



Submission to the Inquiry into the Administration of the Referendum into an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.

Prepared by

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Introduction

This submission focuses on point B of the terms of reference, namely, ‘the detection, mitigation and obstruction of potential dissemination of misinformation and disinformation, including via social media or technology platforms.’

RMIT FactLab is a research hub at RMIT University in Melbourne, dedicated to debunking misinformation and disinformation online and developing critical awareness about the origins and spread of false information. It works in partnership with Meta to slow the spread of false information in Australia by identifying, debunking and labelling problematic content on Facebook and Instagram. This is known as independent third-party fact-checking (3PFC).

FactLab started operating in March 2022 and is accredited by the non-partisan International Fact-Checking Network ([IFCN](#)) in the US. It is one of 80 independent third-party fact-checkers working with Meta globally.

It is important to make two points clear from the outset: first, FactLab retains total independence and control over the third-party fact-checking process. Second, FactLab does not debunk posts created by politicians. (Claims made by politicians are checked by our sister organisation RMIT ABC Fact Check).

Since late 2022, we have seen increasing levels of false information relating to the Voice referendum spreading on social media.

False information and the Voice referendum

Over the past four months our fact checkers have identified an uptick in misinformation and disinformation relating to the Voice referendum. We are scrupulous about trawling through social media posts produced by those supporting the ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ campaigns, but we have

found that the majority of false content is currently being posted by those who support the 'No' campaign.

The key false narratives include: that the Voice will be a third chamber of Parliament, that it will introduce race into the constitution for the first time, and that 'yes' supporters are actually 'no' supporters. We have seen this false information spread through text, images and videos.

Here are links to the Voice-related debunks that we have published:

[No, 109 Aboriginal 'agencies' are not equivalent to the Voice](#)

[No, Indigenous Australians don't already have a Voice to Parliament](#)

[Image of grieving Indigenous elders improperly used in anti-Voice campaign](#)

[Conservative lobby group Advance Australia is wrong on the constitution](#)

[Fake image of Sydney Opera House used to promote 'No campaign' in Voice referendum](#)

[Proposed Indigenous Voice to Parliament will not confer "special rights" to one race of people](#)

[Will the proposed Indigenous Voice to Parliament become a third chamber?](#)

On the issue of the referendum electoral process, FactLab is working collaboratively with the Australian electoral commission to counter disinformation.

Judging by voting-related false narratives that we have encountered in the past in relation to the 2022 federal election and the recent Victorian and NSW elections, we expect to see increasing levels of misinformation and disinformation about the Voice as the referendum draws closer.

How third-party fact-checking works

RMIT FactLab's team of researchers use online tools, including those provided by Meta, to monitor social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and Reddit to identify potential misinformation and disinformation.

When assessing whether problematic content should be fact checked, we ask three questions to guide us:

1. Is the content verifiable?
2. How fast is it spreading?
3. What is the community harm if this content is left unchecked?

We review and rate the accuracy of Australian social media posts, as well as advertising. As part of the process, our researchers interview primary sources, consult public data and conduct analyses of media, including text, photos and video.

They use traditional journalistic skills as well as online tools to mine Open Source Intelligence (OSINT). Open Source Intelligence is information drawn from publicly available material, such as data contained in GPS systems or web archives.

Our research involves checking information against publicly available data and consulting experts. Each fact check is reviewed by a sub-editor who scrutinizes all sources to make sure the article is consistent with the data and the verdict is justified. We publish once the

assistant director is satisfied that the fact check has undergone rigorous scrutiny. All our fact check articles are published on the [RMIT FactLab site](#).

Once published, Meta's technology is used to label posts as 'false' (among other verdicts). This results in posts being immediately 'greyed out' and downgraded in users' feeds so that fewer people are exposed to false information.

Meta notifies people who have shared the content or try to share it, that the information is false, and applies a warning label that links the user to FactLab's fact check article.

FactLab does not remove content, accounts or Pages from Facebook or Instagram. We do not hyperlink to an offending post to minimise amplifying false information. We prioritise content that has the potential to harm people's health and safety as well as content that undermines democratic processes, such as inaccurate information about the referendum voting process.

FactLab retains total independence and control over the third-party fact-checking process. That means Meta has no control over what we choose to fact check, the way we fact check it, what we write, and the verdict we apply to the content. Meta does not see the content before it is published on the RMIT FactLab site.

Since the FactLab started operating in March 2022, we have published 83 fact check articles which have resulted in tens of thousands of social media posts being 'greyed out' and downgraded. Our work helps slow the spread of misinformation in people's news feeds.

Backlash to fact-checking

It may come as a surprise to know that FactLab's work is carried out by just five people, only two of whom are full-time employees. Our work has attracted the attention of mainstream media, politicians, and those whose posts are affected by fact-checking.

Advance Australia is an activist group that has repeatedly spread false information about the Voice. We have fact-checked its social media content several times. In the past, Advance Australia has responded by launching a [personal attack on one of our fact checkers](#), and attacking our [fact-checking endeavours](#).

If an account makes the effort to correct any incorrect information, FactLab removes the strike against the post.

How can we mitigate the impact of Voice-related false information

The problem of what has come to be known as an "infodemic" or "information disorder" is global, and invariably linked to the ease with which information can be uploaded, shared and reshared on social media. While there are steps that can be taken over the long term to mitigate the problem, such as compelling big tech companies to provide transparency over their algorithmic makeup so that fact checkers can better understand the role Big Tech plays in spreading false information, there is an urgency for more immediate measures to tackle

Voice-related false information. This is particularly the case because there is insufficient evidence to suggest that the [DIGI Australian voluntary Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation](#) has yielded any significant slowdown in the rate of spread of false information.

As mentioned, false information relating to the Voice is likely to worsen as we get closer to the referendum. Indeed, it may even continue after the referendum, with claims such as the vote being “rigged” — a type of disinformation that is commonly seen when any kind of voting is involved.

Over the next few months, Meta has agreed to help Australian fact checkers by amending its online tool to specifically identify Voice-related false information. We are grateful for this measure, but much more is required.

An immediate measure that would go some way to helping counter false information would be government grants that would allow IFCN-accredited fact checkers a degree of surge capacity in their fact-checking teams to manage the issue of false information related to the Voice. Put simply, we need more fact checkers to get us through the next few months.

Furthermore, fact-checking organisations such as FactLab are uniquely placed to support media literacy campaigns to educate the citizenry in critical-thinking skills, as well as skills to empower people to conduct their own basic fact-checking.

FactLab is engaged in such media literacy. For example, this month we provided fact-checking workshops to Year10-12 students as part of the Victorian Premier’s Spirit of Democracy tour, as well as a fact-checking workshop to Masters students studying in Australia as part of the DFAT initiative, Australia Awards Cambodia.

It is not hard to imagine how this type of basic fact-check training might energise ordinary Australians who are eligible to vote at referendum later this year.

FactLab is committed to social media verification, research and education and improving public awareness of the disruptive and harmful nature of misinformation and disinformation. We stand ready to help provide media literacy skills as part of any government program to improve understanding of how referendums work and to continue to fact check problematic content online that relates to the Voice referendum.

We would also welcome the opportunity to further explain to the inquiry the nature of our fact-checking and how we think our fact-checking and media literacy training could help combat increasingly levels of false information related to the Voice referendum.