TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Anti-Vilification Protections

Melbourne—Thursday, 12 March 2020

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

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Mr David Southwick

Mr Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Dr Andre Oboler, Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director,

Associate Professor David Wishart, Director,

Mr Mark Civitella, Chairman, and

Dr Nasya Bahfen, Director, Online Hate Prevention Institute.

The CHAIR: Good morning. At this point I ask that all mobile phones be silenced. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and is also being broadcasted live on Parliament's website. Please note that footage can only be rebroadcast in accordance with the conditions set out in standing order 234. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and any handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. I now invite you to state your names, starting from the left, for the record.

Mr CIVITELLA: Mark Civitella.

The CHAIR: And maybe your position as well, please.

Mr CIVITELLA: I am the Chairman of the Online Hate Prevention Institute.

Dr OBOLER: Andre Oboler, the Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director of the Online Hate Prevention Institute.

Dr BAHFEN: Dr Nasya Bahfen, Director at the Online Hate Prevention Institute.

Assoc. Prof. WISHART: My name is David Wishart. I am a Director of the Online Hate Prevention Institute, and I think I am starting off today.

The CHAIR: Thank you. You may proceed.

Assoc. Prof. WISHART: The OHPI is a charity. It was founded in January 2012. The purpose of that charity was to tackle all forms of online hate, without distinction between any of them—just online hate. Now, it is recognised locally and internationally as a leader in this field and particularly as a leader in monitoring and tackling online hate, so we are between the law and enforcement. We have presented at the United Nations. We have been cited in UN reports. We operate through software, internet monitoring software, and that has been praised in numerous places, in particular by the Global Forum for Combating Antisemitism and also UNESCO. And we have given confidential briefings to many government forums but in particular the AFP, ASIO, state police and various other agencies.

Dr BAHFEN: Even though our focus is in Victoria and we tackle individuals, organisations and communities in Victoria that are subject to online hate—and we provide support—our key strengths are that our work is always backed up by research and it is always empirical. Some of the impacts that David was referring to you can see there on the slide. We produced a report that was cited by the UK Parliament's All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims; that was in 2018. Our work has been quoted by UNESCO. The European Commission's Coordinator on Combating Antisemitism has also mentioned our work as being valuable.

So I guess our key strengths are that even though we focus on Victoria, we are cited as an exemplar because of everything that we do in terms of the tools that we use to combat online hate, the lobbying that we do for the community is targeted by online hate and all of that is backed up by evidence. And we have got two examples here.

Firstly, I would like the Committee to note that our Click Against Hate program was actually created by Andre back in 2009. That is currently operated under licence by another Victorian-based organisation. There are two examples of firsts that we have been involved in. The first researched empirical study into anti-Semitism on social media—we created that under commission for the Israeli government. That was made in Victoria by our Institute. And the first work that systematically researched the incidence of

Islamophobia was created in Victoria by the Institute together with one of our partners, which is the ICV, the Islamic Council of Victoria, and that was summarised in this report that was to foreign ministers in the OIC, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

Basically, apart from the empirical evidence base that we work with, we tend to work very, very fast. Facebook and YouTube also have acted on our recommendations, and we have got high-level access to different organisations, which leads to almost immediate responses. Both Andre and Mark will be citing an example of that fast response which is happening as we speak.

Dr OBOLER: In terms of how we are approaching things this year, we have adjusted our approach just a little bit in order to better engage with community partners. We see ourselves as the engine room—not doing everything but facilitating other civil society organisations, government agencies et cetera. We bring the particular technical expertise both in relation to the online content and the hate speech to do some work ourselves and to help others do more work. We have created a program of campaigns this year on a whole lot of different types of hate speech. Each of these campaigns will run for a month. We are inviting other organisations to partner with us. The campaigns have a basic starting point and then, dependent on fundraising, sponsorship et cetera, they expand. One of the handouts which I have shared with you, this one that says 'Racism Against Indigenous Australians on Instagram', is an example of part of our output. This is our current campaign for this month. This shows examples that are live on Instagram; these were there this morning. This document is a couple of days old.

How we tackle the problem—well, the first thing is we have our reporting tools. Our reporting tools have been developed over about a decade now. They are older than the Institute. It started under previous projects. They have been built to gather data and to de-duplicate it to not only provide evidence but also to put other organisations and government agencies in a position to use and work with that data in real time. So we have rebuilt everything to make it flexible in the different types of hate and to make it flexible in allowing others to work with it. We have a Facebook community of over 24 500 supporters. We are very particular to try and keep the focus in Australia, because obviously online things can go international. Eighty per cent of our audience at the moment is Australian. Of the Australian audience, 45 per cent is Victorian, and I think that is more or less in line with population—so mirroring society.

We have partnered with the Council of Christians and Jews to deliver a tackling hate speech program. This is actually funded by the Victorian Government. You have a copy of the resource booklet there. I note in the previous session you were talking about who develops and delivers these resources, so what we have done with this program is we have developed the training material as experts. We are training the trainers and we are making this resource booklet available to those trainers, who are volunteers from a range of different organisations, to then take out into the community. We are also supporting them with ongoing training in the background and much more in-depth training on each of the different types of issues. So we ran a training session a few weeks ago where we specifically looked at the racism resulting from the coronavirus, and we looked at other issues like the attacks on the African community, keeping things right up to date with what is happening.

Mr CIVITELLA: One of the key areas we have been particularly supportive of through our enforcement agencies—federal police, intelligence and Victorian police—is the work we have done around countering terrorism. We have provided a lot of reports. Our software actually goes into the internet and finds things that you do not want to find. Obviously we then pass that on to the relevant authority—we are not someone who can act on that; you need to pass that on. Particularly we have worked very hard taking down terrorist manifestos. As you would have seen, particularly if you looked at what happened in Christchurch and so on, those manifestos give incitement to and encourage others to follow suit. So it is really important to start tackling that online.

As part of this submission, I suppose—and we fully support the process of looking at a vilification process and what can be done to make the state and therefore the country a lot better and safer, which we fully support—there are the other things that we do which are very high-speed practical, tactical things to come in and support, if you like, civil society partnering with government to try and assist where we can. Obviously these reports go unrecorded, but if you look at what we are doing now, if you happen to wander down to your local bookstore or go online, you can currently buy a copy of *Mein Kampf* online; there are many, many different versions. But the critical issue is if you wander into the store now and walk into military history, you can actually pick up a copy of *Mein Kampf*. *Mein Kampf*, if you were to look at it in the modern parlance, is the 20th century's most effective terrorist manifesto, the results of which we do not have to elaborate. We actually went and bought a copy of *Mein Kampf* at a suburban bookstore. We did not bring it in for the Committee. We will spare you the indignity of even having to touch it. This book is constantly cited and referred to. School kids could go up and buy it; someone who was impacted by the Holocaust could walk into a bookstore and see that book.

These are the sorts of things we will be, as a civil society agent, taking up. We will have a campaign targeting Dymocks. It is not something we raise for your action; we will be doing that. We would like to think that we are partnering with the Parliament on this. I do not think there is a split in differentiation across the Parliament about those sorts of matters. These are the things which are just not welcome across the board in our community. So these are the things we do. It would be great to see a further strengthening of our association with the Victorian Parliament.

Dr OBOLER: I will just add, on that last slide, that particular blurb, that is what Dymocks has put online. That states that is the official Nazi translation paid for by the Nazi party, and it actually has a pro-Nazi blurb that Dymocks have copied or retyped or whatever onto the website—literally saying, 'This shows the foundations of white nationalism'. This is the ideology that we saw at Christchurch.

There have been four attacks, including Christchurch, that followed the same modus operandi. A manifesto from the attack in Halle in Germany in October is in the top left-hand corner here. This is a page that was online; that screenshot is from last night. What I want to draw your attention to is obviously the nature of it. That document says who should be killed but also gives bomb-making instructions and weapon-making instructions.

I also want to draw your attention, if we can go to the next slide, to that ad down in the bottom corner. Last month when we were presenting to the banks on countering terrorist financing, when we looked at this we saw an ad for a Victorian financial services firm, a firm in good standing. They paid Google for ads, and then Google put those ads up next to this content. Last night when we double-checked and updated our slides—obviously we worked with that company to resolve the issue for them—we saw this new ad. I just want to show you who this company is that has this ad. This is a joint project of three state governments. This is from late last night. Now, as we did with the financial services firm, we contacted Building Upgrade Finance through their website. I have received an email from them within the last hour. The terrorist manifesto has been taken down. Their advertising agency has been on it straightaway first thing this morning. So this is now a resolved issue, but the problem is money, firstly from a Victorian firm and then from taxpayers via state governments, has been going to funding the promotion of a terrorist manifesto, and that is pretty serious.

Assoc. Prof. WISHART: Our key message is that online vilification plays a significant role in hate and extremism, all groups that are subject to online vilification should be subject to the same protections—is the point of view that we are stating—and those protections should continue to apply both offline and online. However, the problem, as we have demonstrated, is extremely complex, and both of those examples demonstrate that. Of course there are lots and lots of other examples, as to the complexity, and it requires special expertise to be able to identify them. We had to identify those things; we had to notify them. The work that we do covers a broad spectrum of vilification, and we need substantial backing from government to continue to support our work preventing online hate. That concludes our formal presentation.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your submission.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Thank you very much for the presentation and the work that you do. It is very comprehensive. I do know of the work, and I commend you for that and the importance that it has for all of our community more broadly. I just wondered if you could take the Committee through the actual process of what

happens once you have found something that is hateful; how do you go from that to the act of ultimately getting it down?

Dr OBOLER: Okay, I think I will take that one.

Mr SOUTHWICK: And, sorry, as part of that, are there gaps that potentially governments could assist with in making that job easier?

Dr OBOLER: Yes. Firstly, it depends on the content. The first step to dealing with these issues is knowing about them, so either we find things because we are, for example, running a campaign and we are actively going out researching and looking for particular issues, and it may be—as you saw in this particular briefing on racism against Indigenous people, this was—focused on Instagram. Instagram has not had enough attention, so we intentionally went and did research focusing on that topic on that platform. A lot of our content comes through from the public. Most of that can come through our software. The more community organisations we get using the software, the more data that will be coming in and the more will be available. But we also get messages through Facebook, through email et cetera. Just in the last couple of days—we are drowning in vilification right now, because when we announced that our campaign next month is tackling Islamophobia, we received, I think, around 300 comments. Most of them are abusive, most of them are Islamophobic and some of them are violent and extreme, so we are dealing with those.

How do we deal with them? When it is on our own page—most people just remove them—we do remove them, but first we take screenshots of them, we capture them and we have a particular way of documenting them so that we can identify who posted them et cetera. We often then go and investigate that person, looking at, again, open-source intelligence, the public information they put out there. We do that because vilification may actually be an indicator that there is a threat to life and property, so we do that in case there is further information we then find that requires notification to police. As you see in the briefing, some of it we then put online. We take those screenshots and we anonymise them, so accounts which are a pseudonym et cetera we include so people can go and report them. The actual photo of a real person or a real person's name, those we do not publish. That is because we do not want the response against that person to be potentially even more damaging than the vilification, and a person that may have made a mistake could then be pushed towards suicide. As a harm-prevention charity, that is the last thing we want. But we put it out there to educate the public and because when we can include links so the public can report things it can build up a volume on those particular items to the platforms. So that is the first thing.

The second thing is that when it is more extreme—when it is a threat to life—we have direct contacts with the platforms, both their representatives in this country and their representatives that are either regionally based or through to headquarters in the US. In some cases, for example, Facebook, I think we are maintaining relations with, I think it is, five people at the moment. Two of those are specifically terrorism-related contacts. We have an escalation process to very senior people. If it is a real, serious, threat, we can get it through to them in real time to a real person in a senior position that can take action. Obviously we use that incredibly sparingly because we do not want to lose that access or to have it ignored when we tell them there is about to be something that could cost lives. So there is that response.

Another side of what we do is recommendations. We do do law reform recommendations, but we also do recommendations on the technology. We go to a company like Facebook—when they introduced pages, for example, we said to them, 'You require everyone to have a real name and then you have given them this ability now to act as a page effectively anonymously, and that is being used to cause harm. We think you need to change your features so that now either the benefit of the doubt goes against a page in every case if it is anonymous, or if you want to give the benefit of the doubt in favour of freedom of speech, someone must own that; it must have an administrator's name listed'. And Facebook changed their core code to implement that.

When it came to YouTube we pointed out that they were reassessing the same videos again and again and again. When they were taken down—one we looked at was a Holocaust denial video—and someone re-uploads one, why is it sitting in a queue to be reassessed to spend more resources, more of YouTube's money, and in the meantime multiple copies float about? So based on our recommendation YouTube implemented some digital fingerprinting and made sure that, firstly, they would take down all copies, and once they took them down they would prevent further copies being uploaded.

We are about to go through that same discussion—exactly—with Instagram. We looked at, again, Holocaust-related, anti-Semitic content—four copies of the same thing just a couple of weeks ago. One of them was removed, two of them were blurred with a warning and one of them was left as is. Now, that says, firstly, there is no consistency in their response and, secondly, the one that they removed did not trigger the others being removed. So these technical changes as well help the platforms do a better job and ultimately make people here and around the world a lot safer.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Is there any role for Government, and what would you be wanting us to do in terms of our recommendations to make either your job easier or certainly the public's job easier in getting this hateful material removed?

Dr OBOLER: Okay, so the law sets the low bar. That is the minimum that platforms have to follow, and increasingly states are enforcing their rights to set their standards and to say, 'Anything shown in our territory must meet our laws'. Where there is no law it is very difficult to get the platforms to remove something. We went through an issue: the Federal Government introduced the abhorrent violent content laws. They relate to videos of a terrorist attack; they do not relate to the terrorist manifestos. There are other laws that could be applied, but when they were not applied we end up with a situation like that terrorist manifesto I showed you staying online from October up until this morning and causing the sort of damage we have seen. We notified the Federal Government, we notified Google—both the public policy representatives and also through their online forms and email discussions. They were aware of this. That is the point. They knew this was there; we told them about it. They said, 'Where is the law that says this can't be there?'. And unless we can point to it they say, 'Well, freedom of speech; we're not obliged to do anything, so we're not going to'. What the Parliament can really do is make sure we have laws in place and we are able to say to them, 'This needs to come down because it is unlawful'.

Mr CIVITELLA: I think the other part of that is that the parliaments and governments do not have a magic wand that you can just get rid of the thoughts in people's minds with. But what OHPI can do is it can actually take the given circumstance and what you find is very fast-moving terrain. We develop software, we develop training and we develop processes whereby we can sort of try and cut it off a bit and at least then start to pressure those platforms. If you look at something like a Dymocks book—we will run a campaign. We will contact them. We will do that. We will try everything we can to get—it is not illegal to sell it. In fact there is an argument that, for academic purposes, it should not be prohibited. We will do that; we will run that, but the difficulty we run into is: we keep doing these things and we have got a catalogue of campaigns and requests and demands, and we are doing all this stuff and we are working with very—

Mr SOUTHWICK: Do you think the book should be banned?

Dr OBOLER: Do we need 94 different editions, remembering it is out of copyright, so every publisher can make their own edition? Now, there is an edition; Germany has very strict laws on this. However, you can buy a copy in Germany, but it is a particular edition that has academic annotations on it. That edition is sufficient for anyone that needs it for a legitimate purpose to be able to access it. We do not need a version that is an exact duplication of what was authorised by the Nazis, and that is what is currently available.

Mr CIVITELLA: The very worrying thing is often these things are produced. There is simply AI out there. The fact that a whole lot of people that have been buying it online or referring to it or something—it just triggers the republication of that: 'Oh, it's a popular book. We had better stick some in the bookstore'. What is behind that is something extremely worrying, which we need to investigate: why is there a demand for that book? And that is something we ought to tackle. Just get back to that point, we tackle that really at our own expense, and we do sometimes look to the Government to say: 'We're partnering with you'. It is very one-way in many respects. If there was some capacity for government to sort of plug in with us in a resource base and to even ask us: 'Look, we'd love you to investigate this. We can fund it. We can do that'. These things are of critical importance to the wellbeing of our state, and we would be delighted to assist the Government with that. I mean, that that is something that we would love to do.

Dr OBOLER: And I have got to say this was raised in the Victorian Parliament back in 2015. One of the Liberal Members did raise it and say, 'There is a need to act on this. We've got the Online Hate Prevention Institute here. Yes, we need long-term planning, but in the short term let's put money in'. Minister Scott did put in some funding. We used to have five full-time staff. It was enough to let us keep them for a few months until

even with a civil servant support we were unable to find a way of getting further government funding and had to let the staff go and reduce our capacity. The practical effect of that is the amount of stuff we can deal with goes down. Our ability to work with police, to work with VEOHRC and to work with other agencies, reduces.

Ms SETTLE: May I make a comment initially, only because one of my constituents is in the room and he would never forgive me if I did not pass comment. I notice in the campaigns coming up that disability and autism awareness was not among them, and perhaps a comment just that that is something that could be looked at in the future. But it is only a comment.

Dr OBOLER: No, we have been trying to do this for about four years. We have had a number of disability advocates volunteer to work with us on it. The problem is there are other issues that they are dealing with that means that it is very easy to get derailed. If they suddenly lose their support services, which happened to one of them, or they are unable to get the medication they need, those are things that actually impact their ability to function to their full capacity, and then it falls over. We would love to do some work in that. We are talking with someone else as well about intersex and issues there. Those campaigns are not everything we do; we do a lot more. But there are also pockets where we are aware there are issues, and we are very happy to work on those issues and to work with experts in those forms of vilification, but we do not know how to get the resources to make the capacity.

Ms SETTLE: I appreciate that. One of the things I have been really interested in in your submission is: a lot of the submissions that we have had to date are around the test, the bar, for vilification. And what is interesting in the online space is that that is actually not an issue. People have talked to us a lot about changing it to a harm-based model rather than an incitement model, and what I find interesting in your presentation and when we are looking in the online space is that in fact the incitement is an acceptable bar because it is there—it is a publication. I guess what I would ask in terms of strengthening those laws and rules in vilification to help your work: what needs to be done there? You sort of talk here about low-threshold penalties. I would just be interested to tease out—you are not asking us to strengthen the law; you are asking us to strengthen the—

Dr OBOLER: Enforcement.

Ms SETTLE: enforcement. So I would just be really keen to hear.

Dr OBOLER: Okay, I will take that one again. Feel free to jump in, though.

Assoc. Prof. WISHART: You are doing a good job, Andre.

Dr OBOLER: So there are a couple of issues connected there. The first one is we find there is very little follow-up by police, and part of that is because the bar is so high. We have worked with police to try and identify instances that could meet that threshold, but the problem is if there is not a follow-up from police, then people feel they can get away with it. The harshest penalty they will face is their account being closed, and we have archives of material where people say, 'Well, I have just made my four accounts so that when they take down one the next will be ready to go'. So it is not actually a deterrent. That is why we think there need to be penalties that are much lower so that the threshold for them triggering can also be much lower.

Another side of that, though, is that online penalty that the platforms apply. In our report on the attack in Germany we have a number of recommendations. One of them is that there should be a point where a platform is obliged to inform law enforcement or VEOHRC or whoever it is—an agency of government—that, 'Our deterrents are not deterring. This particular person is in your jurisdiction and we can't do anything to stop this getting worse. You need to trigger things at your end'. It could be as simple as a knock on the door from the police saying, 'You seem to be consistently engaging in this sort of behaviour. It has been referred to us. We are now monitoring you, and if you persist these are the penalties that may apply'. At some point there may need to actually be penalties. This is just to bring the deterrence to a level that is actually functional. That first penalty might be a $50 fine. It might be a $100 fine. But if it still persists, eventually you start working your way up to the point that you end up with a jail sentence. I mean, that is how the law works in every other area. It needs to also work like that in this online space.

Ms SETTLE: Can I ask you a little around awareness. It is interesting because from my perspective it never occurs to me to respond when you see those things. You just think there is no hope. So I was interested when

you were talking about your software. Is that really software that is around data collection, or can it be modified to be an almost automatic reporting system? There are two parts to my question: can we do that, and do we need to raise awareness in the community about what we can individually do? Should I be hammering on Facebook's door every time I see something offensive, or are we really using the community to drive some of this?

Dr OBOLER: So the software does not directly report things to the platforms. We have had approaches from the platforms saying, 'Can we get into your data?'. When we did the reports looking at anti-Semitism—this is back in 2015, published in 2016—we approached the three companies we were monitoring, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, and we said to them, 'We have data we collected nine months ago and most of this content is still online. We are going to press in a month. We will give you the data if you commit at a management level to having it looked at again within the next two weeks and get back to us'.

We have a table we publish online, and this stuff changes quickly, so I would say the data is old. I would not say those numbers are current, but we were showing that for some types of hate there was a 90 per cent failure rate—not only after 10 months but after they had actually looked at it a second time at management level. So there was a lack of understanding of what they were looking at, and some of it was bad policy. Some was that policies had changed. We spoke to Twitter. Twitter's policy on what counted as incitement to violence was the US legal standard, which meant it needed to be direct, imminent et cetera. When you are looking at a tweet, how do you prove that this is an imminent threat that is about to occur in a specific location against a specific person? So they were not taking stuff down. But they changed that policy eventually when we pointed out to them, 'This is inconsistent with everyone else, and it's actually not acceptable'. So we can work those angles.

Our software is really gathering the data but it is also putting the data in the hands of people that can respond. Ideally we would want to get to a point where it is not about the individual items; it is about a quality of service—that you are getting rid of 95 per cent of the hate content within a certain time frame, whatever it is. Right now it is much lower than that, and it can continuously improve. It is not just government; it has got to have civil society as well, because the language of hate changes. So there has got to be an ongoing dialogue to say, 'What does it look like today, and are your systems picking up the current manifestations?'. So there is a play-off there. If we were in a position where the tool was being used widely across Victoria and, for example, different agencies of the Government including VEOHRC, including VicPol—we have a second tool, which is really the analysis tool, which is designed for real-time analysis of what is happening. If they are able to look at that and track the trends and throw up a red flag when something goes wrong, that will make a big difference.

There is also a modification of our tool—there is actually a video of it on our Facebook page—we have proposed for dealing with a crisis. That would see, when there is something—we introduced it after the Bourke Street attack; when there is an incident like that and there is a spike of online hate, civil society organisations, the public, can flag things. Civil society organisations can look at what their members are reporting to them, and if it rises to the level of a credible threat, they can verify the flag, and that can go in a priority queue for police. We are talking about real-time, during the hour or two after an attack, when the sort of content we see is people calling for Cronulla-style riots. If we can track that content quickly enough and get a response out there, at the point when the police are actually dealing with people in the streets, it will make Victoria much safer.

Assoc. Prof. WISHART: Andrew, can you just explain exactly what the software does—how you collect the data?

Dr OBOLER: So the software is a very simple form. It has got a bar where you can put in a URL or web address. So on Facebook, for example, you would go to the timestamp, where it says 'This was posted an hour ago', right click, copy the URL, paste it into the system, hit 'report', and then it comes up with a snapshot of what the item is. It processes it using some complicated things to connect to the platforms and show us what it is. It determines what sort of content it is—is it a Facebook page, a post comment, whatever it is—and then it gives you an option for what sort of hate it is and what subtype of hate it is. Our tool can be embedded on different websites and configured to handle different types of hate. So right now on our campaign on racism against Indigenous Australians we have something where it assumes that is what you are reporting, and then it gives you I think six different categories to classify it under. It takes a screenshot, it allows you to upload a screenshot and to add a comment, it puts it into the system, and then a feature we are about to take live in the new version—it was in our old version—is we allow other supporters to be given an item to check. So we can

actually use the public to crosscheck what other people have reported, because all the content is public—it is open-source intelligence—and we have artificial intelligence to work out who we show what to and how much we trust people's judgement in order to actually get a feel for how accurate these reports are. So we have changed the challenge from finding the content to verifying how certain we are about what we have seen—and that is what we use the artificial intelligence for—while relying on the public to actually report it. Our view is if a member of the public cannot identify it as hate, it is not hate; it does not matter; it is rubbish. But it also means that someone in Australia that sees something and identifies it because the language is Australian and has cultural references et cetera—that is good enough for us.

Assoc. Prof. WISHART: So you can see that the motivation is that of a civil society, and so we are plugging into that desire to make the whole thing work.

Dr BAHFEN: As you correctly point out, there is often a reticence among members of the public, and in a book that Andre and I were co-authors on we found these spikes that Andre speaks about, the swarm. In the current swarm at the moment of online hate there is one that is directed at Asian Australians, so there is a big sort of Sinophobia chatter, for example. But in each of these cases, whatever community it is, there is always a reticence to report that because their perception is that the networks like Facebook are very arbitrary, and there is a lack of understanding about those processes. So the value of the tool is that it says to them, 'Well, here are the people who have done this before, and you can very, very easily report this'.

Dr OBOLER: And we will follow up. It takes the onus off them to follow up, and for peak community bodies whose members come to them saying, 'What are you doing about this?', we can give them the tool to put on their website. They can see what their members are reporting, and they can do something with it. If they do not, other people who have access to our database can still respond to it. So without them doing anything, for example, VicPol could go in and access it, VEOHRC could go in and access it, a researcher from a university could go in and decide to do something with this data—and it means that they are playing a role without taking on that responsibility to act on every item.

Mr CIVITELLA: So you would be reluctant. One of the key groups of people who receive more vilification than most are politicians. You are probably aware of that.

The CHAIR: Very much aware of that.

Mr CIVITELLA: We do not come with fresh news on that front.

The CHAIR: No, not at all.

Mr CIVITELLA: But you are probably thinking, 'Well, what do I do? I just get vilified; that is part of the job. Where do you go with it?' And often people actually have a credible threat issued against them; there may be someone following this up. You do not know, but you live with the fear or anxiety of 'There's nothing I can do about it' unless it is a direct matter that you could refer to the police, for example.

We could even set up something for the Parliament. Basically we can transport the system into this and train people up. Basically there is a reference point—and you will also find the women get a lot more than the men; you are probably also aware of that. We can actually catalogue and describe—because you may receive something and you may receive something, but it is actually the compilation of that which actually starts to give you a much different picture about what is going on. You should not dismiss this as a very passive thing or something you have got to put up with. It is a real thing, and in many instances we have been able to track escalations that go through—and by ignoring it it just ramps it up. That is the sort of thing we could do—assist in that very practical application, say, for the Parliament.

Mr TAK: I am not sure whether this is a question, but thank you for the presentation; it is very interesting. Perhaps my question would come back to the software and what it detects, because with such a multicultural community, different languages—and you also mentioned about the cultural references—would that detect any of those?

Dr OBOLER: The software has actually been built to be able to be multilingual. It is not automatically translated. We have a system where for every phrase that is in the software we can create a language file, and every phrase can be manually translated—and it also does right to left rather than left to right. We have a

project which is actually Australian—I am one of the experts for Australia on the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, and as part of Australia's commitment we had two projects to become a full member. One of our projects was dealing with Holocaust denial, and we have used this software as the basis of that project, but the idea is to work with international partners. So this year colleagues of ours in Italy are using the software in Italian to trace the content.

There is no reason we cannot make it multilingual in Victoria. The only difficulty in finding content is having people that recognise it. So as long as there are members of the community who can recognise the problem, it can be reported, and in order to have it correctly categorised we draw both on our expertise and the expertise of the affected communities—'What sorts of messages of hate are you seeing?'. And there is always an 'Other', so if there is a new strand that appears, we will detect that and be able to take it forward.

Mr TAK: And if the source were to be, let us say, interstate or overseas, what can the system do?

Dr OBOLER: Our first priority is to get the content down, because we believe, particularly in social media, the longer it is up the more it spreads and therefore the more harm it causes. So that is really our first approach. If, for example, it is being posted by someone in the United States, where there is a first amendment protection that there cannot be laws stopping them doing that, there is not much follow-up you can have other than getting the content taken down. If we could get Australia to sign up to the Additional Protocol to the Convention on Cybercrime which is all about hate speech, and it is only an additional protocol rather than a part of the main convention because the US could not agree to sign off on it, but that would allow much better sharing of data and prosecutions across borders. But we are not part of the club that is part of that right now.

Mr CIVITELLA: We are heading to Asia, bar coronavirus, which is very interesting for a Victorian organisation. We have been invited to attend a conference on hate speech in Asia, which we are looking at probably from India to Myanmar, Thailand, and so on, because this is now becoming very well known, and you actually have a cure. There is a cure for this. People think this stuff happens and there is nothing you can do. There are things you can do, and it is here in Victoria that it is being developed, and I am not aware of too many other places. So we are getting this interest now internationally, which is fantastic, because it is a borderless hate.

Mr SOUTHWICK: I am conscious of the time, so just very, very quickly, firstly, could you make that information available to the Committee in terms of that convention, because I think it would be really interesting to look at an international convention. Secondly, you showed on your slide the advertisement that was tagged to a hate page. Would the person advertising have known that that would have ended up on that page?

Dr OBOLER: No, no. That is something which we really think—the ACCC is doing an inquiry at the moment looking at advertising. This is not part of that scope, but there is an issue about transparency, knowing where ads are appearing. You can block an ad appearing on a particular page, but you are not going to know about it unless you happen to see it.

Mr SOUTHWICK: I suppose the power of what you are demonstrating is by contacting the company that has had its ad appear on a hate page, you have got more power to be able to get something removed because there is money being funded effectively that is promoting a page. So that is a good tool effectively.

Assoc. Prof. WISHART: Last night at 11 o'clock Andre contacted them. We got the email saying, 'Yes, we pulled that down', at 10 o'clock this morning.

Mr SOUTHWICK: If Facebook lose dough because somebody is upset that their ads ended up on a hate page, then that is effectively a tool.

Dr OBOLER: Although, this one is Google.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Or wherever the social media platform is.

Mr CIVITELLA: Google's advertising is very opaque. No-one really knows how they find this stuff or put it in there. I think Australian businesses and others need to have some certainty that they are not actually contributing to something quite heinous. I mean they are just simply trying to promote legitimate services for

the public. I mean there is no crime in that, but I think if in fact Google thinks it can make money by putting it on something with high traffic or something—which is a terrorist manifesto—then that would require investigation.

Dr OBOLER: Can I say the other issue here, though, is although this ad box would appear on all the documents on this site—so Google would not necessarily know what was there—this particular document we had spoken to them about multiple times, so they actively knew this was there.

Mr SOUTHWICK: The very, very last thing quickly is a plug for you, obviously, in terms of you do a whole heap of work: what does it cost to run your organisation, and what do you need in terms of being able to do what you do?

Dr OBOLER: You took the Chair's question.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Attribute it to the Chair. I am fine.

Dr OBOLER: Obviously we can scale up as much as there is funding for, but when we are running below about $400 000 or so, that sort of money gets us to a bare minimum. I am happy disclosing this, but I was last paid by OHPI in about early 2016. As this stuff has been rising since the start of this year, I have been working full-time on this without an income. As you can see, this is not even a 40-hour-a-week job. This is 1 o'clock in the morning dealing with terrorist manifestos. That is a problem.

That sort of money would cover not just salary for myself but for support staff, because at the moment we have got one person working for us, and my time, and we are still completely drowning. You need somebody to do the research. You need somebody to be liaising with the community organisations and partners. You need somebody to be working the education front. You need somebody just to be monitoring our own page because we are such a magnet for this stuff, and for us to have things on our page talking about killing people et cetera because someone has seen that we are running a campaign on Islamophobia and decides, 'I'm going to go and post that on their page', that is a problem. So that is sort of the bare minimum. Obviously the more we are doing with other parts of government, the more we are servicing and supporting other people, the more staff it will take to actually do that. Our ideal is, again, that we are that engine room sitting behind there building capacity throughout the community.

The CHAIR: Thank you. On behalf of the Committee can I thank you for the work that you do. It has been a very detailed submission. Our next steps will be we have got a number of public hearings hearing other submissions, then we will deliberate all the submissions and put forward some very strong recommendations to Government and a report, taking your submission into consideration as part of that report. But thank you again for all the work that you do. It is so important. The rise of online hate is in particular very alarming. I wasn't going to ask another question, but a statement in particular with the Christchurch first anniversary being marked this weekend. There has been one year of really intense increasing online hate, not only in Australia but globally as well, and I can only imagine what you are picking up. I know that you do some good work with ICV, so keep up that good work.

Dr OBOLER: Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.