210100525)

Dr Kylie Pappalardo

This project examines how automation, digital distribution, and intellectual property laws shape the reach and diversity of our culture. It studies how streaming video-on-demand services, like Netflix and Stan, are changing what screen content gets produced, what historical cultural material is available, what is recommended and made visible, and whose voices are heard. These decisions are increasingly informed by data about what consumers are watching, which in turn is influenced by what titles are recommended and made visible.

Access here: https://research.qut.edu.au/dmrc/projects/reconceptualising-copyright-to-improve-access-to-screen-culture/

Evaluating the Challenge of 'Fake News' and Other Malinformation

Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project (DP200101317)

Prof Axel Bruns, A/Prof Stephen Harrington, Prof Scott Wright (Bournemouth), Prof Daniel Angus, A/Prof Jennifer Stromer-Galley (Syracuse), Prof Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (Cardiff)

Encompassed by the disputed term 'fake news', overtly or covertly biased, skewed, or falsified reports claiming to present factual information present a critical challenge to the effective dissemination of news and information across society. This project conducts a systematic, large-scale, mixed-methods analysis of empirical evidence on the dissemination of, engagement with, and impact of 'fake news' and other malinformation in public debate, in Australia and beyond. It takes a triangulated approach, combining computational big data analytics with deep forensic analysis, to reveal the complex 'fake news' ecosystem, replace 'fake news' with more precise terminology, and provide recommendations for policy responses based on robust evidence.

Access here: https://research.qut.edu.au/dmrc/projects/evaluating-the-challenge-of-fake-news-and-other-malinformation/

Using machine vision to explore Instagram's everyday promotional cultures

Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project (DP200100519)

Prof Daniel Angus, Prof Jean Burgess, A/Prof Nicholas Carah (UQ)

The advertising-driven business models of social media platforms increasingly depend on automation. The technologies used by platforms are rapidly advancing, and include 'machine vision' systems that automatically classify faces, expressions, objects, and brand logos in images. The results are used to provide targeted content to users, often without their knowledge and without sufficient public oversight. Using a novel combination of computational and cultural research methods, this project aims to: examine how machine vision works in platforms like Instagram; explore its role in everyday visual contexts through qualitative case studies of festivals, food, and lifestyle sports; and improve public understanding of machine vision systems.

Access here: https://research.qut.edu.au/dmrc/projects/using-machine-vision-to-explore-instagrams-everyday-promotional-cultures/

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Advancing digital inclusion in low-income Australian families

Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project (LP190100677)

Prof Michael Dezuanni, Prof Marcus Foth, Prof Peta Mitchell, Prof Anthony McCosker (Swinburne), A/Prof Tanya Notley (WSU), A/Prof Jenny Kennedy (RMIT), Ms Anne Hampshire (Smith Family), Dr Amber Marshall (Griffith), Dr Marion Byrne (yourtown)

This ethnographic investigation explores the complex relationship between digital and social inclusion, and social infrastructure's role (education facilities, charities, government services) in supporting low-income families' social and economic participation. It gathers insights from families in six diverse communities from Far North Queensland to Tasmania, across diverse urban, regional and rural locations. It focuses on the digital inclusion implications of children's home and school learning experiences, school leavers' transitions into work, and parenting in digital times. The project is a collaboration with Australia's leading digital inclusion organisations and will develop new practices, policies and sector wide solutions.

Access here: https://research.qut.edu.au/dmrc/projects/advancing-digital-inclusion-in-low-income-australian-families-2/

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Contributor Biographies

Professor Daniel Angus FQA

Daniel Angus is Professor of Digital Communication in the School of Communication, and Director of QUT's Digital Media Research Centre. Daniel's research examines issues at the intersection of technology and society, with a focus on artificial intelligence, automation, misinformation, and new methods to study the digital society. Daniel has been involved in computer and social science research for 20 years and he contributes regularly to media and industry on the impact of technology on society.

Daniel received a BS/BE in research and development, and electronics and computer systems, and a PhD in computer science from Swinburne University of Technology, in 2004 and 2008, respectively. Between 2008 and 2018 he worked in a number of roles at The University of Queensland, leading collaborative research at the intersection of computer science, design, communication, linguistics, and journalism. He is a Chief Investigator in the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision Making & Society; the ARC Discovery Projects: Evaluating the Challenge of 'Fake News' and Other Malinformation, and Using machine vision to explore Instagram's everyday promotional cultures; and the ARC Linkage Project: Young Australians and the Promotion of Alcohol on Social Media.

Professor Axel Bruns FAHA FQA

Axel Bruns is an Australian Laureate Fellow and Professor in the Digital Media Research Centre and is a Chief Investigator in the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society. His books include *Are Filter Bubbles Real?* (2019) and *Gatewatching and News Curation: Journalism, Social Media, and the Public Sphere* (2018), and the edited collections *Digitizing Democracy* (2019), the *Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics* (2016), and *Twitter and Society* (2014). He is one of the world's most cited social media researchers.

His current research focusses on the study of public communication in digital and social media environments, with particular attention to the dynamics of polarisation, partisanship, and problematic information, and their implications for our understanding of the contemporary public sphere; his work draws especially on innovative new methods for analysing 'big social data'. He served as President of the Association of Internet Researchers in 2017–19, and is an elected Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

Distinguished Professor Jean Burgess FAHA FQA

Jean Burgess is Distinguished Professor of Digital Media in the Digital Media Research Centre (DMRC) and School of Communication, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), as well as Director of the QUT GenAI Lab. She served as the DMRC's founding Centre Director from 2015-2020 and has been Associate Director of the national ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society since 2020. Her research focuses on the social implications of digital media technologies, platforms, and cultures, as well as new and innovative methods for studying them. She is the author or editor of more than 140 scholarly publications on these topics, and they have been translated into many languages. Her latest book is *Everyday Data Cultures* (Polity Press, 2022). She is an elected Fellow of the International Communication Association, the Australian Academy of Humanities, and the Queensland Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Digital Media Research Centre

Katherine M. FitzGerald

Katherine FitzGerald is a PhD Candidate at the Digital Media Research Centre. Katherine has an academic background in psychology and digital communications. Katherine has published in journals such as the *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, *Media International Australia*, and contributed her expertise to multiple edited volumes. She uses qualitative and digital ethnography methods to study conspiracy theories, information disorder, and knowledge production on digital platforms.

Associate Professor Timothy Graham

Dr Timothy Graham is Associate Professor in Digital Media at the Queensland University of Queensland (QUT). His research combines computational methods with social theory to study online networks and platforms, with a particular interest in online bots and trolls, disinformation, and online ratings and rankings devices. He develops open-source software tools for social media data analysis, and has published in journals such as *Information, Communication & Society*, *Information Polity, Big Data & Society*, and *Social Media + Society*. In 2021, Tim was announced as an ARC Discovery Early Career Researcher Award recipient and was awarded funding for his project, Combating Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour on Social Media. He is currently a Chief Investigator of an ARC funded Discovery Project, Understanding and Combatting 'Dark Political Communication' (2024-2026).

Dr Bernadette Hyland-Wood

Dr Bernadette Hyland-Wood is a Lecturer in the Queensland University of Technology School of Communication. She is Chief Investigator in the Digital Media Research Centre and co-leads the Responsible Data Science & AI Program at the QUT Centre for Data Science. Her highly cited research examines national strategic priorities, including public health data supply during crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic. She led three semantic technology firms, including a spin-out from MIT that delivered essential services for US Government and international science, technology and medical scholarly publishers. Bernadette is an expert in co-designing and co-developing culturally appropriate, scalable digital platform services. As an invited expert to the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), she chaired a working group with members from the European Union, UK, US, and Australia to create data standards and best practices for findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable (FAIR) data.

Kateryna Kasianenko

Kateryna Kasianenko is a PhD Candidate at the Digital Media Research Centre and is affiliated with Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) Data61 group. Originally from Ukraine, she received her MA in Interdisciplinary Information Studies from the University of Tokyo, Japan. In her research, Kateryna utilises network analysis, computational discourse modelling, qualitative textual analysis, and interviews to examine everyday digital practices and morality as performed online. Her current overarching focus is on practices of online engagement with Russia's war on Ukraine in Japan and globally.

Dennis Leeftink

Dennis Leeftink is a PhD candidate in the QUT Digital Media Research Centre. With a background in media studies (University of Amsterdam) and communication & information sciences (University of Utrecht), his doctoral project, No Tool is a Box: Unpacking Embedded Knowledge to Chart Digital Tools, Methods and Workflows, examines how digital humanities and social science research is conducted through increasingly complex research 'stacks' that comprise a wide range of computational methods, workflows and practices.

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Carly Lubicz-Zaorski

Carly Lubicz is a PhD Candidate at the Digital Media Research Centre. Carly has a professional background in media, communications, public affairs, and policy. Her research uses mixed method approaches, including social network analysis, to examine how interactions in contemporary online communications spaces could influence public support for environmental policy. She works part-time in the Australian Public Service [*note: the contribution to this submission is in her capacity as a researcher*].

Dr Ashwin Nagappa

Ashwin Nagappa, an early career researcher at the Digital Media Research Centre, has a diverse academic background in Computer Science and Engineering, Media and Cultural Studies, and Documentary filmmaking. His PhD research focused on the history of digital media technologies and emerging social media platforms. In addition to his doctoral research, he has also studied other alternative social media platforms and fringe platforms to extend his mis/disinformation research scholarship. Currently, he is contributing to the academic community as a post-doctoral research assistant on various projects across QUT and RMIT, Melbourne, including examining fake news data on Facebook and mapping public service value in new personalization and political discourse on Reddit.

Lucinda Nelson

Lucinda Nelson is a PhD candidate at the Digital Media Research Centre and the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society. She works at the intersection of regulation, media, technology, and violence against women. Lucinda's doctoral research examines the role of social media platforms in the manifestation and spread of everyday online misogyny.

Maria Margarita Ochoa-Diaz

M. Margarita Ochoa-Diaz is a PhD Candidate at the Digital Media Research Centre and is affiliated with the School of Teacher Education and Leadership. Margarita has an academic background in social science and cultural education, as well as youth-led digital peacebuilding. In her research, Margarita uses computational and qualitative methods to study youth's use of social media like TikTok and Instagram for political participation and peacebuilding. Her current research studies young political influencers' peacebuilding practices in post-conflict Colombia.

Dr Kim Osman

Kim Osman researches digital inclusion issues that impact the quarter of Australia's population unable to access and use digital technologies in the ways they want and need. Kim's research has enabled organisations and government to develop evidence-based policy and programs through her development of best-practice advice, guides, and toolkits for improving digital inclusion. Using place-based and ethnographic methods, Kim researches how social infrastructure like libraries support people to develop the digital skills and literacy needed to access education opportunities and fully participate economically, socially, and culturally in Australian society. Kim is a Senior Research Associate with the Digital Media Research Centre at the Queensland University of Technology.

Associate Professor Michelle Riedlinger

Michelle Riedlinger joined QUT's School of Communication in July 2020. Her research interests include the emerging environmental, agricultural and health research communication practices, roles for "alternative" science communicators, online fact checking and public engagement with science. Her research is informed by theories of media, cultural approaches to science, social identity, and pragmatic linguistics. She coordinates QUT's Global Engagement Theme in the Global Journalism Innovation Lab and she has been a co-investigator on Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)-funded projects investigating the online circulation of health research and online explanatory journalism. As a communication consultant, she has worked on projects focussed on climate variability, dryland salinity, ecology, catchment management, and river health. She has facilitated over two hundred communication training workshops for researchers. Michelle is the Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Science Communication (JCOM). She is a member of the Scientific Committee of the Public Communication of Science and Technology Global Network, and she chairs the Finance Sub-Committee.

Dr Aleesha Rodriguez

Dr Aleesha Rodriguez is a 'tech-sociologist' who explores the ways in which people and technology shape each other. Their background is in digital media communication and Science and Technology Studies (STS), and they are currently a Research Fellow at the Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child at QUT, where they explore public imaginaries about future digital media technologies for children. Specifically, Aleesha's research examines the public hopes and fears about new technologies and develops creative and playful approaches to help folks explore how we can shape those new technologies to generate better social outcomes. Aleesha's research is published in leading international media and communication journals on subjects such as social media.

Professor Michael Dezuanni

Professor Michael Dezuanni is a digital media and learning researcher with national standing in the field of media literacy education and as a scholar of children's participation on digital platforms. As a Chief Investigator at the Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child, Michael's work focuses on the commercialisation of childhood, personal relationships in online environments and media literacy. Michael has experience as Chief Investigator on five ARC Linkage projects that focussed on digital literacy and learning at school, the use of digital games in the classroom, digital inclusion in regional and rural Australia, the use of screen content in formal and informal learning, and digital inclusion in low-income families. He is currently a Program Leader for Digital Inclusion and Participation at QUT's Digital Media Research Centre. In 2020, Michael published a book with MIT Press on how YouTube's popular Let's Play videos created by Minecraft players offer opportunities for learning.

Dr Zahra Stardust

Zahra Stardust is a porn studies scholar interested in the regulation of sexual cultures. Her work specialises in sexual media and sextech, focusing on the politics of sexual content moderation (including the production, distribution and regulation of explicit media), and the development of community-led, social justice sextech. Her first book Indie Porn: Revolution, Regulation and Resistance (Duke University Press, 2024) explores the clash between indie porn producers, governments and big tech. Her next co-authored book, Sextech: A Critical Introduction (Polity Press,

2025), explores key debates in sextech design, manufacture and governance. Zahra is a Lecturer in Digital Communication at the Queensland University of Technology, a Chief Investigator in the Digital Media Research Centre, and an Affiliate at the Berkman Klein Centre for Internet and Society at Harvard University.

Dr Sebastian Svegaard

Sebastian Svegaard is a Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Digital Media Research Centre. His work sits within the ARC Laureate Fellowship project Determining the Drivers and Dynamics of Partisanship and Polarisation in Online Public Debate. Currently, he investigates discursive practices in Australian and British news video content, as well as political leaders' use of social media during election campaigns. Sebastian uses a wide range of interdisciplinary approaches and focuses on cross-cultural comparisons within his work. His background is in media and cultural studies, particularly within the audio-visual media space.

Samantha Vilkins

Samantha Vilkins is a Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Digital Media Research Centre, working on the ARC Laureate Fellowship project Determining the Drivers and Dynamics of Partisanship and Polarisation in Online Public Debate. Her background is in mathematics and science communication, and her PhD was in the role of interpretation in producing and communicating statistics in public discourses. She has drawn on her expertise and experience from both academic research and professional roles in communication and design in consulting for government as well as national associations and related stakeholders, including the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Science Technology Australia, the Australian Academy of Science, and the Australian Council of Learned Academies.

Ned Watt

Ned Watt is a PhD candidate at the Digital Media Research Centre and the Australian Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society (ADM+S). Ned's doctoral research, titled Generating Truths: Exploring the Intersection of Generative AI and Independent Fact Checking, examines how independent fact checkers respond to synthetic media and incorporate generative artificial intelligence technologies within their practice. Ned's previous research has included investigating independent fact checking in the southern hemisphere and journalistic frames of global climate summits, renewable energy and sustainability in Australia.

Daniel Whelan-Shamy

Daniel Whelan-Shamy is a PhD candidate at the Digital Media Research Centre and the Australian Research Council Center of Excellence for Automated Decision Making & Society. Daniel's PhD research draws on media and critical theory as well as philosophy of technology to better understand the epistemic and socio-communicative challenges represented by Generative Artificial Intelligence. Daniel is also interested in how knowledge – especially mis- and disinformation, is constructed and spread online, as well as the construction of artificial intelligence as geopolitical issue, especially as these issues relate to China.

Digital Media
Research Centre

About the Digital Media Research Centre

The QUT Digital Media Research Centre (DMRC) conducts world-leading communication, media, and law research for a flourishing digital society. Established in 2015, it is one of the top Australian centres for media and communication research, areas in which QUT has achieved the highest possible rankings in the national research quality assessment exercise ERA, and it is closely linked with the QUT School of Communication.

The Centre incorporates the QUT node of the Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making & Society (ADM+S), and more recently the GenAI Lab. The Centre also participates in the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child, headquartered in the Faculty of Education.

The DMRC works across four programs, which include:

Transforming Media Industries
Digital Publics
Computational Communication & Culture
Creating Better Digital Futures

The Centre draws together leading researchers from six Schools and three Faculties, to investigates the digital transformation of the media industries, the challenges of digital inclusion and governance, the growing role of AI and automation in the information environment, and the role of social media in political polarisation. The DMRC has an international reputation for both critical and computational methods, and has access to cutting-edge research infrastructure and capabilities in areas such as social media analytics and critical simulation.

We actively engage with industry and international partners in Australia, Europe, Asia, the US, and South America; and we are especially proud of the dynamic and supportive research training environment we provide to our many local and international graduate students.

The DMRC is also a member of the global Network of Centres – a group of academic institutions with a focus on interdisciplinary research on the development, social impact, policy implications, and legal concerning the Internet.

We address local, national and global challenges at the forefront of digital transformation, and provide an ambitious, stimulating and supportive research culture for our researchers, students, and partners.

For further information, see: http://research.qut.edu.au/dmrc