

Committee Secretary
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Canberra ACT 2600

13/03/2020

To the Members of the Senate Select Committee on Foreign Interference Through Social Media,

I am writing to you to make a submission to the Committee's inquiry into the risk posed to Australia's democracy by foreign interference through social media.

In this document, I attempt to further define 'misinformation' in social media and its variant forms by addressing nuances of the concept of 'fake news', referencing Eric Weinstein's model: the '4 Types of Fake News'.

I provide recent examples of the manipulation of social media in service of institutional, State and corporate interests. I address 'fake news' from an Australian perspective, focussing on recent media preoccupation with Chinese influence and espionage from around the time that this Committee was proposed, and the sources and background for that reporting. I examine international responses to 'fake news' or misinformation, and the problems or merits inherent in them. I conclude with a variety of possible solutions to prevent misinformation or 'fake news' campaigns, which are supported with evidence from respected professionals and policy experts.

My concluding argument is ultimately, that (in the available formal research conducted on the phenomenon) 'fake news' impacts only a very small audience. I am concerned by the global shift towards the weaponisation of the term, noting governments using it as justification to impose arbitrary regulation that erodes civil liberties and free speech. I concur with Dr Robert Epstein's conclusion: that "fake news is a fake problem".

The risk of the impact of 'fake news' is disproportionate to the methods proposed to combat it. I point out, somewhat ironically, that the very voices calling for action to fight 'fake news', themselves engage in systemic misinformation and narrative control through social media. I believe that the core issue is not really about 'fake news', but who has the monopoly over it. (Weinstein, 2018)

The right to a dissenting voice, the right to freely access and publish counter-narrative information is the last defence of citizens against the money, might and authority of powerful institutions and the State.

By attempting to regulate, control or eliminate arbitrary 'fake news', legislators destroy one of the only real weapons citizens possess - the democratic right to freely and openly judge the State and publicly hold it to account.

I am an independent researcher. I am not affiliated with, or funded by any organisation.

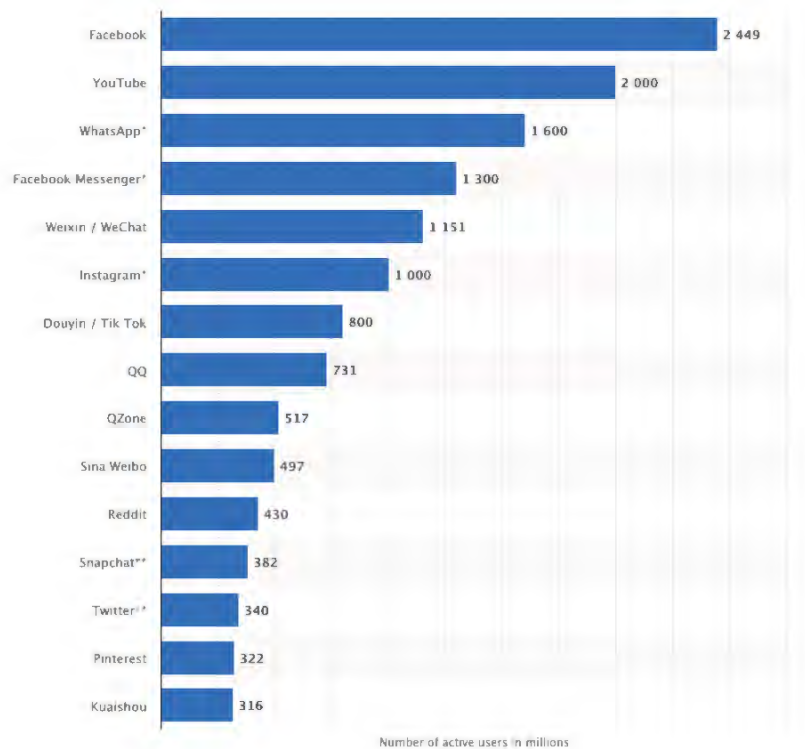
Melissa Harrison

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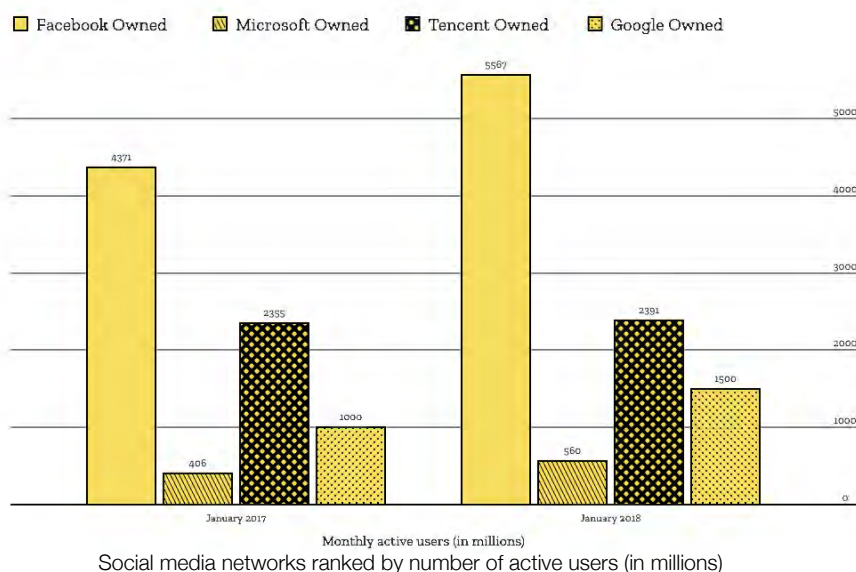
Social Media Platforms and Misinformation

I have examined prominent social media and online platforms, exploring the applicability of 'fake news', and structural misinformation issues that I believe to be systemic in all of them. To provide some idea of the scale to which dominant social media companies may influence the public, the following charts represent ranking of number of active users in total, and number of monthly active users, respectively.^{1 2}



Most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2020, ranked by number of active users (in millions)

Social media networks of Facebook, Tencent and Google have the most active monthly users



Social media networks ranked by number of active users (in millions)

¹ Statista (2020): 'Most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2020, ranked by number of active users' (in millions)'

² Internet Health Report (2018): 'Social media giants Facebook, Tencent, Google reign' Note: 'Tencent' owns WeChat, the biggest platform in China

Wikipedia

Wikipedia is generally viewed as a transparent online encyclopaedia, an archive updated by dedicated members of the community. Social media platforms such as Youtube are using Wikipedia to “help solve its conspiracy problem”, by using the encyclopaedia to “flag disinformation with additional info from Wikipedia”.³

Although this attempt to control ‘disinformation’ or ‘conspiracy’ using a publicly updated archive appears admirable, Wikipedia is in fact not a benevolent or independent institution.⁴

The English Wikipedia site receives 9 billion views per month. It is edited and controlled by only 500 administrators, the majority of which remain anonymous. A ten year study on Wikipedia concluded that 80 percent of the content was created by 1 percent of writers/editors.⁵ Wikipedia administrators are powerful - they can reverse changes or block any users from contributing.

Editors have been found to have been paid by corporations, including pharmaceutical companies, to publish false information.^{6 7 8}

The incidences of Wikipedia editors and authors revealed to be intelligence operatives are numerous and alarming. Information published regarding topics such as the Iraq War, Guantanamo Bay, and the secret service organisations themselves, has been exposed to be edited by intelligence operatives to reflect favourably on them, at the expense of the truth.^{9 10 11 12}

Some prolific Wikipedia editors (for example, the prominent ‘Phillip Cross’) appear to be a team of people, which focus on damaging the reputation of independent journalists, particularly anti-war activists.¹³

As recently as March 2020, during the development of the coronavirus pandemic, Wikipedia was exposed editing the Spanish Flu death rate, reducing the mortality rate.¹⁴

As noted above, apparently disregarding all of these prior revelations, in 2018 YouTube (owned by Google) announced it would be attempting to combat ‘disinformation’ by using Wikipedia as an authoritative source to

³ Olivia Solon, The Guardian (2018) : [‘Youtube will use Wikipedia to help solve its conspiracy problem’](#)

⁴ Swiss Propaganda Research (2020): [‘Wikipedia: A Disinformation Operation?’](#)

⁵ Jim Bush, Purdue University (2017): [‘Results of Wikipedia study may surprise’](#)

⁶ Joe Pinsker, The Atlantic (2015): [‘The Covert World of People Trying to Edit Wikipedia - for Pay’](#)

⁷ Katie Hafner, The New York Times (2007): [‘Corporate editing of Wikipedia revealed’](#)

⁸ Ashley Feinberg, Huffpost (2019): [‘Facebook, Axios and NBC Paid This Guy To Whitewash Wikipedia Pages’](#)

⁹ Tom Spärlich, Heise Online (2016): [‘Officials from the Swiss federal administration manipulate Wikipedia texts’](#)

¹⁰ Randall Mikkelsen, Reuters (2007): [‘CIA, FBI computers used for Wikipedia edits’](#)

¹¹ Ludwig De Braeckeleer, OhmyNews (2007): [‘Wikipedia and the Intelligence Services’](#)

¹² Swiss Propaganda Research (2020): [‘Ruling in German Wikipedia trial’](#)

¹³ Mintpress (2018): [‘Phillip Cross: The Mystery Wikipedia Editor Targeting Anti-War Sites’](#)

¹⁴ Catte Black, Off Guardian (2020): [‘Wikipedia Slashes Spanish Flu Death Rate’](#)

determine if information was ‘fake news’ or not. This decision means that information that dissents from Wikipedia’s narrative will be flagged and removed from YouTube. The lack of transparency and unaccountable power of Wikipedia’s editors and their ability to influence the reach of independent news and content creators, sets a dangerous precedent.

Twitter

In an undercover operation, investigative reporter James O’Keefe exposed Twitter’s ‘shadow banning’ and algorithmic censorship.¹⁵

A former Twitter software engineer described ‘shadow banning’: “One strategy is to shadow ban so you have ultimate control. The idea of a shadow ban is that you ban someone but they don’t know they’ve been banned, because they keep posting but no one sees their content.”

The Policy Manager for Twitter’s Trust and Safety Team described algorithms which down-ranked ‘undesirable’ users: “We’re trying to get the sh*tty people to not show up. It’s a product thing we’re working on right now.”

A Twitter Content Review Agent explained that Twitter doesn’t have an official policy targeting ‘conservative’ speech, but said that they were following ‘unwritten rules from the top’: “A lot of unwritten rules, and being that we’re in San Francisco, we’re in California, very liberal, a very blue state. You had to be... I mean as a company you can’t really say it because it would make you look bad, but behind closed doors are lots of rules... There was, I would say... Twitter was probably about 90% Anti-Trump, maybe 99% Anti-Trump.”

A Twitter engineer revealed that Twitter would examine a user’s profile and history to determine if a user was a ‘redneck’ and should be banned: “Yeah you look for Trump, or America, and you have like five thousand keywords to describe a redneck. Then you look and parse all the messages, all the pictures, and then you look for stuff that matches that stuff... I would say majority of it are for Republicans.”

In 2019, it was revealed that the senior Twitter executive “with editorial responsibility for the Middle East is also a part-time officer in the British Army’s psychological warfare unit.” Gordon MacMillan worked for Twitter while serving with the 77th Brigade, a unit formed to develop ‘non-lethal’ ways of waging war, using social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

Head of the UK military, General Nick Carter, described it as “information warfare”, giving the British military “the capability to compete in the war of narratives at the tactical level”, shaping perceptions of conflict.¹⁶

Mintpress reported that the “bombshell that one of the world’s most influential social networks is controlled in part by an active psychological warfare officer was not covered at all in the New York, New York Times, CNN, CNBC, MSNBC or Fox News, who appear to have found the news unremarkable.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Zerohedge (2018): [‘Conservative Activist Reveals Twitter’s Array of Censorship Tools for Message Control’](#)

¹⁶ Ian Cobain, Middle East Eye (2019): [‘Twitter executive for Middle East is British Army ‘psyops’ soldier’](#)

¹⁷ Mnar Muhawesh, Mintpress (2019): [‘Social Media Censorship Reaches New Heights as Twitter Permanently Bans Dissent’](#)

Google

In their book, *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business*, former CEO Eric Schmidt and fellow Google executive Jared Cohen wrote, “what Lockheed Martin was to the twentieth century...technology and cyber-security companies [like Google] will be to the twenty-first.”¹⁸

Eric Schmidt stepped down from his position at Google to immediately become chairman of the Pentagon’s Defence Innovation Board, staying on at Google as its technical advisor.¹⁹ Google continues to work closely with the US State Department on a host of projects, including into the fields of AI and drone intel analysis.

Eric Schmidt said in an interview: “With your permission you give us more information about you, about your friends, and we can improve the quality of our searches.. We don't need you to type at all. We know where you are. We know where you've been. We can more or less now what you're thinking about.”²⁰

Dr Robert Epstein is a highly respected behavioural research psychologist, former editor-in-chief of *Psychology Today*, Senior Research Psychologist at the American Institute for Behavioural Research and Technology, and the founder and director emeritus of the Cambridge Centre for Behavioural Studies.

Dr Epstein’s prolific research has exposed Google’s manipulation of search algorithms and the measurable effect it has on voting preferences.

“Knowing the proportion of undecided voters in a population who have Internet access, along with the proportion of those voters who can be influenced using SEME [the search engine manipulation effect], allows one to calculate the win margin below which SEME might be able to determine an election outcome.”²¹

Dr Epstein writes: “...Google, Inc., has amassed far more power to control elections—indeed, to control a wide variety of opinions and beliefs—than any company in history has ever had. Google’s search algorithm can easily shift the voting preferences of undecided voters by 20 percent or more—up to 80 percent in some demographic groups—with virtually no one knowing they are being manipulated”.²²

“Google has likely been determining the outcomes of upwards of 25 percent of the national elections worldwide since at least 2015... Google’s persuasive technologies are very powerful.

“These effects are nothing like Russian-placed ads or fake news stories. Russian interference, although troubling and unacceptable, does not, in my opinion, shift many votes. Ads and news stories are competitive and visible, like billboards. The kinds of ephemeral effects I am studying, however, are invisible and non-competitive. They are controlled entirely by Big Tech companies, and there is no way to counteract them...”²³

¹⁸ Mnar Muhawesh, *Mintpress* (2019): ‘[Social Media Censorship Reaches New Heights as Twitter Permanently Bans Dissent](#)’

¹⁹ Morgan Artyukhina, *Mintpress* (2019): ‘[Social Media and Social Control: How Silicon Valley Serves the US State Department](#)’

²⁰ Derek Thompson, *The Atlantic* (2010): ‘[Google’s CEO: ‘The Laws Are Written by Lobbyists’](#)’

²¹ Robert Epstein and Ronald E. Robertson, National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (2015): ‘[The search engine manipulation effect \(SEME\) and its possible impact on the outcomes of elections](#)’

²² Robert Epstein, *Politico Magazine* (2015): ‘[How Google Could Rig the 2016 Election](#)’

²³ Robert Epstein, *Mercatornet* (2019): ‘[Why Google poses such a serious threat to democracy and how to end that threat](#)’

“The problem with Google is not that it censors conservatives; the problem is that it has the power to determine what content billions of people worldwide will or not see. No single entity – especially a private company that is not accountable to the public – should have such power.”

Dr Epstein details Google's self-appointed role as the world's ‘Super Editor’, and not “just the world's biggest purveyor of information; it is also the world's biggest censor.”

Epstein describes multiple ways Google blacklists and censors websites, “generally without input or authority from any outside advisory group, industry association or government agency.”

Google's ‘quarantine list’ is a blacklist that “the public knows virtually nothing about but that gives Google an almost obscene amount of power over our economic well-being.”²⁴

Before US Congress in 2018, Google's CEO Sundar Pichai testified that Google does not make manual adjustments to content- that search results are only determined algorithmically.²⁵

However, in April 2019, leaked internal documents showed this testimony was false. Google search results were manually altered or sites blacklisted using the judgement of staff in Google's Trust and Safety Team.²⁶

Google has also launched its ‘Disinfo Lab’ to “combat mis- and disinformation during elections and breaking news moments.”²⁷

In June 2019, a whistleblower from Google, software engineer Zac Vorhies, leaked hundreds of internal Google documents to independent media organisation Project Veritas.²⁸

The documents revealed Google's “blacklist” - outlining sites which were restricted from appearing on news feeds. The blacklisted sites included many conservative websites. Google's political donations have overwhelmingly favoured Democratic parties.

Concerningly, among the blacklisted search phrases are “cancer cure” and “cure cancer”. The documents revealed Google manipulated its algorithms to hide alternative health and alternative medicine sites. Google's Investment arm, Google Ventures, has \$2 billion under management, over a third of which (36%) is invested in healthcare and medical corporations.²⁹ Google's ability to manipulate search results may be directed to funnel the public into its own commercial ventures, at the cost to their health or even their life. This is a grotesque conflict of interest.

²⁴ Robert Epstein, US News (2016): [‘The New Censorship’](#)

²⁵ CNN (2018): [‘Congress grills Google CEO on bias and data collection’](#)

²⁶ J. Arthur Bloom, Daily Caller (2019): [‘Exclusive: Documents Detailing Google's ‘News Blacklist’ Show Manual Manipulation of Special Search Results’](#)

²⁷ Phillip Schindler (2018): [‘The Google News Initiative: Building a stronger future for news’](#)

²⁸ Project Veritas (2019): [‘Google “Machine Learning Fairness” Whistleblower Goes Public, says: “burden lifted off of my soul”](#)

²⁹ Sara Ashley O'Brien, CNN Business (2014): [‘Google Ventures: less Ubers, more health care’](#)

Facebook

In 2018, the social media giant Facebook (where Australians reportedly get 41% of their news via social media from³⁰) partnered with two US 'non-profits' which were founded and funded by the US government to "slow the global spread of misinformation that could influence elections, acknowledging that fake news sites were still read by millions".³¹

Facebook also partnered with the Atlantic Council, to assist them to "monitor for misinformation and foreign interference".³² The Atlantic Council is funded by the US Department of State and the US Navy, Army and Airforce, NATO, various foreign powers and major Western corporations, including weapons contractors.^{33 34} Facebook is also a major sponsor of the Atlantic Council and supports their Digital Forensic Research Lab. Facebook announced in 2018 that the Digital Forensic Research Lab would be its additional "eyes and ears", "work[ing] closely with our security, policy and product teams to get Facebook real-time insights and updates on emerging threats and disinformation campaigns from around the world."³⁵

The Digital Forensic Research Lab announced their 'Election Watch' program to "identify, expose and explain disinformation during elections around the world. The effort is part of a broader initiative to provide independent and credible research about the role of social media in elections, as well as democracy more generally." "Democracy depends on debate, but productive debate depends on facts. In government for and by the people, facts are a foundation. Too often in recent years, we have witnessed attacks on this foundation: the deliberate spreading of false information, hostile state actors promoting divisive content, and attacks on fact-based reporting and evidence-based research."³⁶

It is curious that the 'Election Watch' program intended to curb misinformation or fake news from 'state actors' is initiated from an organisation bankrolled by at least 25 different foreign countries, including the UK, the United Arab Emirates, Sweden, Japan, Taiwan as well as the Australian and US government.³⁷ How does 'Election Watch' determine which countries' interests take precedence?

After it began working with the Atlantic Council, Facebook removed hundreds of accounts with millions of followers "believed to have been part of coordinated influence operations from Iran, Russia and Venezuela... The

³⁰ Reuters Institute (2018): '[Digital News Report 2018](#)', p 126

³¹ Joseph Menn, Reuters (2018): '[Facebook expands fake election news fight, but falsehoods still rampant](#)'

³² Adam Johnson, FAIR (2018): '[Media Ignore Government Influence on Facebook's Plan to Fight Government Influence](#)'

³³ Atlantic Council: '[Honor roll of contributors](#)'

³⁴ Paul Blest, Splitter (2018): '[Facebook Partnering With Think Tank Funded By Saudi Arabia and Raytheon to Fight 'Disinformation'](#)'

³⁵ Katie Harbath, Facebook (2018): '[Announcing New Election Partnership with the Atlantic Council](#)'

³⁶ Digital Forensic Research Lab, Medium (2018): '[Why We're Partnering With Facebook on Election Integrity](#)'

³⁷ Eric Lipton, The New York Times (2014): '[Foreign Powers Buy Influence at Think Tanks](#)'

pages posted content with strong bias for the government in Tehran and against the ‘West’ and regional neighbours, such as Saudi Arabia and Israel.”³⁸

Adam Johnson reporting for media watch group FAIR said: “Even if one thinks the Atlantic Council can be trusted—and its murderers’ row of spooks, dictators and corporate donors won’t influence its objectivity—at the very least readers should know who’s helping bankroll groups that get to define what the most influential media platform in the history of the world deems “fact and fiction.” These are deeply important and difficult epistemological questions. Questions that will shape the very nature of what news we see and what news we don’t; questions in urgent need of interrogation and introspection—not mindless press releases.”³⁹

In a following round of Facebook’s ‘misinformation’ culling, Nathaniel Gleicher, a former prosecutor with the US Justice Department, was tasked with “ridding Facebook of foreign trolls and state-run disinformation campaigns of the sort that wreaked havoc on the 2016 US presidential election,”⁴⁰ overseeing 30,000 employees assigned to Facebook’s security and safety team.

In a serious conflict of interest, Gleicher is also a senior associate at foreign policy think tank Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)⁴¹. CSIS is funded by oil & gas companies, corporations in the military industrial complex, weapons manufacturers, and governments of countries such as Japan, the United Arab Emirates, the US and Taiwan.⁴²

Respected journalist Tim Shorrock: “I’ve closely observed its [CSIS] enormous influence on U.S. policy on Asia and in particular Japan and Korea, and it’s abundantly clear that everything it does reflects the interests of its government and corporate donors, which include every major U.S. weapons contractor... On the technology and cybersecurity side, where Gleicher is involved, those interests would be some of the largest U.S. intelligence contractors who donate to CSIS. They include Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, General Dynamics, L-3 and Booz Allen Hamilton... Inevitably, CSIS is their voice — hidden behind a pretence of objectivity.”⁴³

Facebook’s account purges have evolved from targeting Russia and Iran based users, to now shutting down journalists, independent US media outlets and activists. Respected independent journalists with tens of thousands to even millions of followers, were shut down with no warning or explanation.

Ford Fischer, founder of the media startup News2Share told Sputnik News: “This attack was a long time coming. Facebook has been slowly clamping down on independent media... Today, hundreds of pages belonging to the family of independent media, especially those that question state authority, were removed

³⁸ Julia Carrie Wong, The Guardian (2019): [‘Facebook and Twitter removed hundreds of accounts linked to Iran, Russia and Venezuela’](#)

³⁹ Adam Johnson, FAIR (2018): [‘Media Ignore Government Influence of Facebook’s Plan to Fight Government Influence’](#)

⁴⁰ Donie O’Sullivan, CNN (2018): [‘Exclusive: Meet Facebook’s top troll hunter’](#)

⁴¹ CSIS, [Nathaniel J. Gleicher](#)

⁴² Center for Strategic and International Studies: [‘Corporation and Trade Association Donors’](#)

⁴³ Alexander Rubinstein, Mintpress (2019): [‘Facebook’s Troll Hunter in Chief Nathaniel Gleicher Tied to Neocon Think Tank’](#)

without explanation. This is just one step further toward the total state and corporate takeover of what you're allowed to think.”⁴⁴

Nicholas Bernanbe, founder of The Anti-Media told Sputnik News: “Our approach generally is to cover stories and angles that corporate media underreport or misreport and to amplify activist and anti-war voices and stories. All of our content is professionally fact-checked and edited... I got into this line of work because I felt there was a need for media that challenged mainstream assumptions and biases in politics. I wanted to shed light on corruption and wrongdoing against oppressed peoples and cover the harsh truth about American foreign policy....Over the last 28 days, we reached 7,088,000 people on Facebook.

The timing of this purge is rather dubious in my view, coming shortly before the midterm elections. This could be an attempt by Facebook itself to affect the outcome of the coming elections. The Twitter suspension caught me by surprise. I can only speculate that these suspensions were a coordinated effort to stifle our message ahead of the coming elections.”

In August 2018, Saudi prosecutors were seeking the death penalty for a 29 year old woman political activist. The same time the news broke, Facebook initiated a crackdown on anti-Saudi accounts. The crackdown was directed by information provided by cyber-security firm ‘FireEye’, which informed Facebook, Twitter and Google/ Youtube about the ‘misinformation’ accounts- on the same day news surfaced about Saudi Arabia’s beheading plans.⁴⁵ The CIA’s investment arm In-Q-Tel has a strategic partnership with FireEye.⁴⁶

FireEye’s intelligence resulted in a wave of Facebook bans targeting allegedly “coordinated inauthentic behaviour” apparently emanating from Russian and Iranian governments.

Some of the accounts were removed for “recent activity focused on politics in Syria and Ukraine”, including media outlets which the Atlantic Council identified were covertly spreading pro-Russian or pro-Assad content.⁴⁷

After experiencing Facebook temporarily unpublishing her independent media organisation’s Facebook page, journalist and host of ‘The Empire Files’ Abby Martin told Sputnik News: “The shuttering of progressive media amidst the ‘fake news’ and Russiagate hysteria is what activists been warning all along — tech companies, working in concert with think tanks stacked with CIA officials and defence contractors, shouldn't have the power to curate our reality to make those already rendered invisible even more obsolete...”⁴⁸

Neither Facebook, the Digital Forensic Research Lab or Nathaniel Gleicher appear to have made any attempt to quell misinformation from US based companies such as Centcom, which has contracted with the US military to develop misinformation software.

⁴⁴ Sputnik News (2018): [‘Exclusive: Meet the Reporters Whose Pages Were Shut Down By Facebook’](#)

⁴⁵ Randi Nord, Mintpress (2018): [‘Saudis Move to Behead Female Activist as Facebook Censors Anti-Saudi Content’](#)

⁴⁶ In-Q-Tel, Press Releases (2009): [‘In-Q-Tel Invests in FireEye to Advance Cyber Security in the U.S. Intelligence Community’](#)

⁴⁷ Facebook (2018): [‘Taking Down More Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour’](#)

⁴⁸ Natalia Seliverstova, Sputnik News (2018): [‘CIA-Backed Firm Tipped Off Facebook to ‘Inauthentic’ Accounts’](#)

The Guardian reported Centcom's software allows US personnel to manage multiple online personas, developing false online personalities with convincing backgrounds, history and supporting details. The Guardian's article stated this software "will let [the US military] secretly manipulate social media sites by using fake online personas to influence internet conversations and spread pro-American propaganda." The article was later amended to remove references to Facebook and Twitter.⁴⁹

Behavioural research psychologist Dr Robert Epstein, has extensively research social media platforms, including Facebook. He says, "Facebook is a serious threat to democracy not because of the ads that companies buy on its platform, but because of its unprecedented power to determine what news and information more than 2 billion people see every day."⁵⁰ Dr Epstein has identified at least five techniques Facebook can use to tip elections without people knowing.⁵¹

Jonathan Taplin's book 'Move Fast and Break Things: How Google, Facebook and Amazon have Cornered Culture and Undermined Democracy',⁵² asserts a disturbing conclusion: that the failing systems of society are intended to be replaced by technological structures controlled by benevolent billionaires.

Taplin quotes Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari: "...human will lose their authority, and humanist practises such as democratic elections will become as obsolete as rain dances and flint knives."

Dr Robert Epstein writes that Big Tech oligarchs are well aware of their power.⁵³ A few days after the November 2016 election, Google's Eric Schmidt said "How people get their information, what they believe, what they don't, is, I think, the project for the next decade..."⁵⁴

UK Intelligence and Social Media

In 2014, documents released by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed the UK intelligence agency GCHQ employed sophisticated tools to manipulate social media and website traffic.

The Guardian reported these were:

- Gateway: the "ability to artificially increase traffic to a website".
- Clean Sweep: which "masquerade[s] Facebook wall posts for individuals or entire countries".
- Scrapheap Challenge: for "perfect spoofing of emails from BlackBerry targets".
- Underpass: to "change outcome of online polls".
- Spring Bishop: to find "private photos of targets on Facebook".

The Guardian reported "The document also details a range of programs designed to collect and store public postings from Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google+, and to make automated postings on several of the

⁴⁹ Nick Fielding and Ian Cobain, The Guardian (2011): '[Revealed: US spy operation that manipulates social media](#)'

⁵⁰ Robert Epstein, The Epoch Times (2019): '[Zucked Again: Zuckerberg's Proposal for Regulating the Internet is Self-Serving](#)'

⁵¹ Robert Epstein, Quartz (2016): '[Five subtle ways Facebook could influence the US presidential election this fall](#)'

⁵² Jonathan Taplin: '[Move Fast and Break Things](#)'

⁵³ Robert Epstein, The Hill (2017): '[Is it still possible to stop 'Big Tech' from killing democracy?](#)'

⁵⁴ The New York Times Live Events (2016): '[DealBook 2016: Artificial Intelligence](#)'

social networks. Capabilities to boost views of YouTube videos, or to boost the circulation of particular messages are also detailed.”⁵⁵

Fake News

Dr Robert Epstein’s 2017 article: ‘Fake News Is A Fake Problem’,⁵⁶ says that “efforts by Google, Facebook and others to try to suppress fake news are potentially more harmful than fake news itself.” Dr Epstein states that the influence of ‘fake news’ is limited due to its inherent competitive and visible nature:

1. Fake news is competitive: “It is exactly like billboards and TV commercials — many of which also contain false claims. For every fake news story you post about me, I can post two about you... Mud-slinging is endemic to politics and always will be, and no algorithm will ever stop it... fake news is competitive, so rapid proliferation works for all parties; it doesn’t inherently favour one party over another”.

2. Fake news is visible: “...fake news stories are visible sources of influence. When, through Facebook’s newsfeed or Google’s search engine, you come across a story claiming that Hillary Clinton is a Martian, you know you are being influenced. You can see the story in front of you, just as you can see a physical newspaper or a billboard or TV commercial. Visible sources of influence impact people quite predictably: people pay attention to information that supports their biases and beliefs, and they ignore or reject the rest.”

Epstein argues that far more dangerous variants of ‘fake news’ are types of influence that are unseen. He refers to his research exposing algorithmic manipulation and bias by Google and Facebook, “which are entirely invisible to most people and which are unprecedented in human history... These types of influence are nothing like billboards or fake news stories because virtually no one can detect the bias, and when people can’t see sources of influence, they mistakenly conclude they are making up their own minds.”

Epstein refers to a recent study by Jason L. Nelson which found that the ‘fake news’ audience is real, but is about “tiny” - with the audience about 10 times smaller than the average audience.⁵⁷

Epstein says, “Whatever that proportion is, let’s put this issue into perspective: Favoritism in search results and search suggestions is likely affecting billions of people every day without their knowledge. As sources of influence, news stories in general and fake news stories in particular are relatively trivial in their impact.”

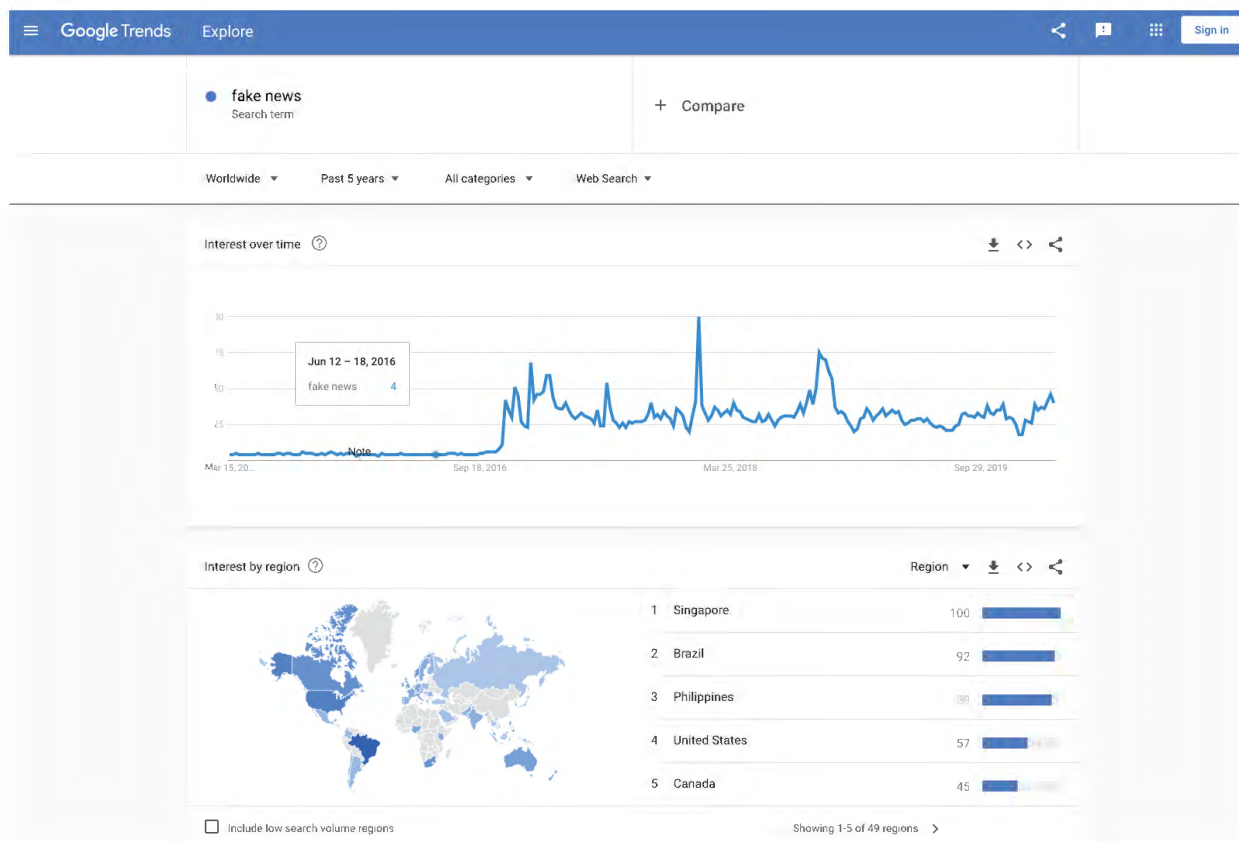
The term ‘fake news’ has accompanied the rise of wide attention and government and corporate concern towards ‘misinformation’, usually postulated as a ‘threat to democracy’.

The phrase ‘fake news’ appears to have suddenly catapulted into the cultural lexicon. Google Trends analytics reveal that the search term ‘fake news’, experienced a sudden and exponential hike at the beginning of November, 2016, the week of the US Presidential election.

⁵⁵ James Ball, The Guardian (2014): ‘[GCHQ has tools to manipulate online information, leaked documents show](#)’

⁵⁶ Robert Epstein, Medium (2017): ‘[Fake News Is a Fake Problem](#)’

⁵⁷ Jacob L. Nelson, Columbia Journalism Review: ‘[Is ‘fake news’ a fake problem?](#)’



A search of news articles during the same period and the months following show a sudden slew of mainstream media articles, governments and corporations very concerned about the (apparently new) phenomenon of ‘fake news’.

Eric Weinstein is a mathematician and economist with a PhD in mathematics and physics, and is also the managing director of Thiel Capital.

In an 2018 interview, Weinstein critiqued the sudden emergence of the ‘fake news’ narrative: “What happened after the election, the sudden emergence of this mania over fake news, I found incredibly inauthentic. And if I go back, to real things that we found out, through the Church and Pike Commission⁵⁸, through Operation Mockingbird⁵⁹, about how pro intel worked, I’m concerned that I don’t know where these narratives are from...”

“I think it’s very important to ask where did the fake news narrative explode from? Because it didn’t feel real to me, it felt like exactly when we took over the Tobacco Institute Archives. They have an entire playbook of how to manipulate people at scale. And that was exactly what we needed: we needed an enemy, we needed to be mobilised, we needed to [be] begging for safety - save us from fake news, save us from Russian interference.”⁶⁰

In a 2017 interview with the Rubin Report, Weinstein referenced the ‘fake news’ phenomenon:

⁵⁸ Thomas Young, Brookings (2015): [‘40 years ago, Church Committee investigated Americans spying on Americans’](#)

⁵⁹ Claire Bernish, Free Thought Project (2016): [US Govt just legalised Operation Mockingbird - FBI can now impersonate the media’](#)

⁶⁰ Eric Weinstein, Consumer Technology Association 2018: [‘The Future of News’](#)

"I don't believe that it had an authentic source... it was an inauthentic, sudden anomaly.... Fake news came out too quickly, too unified..." Weinstein observed the "obvious inauthenticity of what are considered to be the pillars of the fourth estate [journalism or the media]."⁶¹

Weinstein says "The fake news narrative itself is a higher form of fake news pointed at lower forms. It's the fakery of the elite..."⁶² Weinstein states in the Rubin Report interview that the true issue isn't 'fake news', but is actually about the monopoly over fake news.

Weinstein has identified four kinds of 'fake news'. All categories are intended to lead to deliberate error.

1. **False/fake news:** "The type which all of these other institutions would like us to synonymise with fake news... which is somebody just 'making it up'." (Non-factual, pseudoscience, conspiracy theories)
2. **Narrative driven:** "An organisation is telling a prefabricated story with an arc, to which facts are fit." (Selective facts, biased coverage)
3. **Algorithmic driven:** "News algorithms that present people with a picture of the world but are 'tweaked' to mislead you for the benefit of others." (Social media or newsfeed algorithms)
4. **Institutional driven:** Involves institutions such as universities "which can release what they claim to be objective fact... very often that news is just some construct [to] filter reality."

Weinstein states that the false or 'fake news' is not as important to address as 'narrative' or 'algorithmically' driven news: "If you say 'all the news that's fit to print' but you assiduously avoid reporting a story that is counter-narrative to your newspaper. Your newspaper shouldn't have a narrative because the facts haven't come in. Why do you have a narrative arc that lasts six months that's pre-planned by a group of editors that lasts six months when you don't know what the truth is yet? This is really where things are dangerous."⁶³

Shevek Gurgeh reported on Weinstein's '4 Kinds of Fake News': "Fake news, if it is defined as above [as per Weinstein], is prevalent throughout the media — the first kind [fake news] is just blatant, and makes no attempt to hide its agenda. The fake news employed by governments and corporations, as Weinstein describes it, is "fact-based" fake news (selective facts and bias, not blatant deceit) — and Weinstein warns that the uncontrolled nature of openly false news, and the threat it poses to authority, could be used to justify new regulations and algorithms to control what can be accessed and how."⁶⁴

Gurgeh references Noam Chomsky's and Edward Herman's 1988 'Manufacturing Consent', which outlines the 'Propaganda Model', a "mechanism by which Western democracies, in particular the US, [and including Australia] align the public's viewpoints with that of the ruling elite. They postulated that corporate media, although independent, is still within the influence of government, and said influence is achieved through a "set of news filters" which include:

⁶¹ Rubin Report: '[The 4 Kinds of Fake News](#)'

⁶² Eric Weinstein, [Tweet 7/12/16](#)

⁶³ Eric Weinstein, Consumer Technology Association 2018: '[The Future of News](#)'

⁶⁴ Shevek Gurgeh, Medium (2017): '[The Fake News Spectrum](#)'

1. The size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms
2. Advertising as the primary income source of the mass media
3. The reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and "experts" funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power
4. Negative commentary and attacks on stories which do not align with government interests, termed "flak" - as a means of disciplining the media
5. A common and constant enemy, for example: "anticommunism" as a national religion and control mechanism.

"These elements interact with and reinforce each other. The raw material of news must pass through successive filters, leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print. They fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first place, and they explain the basis and operations of what amount to propaganda campaigns." (Chomsky & Herman, 1988)

'Manufacturing Consent' states "The five filters narrow the range of news that passes through the gates, and even more sharply limit what can become "big news," subject to sustained news campaigns. By definition, news from primary establishment sources meets one major filter requirement and is readily accommodated by the mass media. Messages from and about dissidents and weak, unorganized individuals and groups, domestic and foreign, are at an initial disadvantage in sourcing costs and credibility, and they often do not comport with the ideology or interests of the gatekeepers and other powerful parties that influence the filtering process. Thus, for example, the torture of political prisoners and the attack on trade unions in Turkey will be pressed on the media only by human rights activists and groups that have little political leverage."

"The elite domination of the media and marginalization of dissidents that results from the operation of these filters occurs so naturally that media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news "objectively" and on the basis of professional news values. Within the limits of the filter constraints they often are objective; the constraints are so powerful, and are built into the system in such a fundamental way, that alternative bases of news choices are hardly imaginable... the media do not stop to ponder the bias that is inherent in the priority assigned to government-supplied raw material, or the possibility that the government might be manipulating the news, imposing its own agenda, and deliberately diverting attention from other material. It requires a macro, alongside a micro- (story-by-story), view of media operations, to see the pattern of manipulation and systematic bias."

"The relation between power and sourcing extends beyond official and corporate provision of day-to-day news to shaping the supply of "experts." The dominance of official sources is weakened by the existence of highly respectable unofficial sources that give dissident views with great authority. This problem is alleviated by "co-opting the experts"-i.e., putting them on the payroll as consultants, funding their research, and organizing think tanks that will hire them directly and help disseminate their messages. In this way bias may be structured, and the supply of experts may be skewed in the direction desired by the government and "the market." As Henry Kissinger has pointed out, in this "age of the expert," the "constituency" of the expert is "those who have a vested interest in commonly held opinions; elaborating and defining its consensus at a high level has, after all,

made him an expert." It is therefore appropriate that this restructuring has taken place to allow the commonly held opinions (meaning those that are functional for elite interests) to continue to prevail."⁶⁵

Australia, foreign interference and 'fake news'

I have been curious about the macro socio-economic background surrounding the growing concern that Australia's 'democracy and values' are at risk from 'foreign interference'.

I have examined related matters, the sources of 'foreign interference' reporting and independent commentary on these matters, to attempt to construct a framework through which the overall intention of proposing this Committee may be surmised.

In 2019, Reuters reported that the appointment of the Senate Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media "comes amid heightened Australian concerns that China is seeking to interfere in Canberra's affairs, and after U.S. intelligence analysts found Russia had used social media to try and influence the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election."⁶⁶

Reuters reported: "No specific national threat was mentioned, but activity suspected to have been undertaken by China has come under increasing scrutiny in Australia in recent years.... China denies seeking to sway Australia, accusing the government of adopting a "Cold War mentality".

"The rise of 'fake news' and misinformation campaigns present a very real and present danger to democracy not only in Australia, but across the globe," Labor lawmaker Penny Wong said. "We must protect our democracy from malicious foreign actors."

This Committee was formed to "inquire into and report on the risk posed to Australia's democracy by foreign interference through social media, with particular reference to: use of social media for purposes that undermine Australia's democracy and values, including the spread of misinformation", also referencing "the risk posed to Australia's democracy and values..."

Around the time that this Committee was appointed, I note there were several prominent news stories widely circulated, which concerned Australia and China relations. These regarded:

- Alleged Chinese foreign espionage agents in Australia
- Reports that Chinese spies were influencing Australian universities
- Reports that Chinese agents had hacked Australian government software
- Allegations of China committing human rights abuses against Uyghurs

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) is a think tank which was established in 2001 by the Howard government, and is highly influential in the Australian government's foreign policy decisions. ASPI's sponsors include weapons manufacturers such as Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, and MBDA Missile Systems.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (1988): '[A Propaganda Model, Excerpted from Manufacturing Consent](#)'

⁶⁶ Colin Packham, Reuters (2019): '[Australia to probe foreign interference through social media platforms](#)'

⁶⁷ Australian Strategic Policy Institute: [Sponsors](#)

ASPI is heavily referenced as an authoritative source in Australian media and has produced a number of publications and reports that focus on 'strategic implications' of Australia/China relations including: 'The China Defence Universities Tracker', 'Uyghurs for sale', 'Mapping China's Tech Giants', 'The many ways in which China is pushing us around... without resistance', 'China everywhere' and 'How the geopolitical partnership with China and Russia threatens the West'.

The Australian Financial Review described ASPI as 'the think tank behind Australia's changing view of China'. The AFR noted the funding ASPI receives from foreign States: "The Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme, set up to monitor Chinese government influence in Australia, ironically captures some more recent sources of ASPI funding, including NATO, the US State Department and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office."

"But ASPI, which is funded by the Department of Defence, foreign governments and military contractors, has also been accused of fomenting anti-China hysteria, to the alleged benefit of its benefactors..."

Former NSW premier Bob Carr has accused it of pumping out a "one-sided, pro-American view of the world". Veteran foreign editor Tony Walker has slammed its "dystopian worldview" which "leaves little room for viewing China as a potential partner". "It lacks integrity and brings shame to Australia," says retired former DFAT chief and ex-Qantas CEO John Menadue. "I see it as very much the architect of the China threat theory in Australia", adds ex-ambassador to China turned Beijing-based business consultant Geoff Raby."⁶⁸

The US 2017 'National Security Strategy of the United States of America', states "China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. ... China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests... To prevail, we must integrate all elements of America's national power—political, economic, and military. Our allies and partners must also contribute the capabilities, and demonstrate the will, to confront shared threats. Experience suggests that the willingness of rivals to abandon or forgo aggression depends on their perception of U.S. strength and the vitality of our alliances."⁶⁹

By its own admission, the US considers that 'vitality of alliances' such as those with Australia, are essential to the success of its foreign policy. Allies must demonstrate 'the will' to confront *shared threats*. It serves the interests of US foreign policy to convince Australians that China is a shared threat.

In 2017, independent Australian public commentator, former Diplomat and Officer of the Order of Australia, John Menadue reported: "Agents of influence, presumably Chinese, are in the news. But the really important agents of influence are organisations linked 'hip to hip' to the US and its military/industrial complex. One of these is the Australian Strategic Policy Institute which is an enthusiastic supporter of almost all things American. It pretends it is an independent think tank... ASPI's pro-American and anti-Chinese views reflect the attitude of the 'Australia/US defence intelligence complex' (AUSDIC)."⁷⁰

Menadue reported ASPI representatives have incorrectly asserted that China was responsible for hacking Australian government websites and warned that "the H-6K Chinese bombers based in the Spratly Islands

⁶⁸ Myriam Robin, Australian Financial Review (2020): '[The think tank behind Australia's changing view of China](#)'

⁶⁹ [National Security Strategy of the United States of America](#) (2017)

⁷⁰ John Menadue, Michael West Media (2017): '[Agents of influence - what about the Australian Strategic Policy Institute?](#)'

could threaten Australia and we had to consider stepping up our missile defence, with the help of US Patriot missiles.”

Menadue notes: “In 1961, President Eisenhower warned Americans about the power of the military and industrial complex... That incestuous complex including “think tanks” has enormous influence in the US but also around the world. The US is scarcely ever at peace. In part that is due to the responsibilities that US Presidents feel have been imposed upon them but it is also driven by the power of vested defence/military interests throughout the US. War is in the American DNA.

We have the same problem, although on a smaller scale with the same close relationships between “think tanks” like ASPI, the Department of Defence in Australia, the intelligence community and our defence industry. What makes that all the more concerning is that our defence policy is being increasingly contracted out to the US, a “dangerous ally” as Malcolm Fraser warned us.”

“ASPI provides good analysis, but it is very unlikely to come to conclusions and recommendations that would embarrass or annoy the Department of Defence, defence suppliers, the Australian Government or the US government. Culturally, it is conditioned to a view of the world dominated by the US. Its mindset makes it difficult for it to adjust to the seismic shift in world power with the rise of China.”

“More importantly ASPI is not in the habit in recent years of speaking truth to power. It has seriously departed from the original charter... It acts like a foreign entity.”

In February 2020, the AFR’s Myriam Robin reported on Labor Senator Kim Carr’s speech in the Senate condemning “hawks intending on fighting a new cold war”. Senator Carr referenced the ASPI, which he said was receiving funding from the US State Department to track Chinese collaborations with Australian universities, “vilifying and denigrating” Australian researchers and their work.”⁷¹

In October 2019, Senator Carr published ‘An Academic Iron Curtain?’, writing that Australia’s Department of Defence’s “hawks appear to be using proxies, including right-wing thinktanks... [which] often get quoted in the mainstream media, conjuring up some disastrous outcome from the fact that Chinese graduate students sometimes come to Australia to undertake their doctoral research.”

“That said, however, the hawks are being highly selective, indeed quite arbitrary, in their focus on the PRC [People’s Republic of China]. After all, it is not the only authoritarian state with a record of human rights abuses whose students visit this country and undertake research in PhD programs. Yet strangely, nothing is said about the students who come here from the Middle East or Africa. Apparently, it is only the PRC whose treatment of dissidents and minorities is cause for concern. Nor do the Sinophobes acknowledge that there is more than one state with the technological capacity to threaten Australia’s cybersecurity. Russia and the United States could all do so.” Senator Carr argues that “The Balkanisation of international research is not in Australia’s interest”.⁷²

Australia’s ABC News frequently uses ASPI representatives as sources and as an authority in its reporting. In one case, the ABC reported on China’s alleged human rights violations in its treatment of Uyghurs. The ABC reported that the ASPI had analysed a video which had “surfaced online showing hundreds of Uyghur men

⁷¹ Myriam Robin, Australian Financial Review (2020): ‘[The think tank behind Australia’s changing view of China](#)’

⁷² Senator Kim Carr, (2019): ‘[An Academic Iron Curtain?](#)’

shackled and blindfolded awaiting transport to a detention centre... The video has been analysed by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, which suggested it was genuine.”⁷³

Independent journalist Ajit Singh has reported on the Uyghur human rights issue in his piece ‘Inside the World Uyghur Congress: The US-backed right-wing regime network seeking the ‘fall of China’.’⁷⁴

Singh writes, “In recent years, few stories have generated as much outrage in the West as the condition of Uyghur Muslims in China. Reporting on the issue is typically represented through seemingly spontaneous leaks of information and expressions of resistance by Uyghur human rights activists struggling to be heard against a tyrannical Chinese government.

True or not, nearly everything that appears in Western media accounts of China’s Uyghur Muslims is the product of a carefully conceived media campaign generated by an apparatus of right-wing, anti-communist Uyghur separatists funded and trained by the US government.

A central gear in Washington’s new Cold War against China, this network has a long history of relationships with the US national security state and far-right ultra-nationalists.”

Singh reports organisations pushing this narrative include the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), which poses as a ‘grassroots organisation’, but is in fact an international umbrella organisation backed and funded by the US government. The WUC and its numerous Uyghur-focused affiliates lobby US and Western politicians to “intensify their new Cold War agenda by enacting economic sanctions and curbing ties with China.”

Past WUC president Erkin Alpektin has previously stated that “Ten years ago no one believed that the USSR would fall apart, now you can see that... Today the same situation applies to China. We believe in the not too distant future we will see the fall of China and the independence of East Turkestan.”

Current President of the WUC Dolkun Isa has emphasized “the Uyghurs’ resistance to communism” and that “we will not stop our work until we consign this destructive ideology, in the words of Ronald Reagan, to ‘the ash heap of history.’”

Sources for the claims of China’s human rights abuses are largely based on two studies. Investigative journalists Ajit Singh and Max Blumenthal reported that “a closer look at these papers reveals US government backing, absurdly shoddy methodologies, and a rapture-ready evangelical researcher named Adrian Zenz.”⁷⁵

⁷³ Amy Greenbank, ABC News (2019): [‘China-based academic says Australia is naive to rely on US, after Morrison’s comments on trade’](#)

⁷⁴ Ajit Singh, The Grayzone (2020): [‘Inside the World Uyghur Congress: The US-backed right-wing regime change network seeking the ‘fall of China’](#)

⁷⁵ Ajit Singh and Max Blumenthal, The Grayzone (2019): [‘China detaining millions of Uyghurs? Serious problems with claims by US-backed NGO and far right researcher ‘led by God’ against Beijing’](#)

In November 2019, widespread reporting about foreign espionage threats from China centred around a self-proclaimed Chinese spy, Wang Liqiang, who ABC News said “could be the greatest threat to Australian security since Petrov defection of the 1950s”.⁷⁶

The Australian reported that “ASPI executive director Peter Jennings said Wang’s confession had given Australian agencies an unprecedented insight into Beijing’s espionage activities. “We have, for the first time, direct and clear understandings from a Chinese intelligence operator himself about what China is doing in this country,” he said.”

However, “In the end it took Australian security agencies less than a week to conclude self-proclaimed Chinese spy Wang Liqiang was not a highly trained intelligence operative dispatched by Beijing to wreak havoc on the nation’s enemies and was, at most, a bit player on the fringes of the espionage community.”⁷⁷

The Australian reported Liberal MP Andrew Hastie “was involved in brokering Wang’s contact with ASIO”. Mr Hastie, Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Intelligence and Security, was in the US at the ‘Australian American Leadership Dialogue’, when he reportedly received an message about Mr Wang’s alleged Chinese intelligence operations in Australia. Mr Hastie used US military communications equipment to communicate with ASIO and arrange Mr Wang’s contact with the organisation.

The Australian reported that Mr Hastie also appeared on a 60 Minutes broadcast with the ‘alleged spy’ Wang Liqiang, calling him “a friend of democracy... anyone’s who’s willing to assist us in defending our sovereignty deserves our protection.”

Mr Wang was not the first alleged conspiratorial actor identified by Mr Hastie. In May 2018, Mr Hastie used a speech in Federal Parliament to identify Chinese-Australian billionaire Chau Chak Wing, as the alleged “co-conspirator 3” in a 2015 American bribery case.

Mr Hastie said: “In Australia it is clear that the Chinese Communist Party is working to covertly interfere with our media and universities and also to influence our political processes and public debates... As chair of the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security I led a delegation to the United States last month to discuss our espionage and foreign interference legislation with US counterparts. During discussions with United States authorities I confirmed the long-suspected identity of CC-3.”⁷⁸ The delegation met with agencies such as the CIA, FBI and US Department of State.⁷⁹

Legal representatives for Mr Wing stated in a Federal Court defamation case against the ABC that “Whatever Mr Hastie MP may have been told (leaving aside that, even if he had said this outside the House, it would have

⁷⁶ Tony Walker, ABC News (2019): ‘Chinese spy case could be the greatest threat to Australian security since Petrov defection of the 1950s’

⁷⁷ Paul Maley, The Australian (2019): ‘Wang Liqiang: Beijing bit player at best as cloak-and-dagger claims fall away’

⁷⁸ Parliament of Australia, Federation Chamber, Andrew Hastie MP

⁷⁹ Parliament of Australia, Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, Annual Report 2017-18

been hearsay and incapable of being evidence of the truth of the assertion)... there is no other matter particularised to connect the identity of CC-3 with his being Dr Wing".⁸⁰

Mr Hastie has been publicly outspoken in his opposition to China, with the ABC reporting on comments Mr Hastie made "linking the West's handling of China's rise to a failure to contain the advance of Nazi Germany."⁸¹

Mr Hastie has also published writings warning that "authoritarian regimes like the Russian Federation or the People's Republic of China conduct hybrid and political warfare operations in the pursuit of strategic objectives, exploiting the norms and global peace built by the United States and its allies..."

In stark contrast to former Diplomat John Menadue, who stated "The US is scarcely ever at peace"⁸², Mr Hastie's publication claimed that the US has been responsible for building 'global peace'. This claim is extraordinary, given the plethora of revelations of US war crimes and its apparent pathological lying about them, which continues unabated.^{83 84}

Mr Hastie wrote "We must take assertive diplomatic, economic and covert measures to push back against authoritarian states that undermine the global order... we must understand our adversaries and become practitioners of hybrid and political warfare ourselves."

"Values must be articulated. Core interests must be defined... A powerful narrative, [that] supports our own values... must be constructed... democracies should develop and establish expertise in hybrid and political warfare.... [Requiring skills] for the disruption of rival subversive campaigns, and for the conduct of our own – where necessary."

"...we must build an array of political warfare instruments. This would include cyber, diplomatic, information, and media capabilities. These are important for informing domestic public about the nature and scale of the challenge, but also for exposing to international publics the activities of authoritarian regimes. These activities include corruption, espionage, fake news, and human rights abuses."⁸⁵

I find Mr Hastie's words ominous and deeply concerning.

Mr Hastie's words resemble those of the head of the UK military, General Nick Carter, describing the 77th Brigade (Britain's 'psychological warfare' unit) and its work influencing social media platforms as "information

⁸⁰ Federal Court of Australia, *Wing v The Australian Broadcasting Corporation* (2018)

⁸¹ Eliza Laschon, ABC News (2019): "[Liberal MP Andrew Hastie condemned by China after comparing Beijing's rise to threat from Nazi Germany](#)"

⁸² John Menadue, Michael West Media (2017): "[Agents of influence - what about the Australian Strategic Policy Institute?](#)"

⁸³ Peter Beaumont, The Guardian: "[Afghanistan papers reveal US public were misled about unwinnable war](#)"

⁸⁴ Gordon Duff, Veterans Today (2015): "[US Government's Pathological Lies](#)"

⁸⁵ Andrew Hastie, The Sydney Morning Herald (2019): "[Challenge to democracy to counter Russia, China](#)"

warfare”, giving the British military “the capability to compete in the war of narratives at the tactical level”, shaping perceptions of conflict.⁸⁶

A Member of Australian Parliament is openly advocating for narrative management, subversive campaigns and ‘political warfare instruments’, which include utilising ‘diplomatic and media capabilities’. A representative of the State openly speaking of using the media for political warfare, implies he considers that the State has control over said media. Mr Hastie demonstrates that Australian media and journalists are apparently not considered independent or impartial, but tools of the government, to be used for ‘political warfare’. I am appalled.

Independent journalist Caitlin Johnstone writes: “There is an immense narrative management campaign dedicated to controlling what people think about what’s happening in Syria, aimed not solely at advancing the longstanding regime change agenda of the US-centralized empire but at protecting the credibility of the warmongering government and media institutions who the public is growing increasingly skeptical of in a post-Iraq invasion information age. If people become doubtful in the propaganda machine which greases the gears of war, then warmongering itself will become impossible to carry out without waking the masses up from the narrative control matrix they’ve worked so hard to lull us into. Without endless war, the empire will crumble.”⁸⁷

‘Fake news’ and the real threat to Australia’s democratic values

An Australian Parliament publication ‘Responding to fake news’, says that “Fake news is said to have influenced the 2016 US presidential election and UK European Union membership (Brexit).”⁸⁸

I find these official examples of ‘fake news’ interesting, given the following:

CIA officials were reported to have concluded that Russia intervened in the 2016 to help Donald Trump win the presidency.⁸⁹ Mintpress reported that “The CIA’s claims appear to dramatically undercut the rest of the government’s narrative, which includes a White House confirmation that there was no measurable increase in cyber activity around the election, nor any indication Russia had planned any malicious cyber activity for the US election.”⁹⁰

The following US ‘Russiagate’ media frenzy was promoted by ‘The Alliance for Securing Democracy’ a US State backed organisation regarded as “the most prominent of an array of information warfare initiatives that exploited public hysteria over supposed Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential elections.”^{91 92}

⁸⁶ Ian Cobain, Middle East Eye (2019): [‘Twitter executive for Middle East is British Army ‘psyops’ soldier’](#)

⁸⁷ Caitlin Johnstone (2019): [“Narrative Managers In Overdrive After Death of White Helmets Founder”](#)

⁸⁸ Luke Buckmaster and Tyson Wils, Social Policy, Parliament of Australia: [‘Responding to fake news’](#)

⁸⁹ Adam Entous, Ellen Nakashima and Greg Miller, Washingto Post, (2016): [‘Secret CIA assessment says Russia was trying to help Trump win White House’](#)

⁹⁰ Jason Ditz, Mintpress (2016): [‘CIA Claims Russia Intervened to Get Trump Elected’](#)

⁹¹ Alex Rubinstein, The Grayzone (2020): [‘State-backed Alliance for Securing Democracy disinfo shop falsely smears The Grayzone as ‘state-backed’](#)

⁹² Max Blumenthal, The Grayzone (2017): [‘McCarthyism Inc: Introducing the counter-terror ‘experts’ hyping Russian threats and undermining our civil liberties’](#)

The UK government appropriated 2 million pounds of taxpayer money to fund an ‘infowar unit’ against opposition Leader Jeremy Corbyn during the election period, which included Brexit issues.⁹³

An independent research project provided theoretical analysis of British media representations of Jeremy Corbyn during the election period. The analysis found over 75% of media coverage factually misrepresented Corbyn, who was “deligitimsed as a political actor from the moment he became a prominent candidate...”

The report authors said their findings raised “pressing ethical questions regarding the role of the media in a democracy. Certainly, democracies need their media to challenge power and offer robust debate, but when this transgresses into an antagonism that undermines legitimate political voices that dare to contest the current status quo, then it is not democracy that is served.”⁹⁴

In both the US and the UK example referenced in Parliament’s ‘Responding to fake news’ publication, ‘fake news’ or misinformation *came from domestic sources*.

Reuters reported that Senator Penny Wong, who moved the motion to appoint this Select Committee, said “The rise of ‘fake news’ and misinformation campaigns present a very real and present danger to democracy not only in Australia, but across the globe... We must protect our democracy from malicious foreign actors.”⁹⁵

The Committee inquiry references the “use of social media for purposes that undermine Australia’s democracy and values”.

To define Australia’s ‘democratic values’, I refer to the Australian government’s Museum of Australian Democracy.⁹⁶ The MoAD states that “the Australian democracy has at its heart, the following core defining values:

- freedom of election and being elected;
- freedom of assembly and political participation;
- freedom of speech, expression and religious belief;
- rule of law; and
- other basic human rights.”

I feel compelled to state that, aside from allegedly requiring protection from ‘fake news’ disseminated through social media by ‘malicious foreign actors’ (which I believe in this case are strongly implied to be China), Australian citizens face a serious and sustained threat to democratic values *from our own government*.

In December 2019, Australia’s democracy was downgraded from ‘open’ to ‘narrowed’, in line with the United States, Ghana and Botswana, by the CIVICUS Monitor- a collaborative effort between international human rights organisations which annually assess countries’ democratic freedoms.

⁹³ Ben Gelburn, The London Economic (2018): ‘Labour demand government explains \$2m taxpayers’ cash funding infowars unit which smeared Corbyn and Labour.’

⁹⁴ London School of Economics and Political Science (2019): ‘Journalistic Representations of Jeremy Corbyn in the British Press’

⁹⁵ Colin Packham, Reuters (2019): ‘Australia to probe foreign interference through social media platforms’

⁹⁶ Museum of Australian Democracy: ‘Australian democracy: an overview’

The CIVICUS report cited Australian Federal Police raids on journalists and media outlets, growing trend of silencing and prosecuting whistleblowers and increasing crackdown on peaceful protest, legislation passed which allowed enforcement authorities to force tech companies to hand over encrypted user information, as reasons for the downgrade.

The report found that only 59% of Australians were satisfied with how democracy is working.

SBS reported "The Human Rights Law Centre is concerned about the findings. "All of these restrictive policies add up. We need to draw a line in the sand and say 'enough'," said the Centre's Campaigns Director Tom Clarke. "Powerful politicians and their corporate backers don't always respect the rights of individual people or communities... We need to create an Australian Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms to help level the playing field."⁹⁷

In December 2019, the Australian National University's election study revealed that trust in government has reached an all time low, with only one in four Australians confidence in their political leaders and institutions. "I've been studying elections for 40 years, and never have I seen such poor returns for public trust in and satisfaction with democratic institutions," lead researcher Professor Ian McAllister said.

"There is widespread public concern about how our democracy is underperforming."⁹⁸

Human Rights Watch noted that "Authoritarian governments around the world use broadly drafted national security laws to silence human rights defenders, journalists, bloggers and critics of the government. Australia should not join them by having overly broad laws on the books that are open to misuse... The Australian government should be careful to protect the country's democratic freedoms, especially the right to freedom of opinion and expression."⁹⁹

Human Rights Watch criticised new espionage and foreign interference legislation enacted in 2018. "There is no public interest defence and no requirement of "intention to cause harm" as part of these offences. The vagueness of these provisions means anyone who receives or communicates politically sensitive information in a public manner could be guilty of one or more espionage offences. Human rights activist and journalists advocating or reporting on politically sensitive areas are particularly exposed."

Sydney Criminal Lawyers' journalist Paul Gregoire reported that "Home affairs Minister Peter Dutton quietly announced to the ABC a fortnight ago that the Morrison government's - often denied - push to turn the nation's international spying agency on its own citizens is close to finalisation.

Back in August 2014, then attorney general George Brandis first announced that the federal government was looking at implementing the metadata retention regime in relation to terrorists. Today, all Australians have their data stored by telcos that can be accessed by intelligence agencies.

⁹⁷ Velvet Winter, SBS The Feed (2019): 'Australia's democracy has been downgraded from 'open' to 'narrowed'

⁹⁸ SBS News (2019): 'Australians trust in government reaches new all-time low, study shows'

⁹⁹ Submission by Human Rights Watch to the Australian Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security on the Inquiry into the Impact of the Exercise of Law Enforcement and Intelligence Powers on the Freedom of the Press (2019)

Australia is the only western democracy in the world without a bill of rights, which means most of our rights aren't protected. And commentators have outlined that this means the rights eroding laws that have been enacted in the name of terrorism go much further in their reach than elsewhere."¹⁰⁰

Professor Terry Goldsworthy, Associate Professor in Criminology, at Bond University, stated that Minister Dutton's proposal "effectively suggests a blurring of the line between an externally focused defence organisation and internally focused law enforcement agencies. If the new powers are in line with those reported last year, they could potentially sideline the Attorney-General, and give the home affairs and defence ministers power in the approval process for use of the ASD's functions.

It would take powers primarily designed to defend Australia against external threats and use them for internal investigations against Australian citizens.

Australians should rightly be concerned about any shift to an intelligence or investigative model that is based on the introduction of greater powers on the one hand, and less oversight and governance on the other.

The case needs to be made that current laws and powers are ineffective and that there is a real need for any additional powers. Only then should serious consideration be given to the proposals outlined above. Issues of governance and transparency should be paramount in any realistic discussion of increasing the role and power of the ASD."¹⁰¹

It is my opinion that this Select Committee inquiry into the risks of 'fake news', may have been proposed to provide arbitrary justification for further erosion of the rights of Australians to freedom of expression, and further erosion to the freedom of the press. The justification of preventing 'fake news' 'misinformation and 'interference from malicious foreign actors' has been widely used in the US, the UK, Asia and Europe^{102 103 104} to enable intelligence agencies and Big Tech to collude in the silencing of dissent and alternative voices.

'Fake news' or misinformation is a misleading excuse to legislate on, given that, as I have demonstrated, narrative management is consistently practised by governments and mainstream media everywhere.

The most recent example is detailed research conducted by investigative journalist Mark Curtis: 'How the UK press is misinforming the public about Britain's role in the world'.

"Britain's national press consistently portrays Britain as a supporter of noble objectives such as human rights and democracy. The extraordinary extent to which the public is being misinformed about the UK's foreign and military policies is revealed in new statistical research... The research suggests that the public is being bombarded by views supporting the priorities of policy-makers. It also finds that there is only a very small space in the British press for critical, independent analysis and key facts about UK foreign policy."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Paul Gregoire, Sydney Criminal Lawyers (2020): '[Dutton Plans to Set Our International Spy Agency Upon Citizens](#)'

¹⁰¹ Terry Goldsworthy, The Conversation (2019): '[Why we should be wary of expanding powers of the Australian Signals Directorate](#)'

¹⁰² Daniel Funke and Daniela Flamini, Ponter (2018): '[A guide to anti-misinformation actions around the world](#)'

¹⁰³ New Scientist (2019): '[UK wants to curb fake news and cyberbullying with new internet laws](#)'

¹⁰⁴ Agence France-Presse, The Guardian (2019): '["Chilling": Singapore's 'fake news' law comes into effect](#)'

¹⁰⁵ Mark Curtis, Declassified UK (2020): '[How the UK press is misinforming the public about Britain's role in the world](#)'

Independent journalist Caitlin Johnstone says, “Whoever controls the narrative controls the world. Narrative control comes before any other priority the empire might have; before resources, before land, before even war itself. Our rulers and their goons will protect their ability to control the story of what’s happening tooth and claw. It’s up to us to see through their lies and bring an end to the lie factory.”¹⁰⁶

Solutions

In order to address ‘the risk posed to Australia’s democracy by foreign interference through social media’, through ‘fake news’ or misinformation that may ‘undermine Australia’s democracy and values’, I have a number of suggestions for the Committee to consider.

- Support local and independent journalism
- Protect free speech and support diverse media
- Pursue a legal environment which protects journalists, whistleblowers and the free press
- Support freedom of internet expression, without arbitrary regulation
- Less concentrated ownership of media, examine conflicts of interest
- Examine competitive pressures on the media and independent journalism
- Demand Google’s index be made public
- Demand transparency in Wikipedia’s editorial process
- Acknowledge the varied State and commercial actors which engage in misinformation
- Approach the concept of ‘misinformation’ or ‘fake news’ with a more nuanced perspective
- Politicians should use social media to transparently engage with their constituents

Or perhaps an even simpler suggestion proposed by Eric Weinstein may be appropriate: “Any traditional “news” outfit wanting to destroy fake news can at any time just sell pure news to the public. That *none* even try tells all.”¹⁰⁷

Support local and independent journalism

The Council of Europe’s 2018 report ‘State of Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law’¹⁰⁸, identified independent journalism is a way to combat misinformation:

“The collapse of local journalism is viewed as an important reason why mis- and disinformation have taken hold, as these grow much faster among marginalised communities who do not feel represented in the mainstream media. Media initiatives that draw these communities into the public communication space and help diversify content through the amplification of alternative and counter-narratives are therefore one means of tackling “information pollution”.

¹⁰⁶ Caitlin Johnstone (2019): ‘[Narrative Managers in Overdrive After Death of White Helmets Founder](#)’

¹⁰⁷ Eric Weinstein, [Tweet 7/12/2016](#)

¹⁰⁸ The Council of Europe (2018): ‘[State of Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law: Role of institutions, Treats to institutions](#)’

I request that the Committee examines current government and community funding of independent journalists and local media. While I believe the ABC plays an important part in Australia's media landscape, it is my opinion that it has become too one-sided in its narrative, overly funded through taxpayer contributions and its funding model should be broken up.

It is my opinion that multiple, less centralised public news outlets, which are independent and local, may help to maintain media pluralism and a diverse range of views, combating the 'ideological echo chambers' which may be a fertile environment for 'fake news'.

Protect free speech and support diverse media

I am aligned with the Council of Europe's statement that "Free speech, supported by a diverse and independent media, allows citizens to make informed choices and helps ensure that powerful interests are held to account."

I request that the Committee examines the question of the regulation of 'fake news' within this framework - citizens must have free speech and access to free press to make informed choices. The freedom of the press is one of the only mechanisms by which the citizens can hold the State to account. Interference from the State in the arbitrary regulation of the press is a serious conflict of interest. In a democracy, the citizens and the press must be able to publicly to hold the State to account.

In other words, legislators should 'back off'.

Pursue a legal environment which protects journalists, whistleblowers and the free press

The Council of Europe observes that "Corrupt officials are unlikely to be scared by casual online opinion, but they will use everything in their power to thwart serious investigative reporting into their affairs... free and independent media continue to be essential in the fight against abuse and corruption, sometimes at high personal cost to the journalists and editors behind the stories... serious journalism is not possible without a protective legal and institutional environment. Flawed defamation laws, impunity for attacks against and intimidation of media professionals, failure to guarantee the confidentiality of sources and legal protection for whistle-blowers, or the denial of access to information held by public authorities – all inhibit free speech and, ultimately, undermine accountability."

I am concerned that Australia's legal environment has recently become much more restrictive, punishing and intimidating for journalists and independent media. I request that the Committee considers if Australia's current regulatory environment threatens the practise of serious journalism, contributing to an increasingly opaque political environment which may be fertile ground for 'misinformation' campaigns. I request that the Committee consider if the current regulatory environment threatens Australia's democratic values of 'freedom of speech and expression'¹⁰⁹ (perhaps much more so than 'fake news'?)

Support freedom of internet expression, without arbitrary regulation

I am aligned with the Council of Europe's assertion that freedom of expression and media independence is threatened by 'arbitrary shutdowns', and request the Committee consider the impacts of this.

¹⁰⁹ Museum of Australian Democracy: ['Australian democracy: an overview'](#)

“Freedom of expression on the internet is threatened by arbitrary blocking of online content, through administrative decisions or pursuant to flawed legal frameworks. Certain member states have passed laws or issued court judgments imposing stricter legal obligations on intermediaries, driven by concerns over the spread of illegal online content that causes serious harm to individuals or collective interests. This complex policy area calls for great care in designing liability and self-regulation models that safeguard basic rights without impeding the free flow of information and ideas or weakening due process guarantees.... Media independence is undermined by the arbitrary shutdown of media organisations, attempted financial manipulation by government and commercial entities, and widespread pressure on public service media in many member states.”

Less concentrated ownership of media, examine conflicts of interest

“Media pluralism must be protected against the existential threats to traditional media in the digital age...” The Council of Europe acknowledged a number of efforts which had been made “to address the media owners’ conflicts of interest and excessive concentration of ownership.” (Council of Europe, 2018)

I request that the Committee examines Australian media owner’s possible conflicts of interest and the concentration of ownership, and how this may be contributing to a monopoly on ‘narrative management’, which may be damaging to diverse and serious journalism.

Examine competitive pressures on the media and independent journalism

“Competitive pressures produced by the digital revolution have seriously threatened the financial viability of traditional media, forcing painful adaptations and making quality journalism less affordable... the great democratisation of information brought about by the internet can be no substitute for good journalism.” (The Council of Europe, 2018)

I request that the Committee examines competitive and financial pressures on the media, to determine the impacts they have on the quality of Australian journalism. I think Michael West Media and John Menadue’s Pearls and Irritations would be an excellent resource to assess how independent media outlets have adapted to be able to produce consistent excellence in journalism.

Demand Google’s index be made public

Dr Robert Epstein says “there is a simple way to end the company’s monopoly without breaking up its search engine, and that is to turn its “index”—the mammoth and ever-growing database it maintains of internet content—into a kind of public commons.”

“If entities worldwide were given unlimited access to Google’s index [through APIs]... thousands of new search platforms might emerge, each with different strengths and weaknesses... These aren’t just alternatives to Google, they are competitors—thousands of search platforms, each with its special focus and emphasis... This system replicates the competitive ecology we now have of both traditional and online media sources—newspapers, magazines, television channels, and so on—each drawing on roughly the same body of knowledge, serving niche audiences, and prioritizing information as it sees fit...”

“There is precedent for this both in law and in Google's business practices. When private ownership of essential resources and services—water, electricity, telecommunications, and so on—no longer serves the public interest, governments often step in to control them...

In Google's case, it would be absurd for the company to claim ownership rights over the contents of its index for the simple reason that it copied virtually all those contents. Google scraped the content by roaming the internet, examining webpages, and copying both the address of a page and language used on that page. None of those websites or any external authority ever gave Google permission to do this copying.”

“Google's search engine is an annotated index to the world's websites; those websites belong to the world, not to Google, and so should the index, along with all the other “free” services Google and other companies are supposedly giving us. Those services were never free; we have been paying for them with our freedom.”¹¹⁰

Demand transparency in Wikipedia's editorial process

To combat malpractice of the opaque editors of Wikipedia, German developers created a tool which analyses digital traces of Wikipedia edits. Users can run the script on any Wikipedia page to show colour coded authors and edits. It enables viewers to see who has had the monopoly on that page.¹¹¹

Indian officials are so frustrated with Wikipedia's ‘provocative distortion of facts’ that they now demanding that Wikipedia publish the IP addresses of anonymous editors who are “approving content and protecting it from editing.”¹¹²

Acknowledge the varied State and commercial actors which engage in misinformation campaigns

If the Committee considers countries like China to be a source of risk for ‘malicious foreign actors’ promoting misinformation through Australia's social media, (although apparently based on evidence from conflicted sources), then it is farcical not to include the United States and the United Kingdom as an even greater risk to influencing our ‘democratic values’.

I have included ample evidence of the willingness of the US and the UK to weaponise social media and Big Tech to drive their own narratives, in their own interest. That interest can not be expected to always align with what is best for the Australian people. The Committee and legislators must recognise and acknowledge this and act accordingly. Legislators must serve the interests of the Australian people, without adherence, obedience or allegiance to foreign power, if they are to remain Constitutionally viable to hold their Seat.¹¹³

Approach the concept of ‘misinformation’ or ‘fake news’ with a more nuanced perspective

Acknowledge that the (apparently ‘newly minted’) phenomenon of ‘fake news’ is multifaceted.

Weinstein's model asserts ‘fake news’ can consist of:

1. False/fake news (Non-factual, pseudoscience, conspiracy theories)

¹¹⁰ Robert Epstein, Vice (2016): “[Free Isn't Freedom: How Silicon Valley Tricks Us](#)”

¹¹¹ Fabian Flock: “[Accessible data science tools: interactive tools to explore and analyse digital traces](#)”

¹¹² Dr Sandeep Mittal, I.P.S, [Tweet 9/3/2020](#)

¹¹³ Parliament of Australia, [The Australian Constitution. Section 44 \(i\)](#)

2. Narrative driven (Selective facts, biased coverage)
3. Algorithmic driven (Social media or newsfeed algorithms)
4. Institutional driven: (Universities, organisations or think tanks publishing biased research or 'cherry picked data')

The Committee should widely examine all types of 'fake news' or 'misinformation through social media', and which actors employ them.

Politicians should use social media to transparently engage with their constituents

There is systemic opacity and a perceived divide between the 'bubble' of Canberra and the reality of life for the majority of Australians. It is my opinion that politicians should work harder to engage with their constituents in a direct and local manner.

Politicians should use social media platforms to:

- Answer direct questions from their constituents, with questions possibly chosen via a weekly 'upvote', similar to the way Reddit operates. Consider using livestreams to promote direct community engagement.
- Provide interesting and educational content to their constituents, beyond positive 'spin' or self-serving propaganda (which is always transparently obvious and inauthentic). The rapid success of the YouTube channel 'In the Interests of the People' is an excellent example of how hungry the Australian public is for intelligent, local and well sourced 'counter-narrative' information, regarding serious issues completely ignored by the mainstream press. Politicians should lead by example, to educate the public about the calibre of journalistic integrity they should expect.
- Politicians should develop their own social media platforms to acknowledge and promote independent journalism, local community issues and the free press, instead of the usual preoccupation with self-praise, maligning other parties or useless bickering or posturing.

Politicians should consider that 'cleaning up their own backyard' may be the most effective preventative of risk of damage from 'fake news'. Systemic opacity and dishonesty mean that Australian citizens do not trust our politicians, and may be more likely to be influenced by any incidences of 'fake news' - if it provides the only available 'counter-narrative' or alternative to political dogma.

Conclusion

Australia's changing societal structure (moving away from historical 'class divides' between the educated and the working class) and the public's increasingly high level of education and political sophistication, means citizens are impatient with perceived political ineptitude and are unwilling to be placated by simplistic, meaningless platitudes. The public's questioning of official narratives is inevitable when the majority of a culture is well educated and has access to alternate sources of information. Attempts to restrict or legislate this only arouse suspicion and political unrest.

"I believe that the biggest pressure for change will come from the failure of our system to meet the expectations for participation from an increasingly well-educated, electronically informed and politically literate electorate." Senator Gary Humphries, on the future of our Australia's democratic system.¹¹⁴

If Australia genuinely needs to 'protect our democracy from malicious foreign actors' promoting 'misinformation', it must be asked- what domestic safeguards, institutions and systems *already in place* have failed, to make this issue a sudden existential threat?

Public trust in Australian politics is at a historic low. It seems new allegations of corruption and abuse of political power surface every week. The actions or inactions of politicians have directly contributed to the widespread distrust in public institutions and the ensuing deligitimisation of the press. This environment where 'fake news' may (or may not) present a risk to Australian democracy is, in no small part, their doing. And now- voila! The apparent answer to 'fake news' will likely be to give the State more power, more control and more opacity over how politicians abuse that power.

In my opinion, it has become difficult to see legislators as anything other than State actors determined to arbitrarily erode more of the civil liberties of Australians, in allegiance to corporate interests, and at times, in unconstitutional alignment, obedience or adherence to the interests of foreign power.

"Social cohesion is, in essence, the ability of people in a society to work together in groups. It is based on shared norms dealing with issues like truthfulness, honesty and reliability. It is the foundation of the sort of trust that makes a society work.... The erosion of social capital can be seen as both cause and effect of changes in the way citizens relate to their families, their employers and their communities." David Zussman, Canadian President of the Public Policy Forum¹¹⁵

The right to a dissenting voice and the right to freely access and publish counter-narrative information, is the last defence of citizens against the money, might and authority of powerful corporations, institutions and the State.

By attempting to regulate, control or eliminate arbitrary 'fake news', legislators destroy one of the only real weapons citizens possess - the democratic right to freely and openly judge the State.

¹¹⁴ Gary Humphries, Papers on Parliament No. 54 (2010): 'Proceedings of the conference to mark the 40th anniversary of the Senate's legislative and general purpose standing committee system'

¹¹⁵ David Zussman, Papers on Parliament No.38 (2002): 'Confidence in Public Institutions: Restoring Pride to Politics'

“The whole point of constitutional rule is that governments must be called to account between elections... Enough history has passed to establish that mistakes and misdeeds multiply when they can be covered up... If governments had regard to their own long term best interests, they would embrace parliamentary accountability with enthusiasm.” Harry Evans (Longest serving clerk of the Australian Senate)¹¹⁶

“What is the ultimate ground for effective policy making? We argue there is only one—an informed public opinion.” Professor Ian Marsh¹¹⁷

The Hegelian Dialect suggests that a synthetic ‘problem’ or ‘thesis’ must be created for an agent to direct a predetermined ‘solution’.¹¹⁸ As I have referenced, studies show true ‘fake’ or false news (ie non factual conspiracies) impacts only a tiny audience. Algorithmic, narrative and institutional types of fake news are not emphasised as ‘fake news’ or ‘misinformation’. This is understandable, given the fact that the corporate elite and governments themselves widely engage in these practises, which I have demonstrated.

It is my opinion that this may be the Hegelian Dialect at work- the synthetic ‘problem’ of ‘fake news’ and the apparently pre-determined solution- State actors and giant corporations will cooperate to ensure increased control of the press, arbitrary silencing of dissent and narrative control.

Citizens and journalists must retain the freedom to publicly hold the State to account. Arbitrary or restrictive regulation by legislators in the name of combating misinformation (when, in all likelihood ‘fake news is a fake problem’), is a serious conflict of interest. *Citizens must be able to hold the State to account.*

This democratic right must be protected, not hindered, by legislators who serve the Australian public.

It is imperative that the Australian public retain their civil liberties and that Australia’s democratic values are upheld, by protection and support of free speech and the free press.

Melissa Harrison

13/03/2020

¹¹⁶ Harry Evans, Papers on Parliament No. 48 (2008): ‘[The Senate, Accountability and Government Control](#)’

¹¹⁷ Professor Ian Marsh, Papers on Parliament No. 44 (2006): ‘[Australia’s Representation Gap: A Role for Parliamentary Committees?](#)’

¹¹⁸ Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (2016): ‘[Hegel’s Dialectics](#)’