

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of Social Media on Elections and Electoral Administration

Melbourne—Monday, 5 July 2021

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Mr Lee Tarlamis—Chair

Mrs Bev McArthur—Deputy Chair

Mr Enver Erdogan

Mr Matthew Guy

Ms Katie Hall

Ms Wendy Lovell

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Cesar Melhem

Mr Tim Quilty

Dr Tim Read

WITNESS

Professor Scott Wright, Professor of Political Communication and Journalism, Monash University.

The CHAIR: I declare open the public hearing for the Electoral Matters Committee Inquiry into the Impact of Social Media on Elections and Electoral Administration.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands each of us are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their elders, ancestors and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of any issues to the committee or who may be watching the broadcast of these proceedings.

I would like to welcome Professor Scott Wright, Professor of Political Communication and Journalism at La Trobe University.

I am Lee Tarlamis, Chair of the committee and Member for Southern Eastern Metropolitan Region. The other members of the committee here today are the Honourable Wendy Lovell, a Member for Northern Victoria; Katie Hall, the Member for Footscray; Andy Meddick, a Member for Western Victoria; and Cesar Melhem, a Member for Western Metropolitan Region.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action in Australia for what you say here today. However, if you repeat the same things outside of this hearing, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. 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 handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

I now invite you to commence with an opening statement introducing yourself and what you consider to be the key issues. To ensure enough time for discussion, please limit your opening statement to no more than 5 minutes.

Prof. WRIGHT: Thank you. I would also just like to begin today by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today—I am here on Wurundjeri country—and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

My name is Scott Wright. I am a Professor of Political Communication at Monash University, not La Trobe.

The CHAIR: So sorry.

Prof. WRIGHT: That is okay. I do work on quite a broad range of work really on how people talk about politics, online fundamentally. So I am interested in the ways in which people talk about politics and what factors influence how they talk about politics. That can be interface design, it can be pressures of moderation, it can be sources of information.

I guess one of the things I have always been really interested in, and I will focus here on, is everyday political talk. I started off studying edemocracy, so government-run online consultations and things like that, and over the years I have moved to study really kind of like political talk in non-political spaces. So in terms of my evidence—I have had a look through some of the evidence that has been submitted to date, so first of all, thank you for setting up this inquiry; it is fantastic, and you have got some brilliant evidence, and best of luck in filtering through it all and coming to your recommendations—what I wanted to do was rather than just talk about what you have heard already in terms of from, say, QUT and from Professor Carson and others is talk about maybe something that has been less focused on.

A lot of the statements have focused on what Egelhofer and Lecheler would call genres of fake news. What they mean by that is misinformation, disinformation and all of that. And obviously this is extremely important and is the core focus in many ways, alongside advertising, of what you are doing here. But what I wanted to talk about more was what I would call discourses of fake news, and so that is where, say, former President Trump would say, 'You are fake news' and things like that, and we see the media and journalists getting

targeted for systematic abuse online as both fake news and also general kind of abuse and trolling and blaming, and politicians get that too. It is on both sides of politics, okay—one thing I want to emphasise is that it is both sides of the media, it is not one side of the media. All sides of the media get this kind of vitriolic abuse, and it is the same for politics. So I am going to focus on these discourses of fake news.

I guess I would like to start off by saying three points. First, most Australians I think would be more likely to hear fake news discourse than consume fake news stories—misinformation and disinformation. So in other words, people are more likely to have seen the media being labelled as ‘fake’ and the like. Second, these different genres of fake news—the misinformation and all of that—work in part because fake news discourse serves to denude trust in journalism and expertise and just simply confuses people really. So I would argue that to effectively respond to the different genres of fake news requires us to also effectively respond to discourses of fake news. A third point would be that celebrities, politicians and journalists have a crucial role to play in combating mis- and disinformation and discourses of fake news too. I guess that is kind of like a main summary point.

I also just want to, maybe as a starting point, say that in studying a lot of these issues what we are often focusing on is the formally political spaces, so #auspol, #QandA, politicians’ tweets and political forums, and that is actually not where the vast majority of Australians are consuming and participating in politics online—and that is also where a lot of the problematic behaviour is as well, I might add. A lot of the toxicities are in the formally political spaces, and also a lot of the polarisation, where the left do not talk to the right, which you would have heard a lot about. So actually what my research has shown is that there is a higher quality of political discourse that occurs in non-political online spaces. I think we need to acknowledge that political talk, say, in a parenting forum, a fishing forum, a sports forum, a neighbourhood WhatsApp group, is often of a higher deliberative quality. So when Scott Morrison was talking after the last election about ‘quiet Australians’, my argument would actually be that it is not so much that these Australians are quiet about politics, it is just that we do not go to the spaces where they are to listen to them. And, yes, that matters for this inquiry, because often the political talk that occurs in these everyday spaces is of a higher discursive quality. So I think I just wanted to acknowledge that as well. And I think on that note I will end my opening statement. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Professor Wright. We might go to Mr Meddick for the first question.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Professor. I find this really interesting that we are prospectively coming from this: rather than looking just at the source—so, in other words, the fake news article—but the conversations that follow on from that; it is how we fight them. I think to a large degree that is almost like ‘How long is a piece of string?’, because there are so many of these individual groups out there that are private chat rooms et cetera. It is something that we have also covered off with the major social media players, such as Facebook and Twitter. Throughout all of that there seems to be a reticence on their part to actually interfere with these faces, because it does not suit their business model obviously. I am just wondering: what path do we take? Is it just that we have to be responsible people and call out these bad conversations, if you like, where we see them, or is there something that has to be done from a legislative perspective? I am wondering if that is even possible.

Prof. WRIGHT: Yes, I think that is a really, really good question. I think what you started off with there is part of the problem—that often it is in semi-private or private online spaces in which we cannot get access to any data. So often the work that we do in these kinds of spaces is more qualitative in nature than the kinds of large-scale quantitative studies in which we can see, say, all of the comments.

As to your question, I would say a few things. I think largely it is around individual responsibility and then around two things. One is around the moderation of those kinds of spaces and how those moderators work. That works at both the group level if it is a private group and then at the platform level as well, and there has been a lot of work done on this by the platforms, as you noted. But we need transparent moderation, community rules and all of that. Things have got a lot better. My focus would be more on the group level rather than the regulatory level. Things like involving the participants in the moderation is one of those steps forward. The other thing is around interface design. Research has shown now for a long time that the way in which we design online spaces affects the nature of the communication. So again, at more the group level rather than the regulatory level we could at least be doing more to acknowledge how interface design and moderation affects this—affects the nature of political talk, political communication—and also trying to then design in those characteristics of, say, third spaces, as I call them, to try and produce a higher quality debate.

In terms of the regulation, I guess that really comes down to guidelines, and maybe not formally but via the different bodies encouraging them to be more transparent. In certainly a lot of my response there—I was reading through it earlier, the written response—I kept saying ‘transparency, transparency’, and I have heard that in a lot of the other submissions as well in terms of the moderation rules but also how they are applied in practice. Because the rules are one thing; actually seeing what the moderators are doing as well with those rules and how they might be applied here in one way and there in another way I think is really crucial. So if we can get more information, even if it is summary reports and things like that, from the platforms and at the group level from the groups, I think that all of that can help then improve and at least give greater oversight of these kinds of questions of moderation and interface design. Often we do not see what is happening, right? We do not see how they are changing the interface. It just happens, and we do not actually know it has happened. So the more transparency we have around those kinds of questions, I think that would be good.

Mr MEDDICK: Wonderful. Thank you so much. Cheers. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Meddick. I will just pick up that point around transparency around the algorithms. So one way to do that would be for social media platforms to actually be more transparent and publish, therefore, the way in which the algorithms which they are using on their platform work so that we can actually see how they are working. Because that information is not available at the moment, I assume, in any form.

Prof. WRIGHT: Yes. I think the platforms would, I would say, rightly push back against that and say that, you know, it is commercially privileged information and it would harm their business, as Mr Meddick was describing earlier. It is a tricky one, and also the algorithms are just constantly changing. So literally if they gave you, you know, the black book now it would be different in 5 seconds time. And so it is really, really difficult to capture that. But what we can do—not just looking at the algorithm but looking at maybe interface design—is monitor the platform. As academics we can be capturing that interface. We can be capturing public code and things like that. We can try and re-engineer the API. So we could basically test, you know, what Twitter is doing or Facebook is doing with its API.

So I think that that kind of testing is important, and academics and others can do that kind of work, but I think it would be tricky to ask the platforms themselves to release their APIs. And also another issue would be that if that was public, then bad actors could try and game the algorithms as well. So I think there would be potential downsides to doing, too.

The CHAIR: Still on the issue of transparency, when you spoke about the forms of discussion that occur in that public discussion and about moderating that, to go with the other area in terms of advertising we need transparency in that area as well. Because, I mean, as it stands at the moment there is no way of capturing what ads are out there. There are ad banks, but they are not that detailed and they certainly do not capture microtargeting that occurs. So there is no ability to actually see what is going on at that microtargeting level and who is being targeted and what is being said. Would you be supportive of, you know, a proper ad bank that actually captures as much as possible in real time, microtargeting ads and all advertising? That would basically include who has paid for the ad, who has been targeted, how many hits it has had and all those sorts of things. So that way if someone is saying something to a particular demographic at a particular period of time, that can be countered by the other side so a person can make an informed choice, because they are getting all sides of the argument. But also, from an academic point of view, over time you can build that knowledge base of what has been happening, what has been said and how it is being used, to build the kind of knowledge base about usage and look to how you might put in place other regulations going forward based on behaviour and things like that.

Prof. WRIGHT: Yes, I do. So let me just start by summarising what I see as the issues with political advertising, and then I will talk about three potential solutions. So first, as you said, political advertising can be highly targeted and it lacks transparency. They are two kind of separate issues really, but sometimes only the people who are targeted with that ad actually see that. And there have been improvements, as you said, via the ad banks and so on, but they are incomplete in various ways, and I will get to that in my solution. And the third thing I just emphasise is about the ephemeral nature of those adverts. Like with the algorithm, they are constantly being adjusted and redesigned, and sometimes there are hundreds if not thousands of variants of a single advert. So it is hard to see all of that. And just to say that these targeted adverts matter, when we have seen the example, say, in America of adverts being used to try and discourage people from turning out to vote.

What might we do about that? I guess first of all we might decrease the precision of the targeting or remove some of the metrics. Some of the predictive behavioural stuff I think is problematic. A more general response would be to say we allow targeting of political adverts on the postcode level, which would obviously take it a lot further back, that targeting. So, you know, you would be focused on your specific postcodes in Melbourne, as another idea. But I do think we need to think carefully about what precision we allow for the adverts to be targeted at people and what metrics, what boxes, can be ticked by the advertiser.

In terms of the advertising banks, I think that all political advertisers, so not just political parties, could be required to post their ads to a publicly available, searchable ad library. That should also be coupled—as I think you mentioned in your comment—with the targeting specifications as well, so we know who was being targeted, how long for and all of that information too.

A third part might be, beyond the advertising, to capture more broadly campaign messages and party messages that are being circulated on Facebook, because we have seen that these play a crucial role in the public discourse, via a study from Monash by Professor Mark Andrejevic and colleagues on the last Australian federal election, and that that information is really important too. I think there are three parts to it. I think that probably covers my main answer to that.

I guess the question then becomes: if you are going to move beyond your formal political parties to, say, Greenpeace or whatever, where do you draw the line? Where do you say that actually this is no longer political information, or this is no longer a political organisation? When you have got all of these third spaces that I have just described—all these kind of, like, everyday life politics groups out there—we need a way in which we can separate the two to create a parameter around that ad library if we are going to extend it beyond the formal political parties. I do not think that is impossible. I think that we can do that, and we just need a public debate about those kinds of issues to come up with a workable solution for the platforms and us as a society.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Lovell.

Ms LOVELL: Thanks, Lee. And thanks for the presentation. I was just interested in a couple of things. One is the third-party spaces and your comments on how the political commentary there is usually of a sort of higher standard. Has that been just on issues of concerns to those groups? Like, if it is a gardening group, is it particularly around access to some gardening spaces they are trying to get, or is it just general political commentary that is happening in these third-party spaces?

Prof. WRIGHT: When I say they are third spaces, the higher level protection comes for politicians, right? So it is when Donald Trump and politicians are allowed to say stuff that would otherwise breach the terms and conditions or the rules of, say, Facebook or Twitter, but they allow that because it is considered to be, depending on the platform, newsworthy or whatever language is used. Obviously they have now begun to change that and have become a bit stricter on that, which I think is a good thing. When it comes to the political talk that occurs in third spaces, say, a gardening forum or a parenting forum, there are not the same rules there. One of the things that can happen is that the moderators basically just say, 'We don't want people talking about politics here', and so there can be this fairly arbitrary enforcement of the rules around what is political talk. The moderators will just say, 'Actually, no, please don't talk about that here, because we do not want it to descend into a war', but that is fairly rare, I would argue.

We did a study of a parenting forum—I think it was at the last federal election in Australia—and we found there that actually there was cross-cutting political talk. Parents support Labor, they support the Liberals, they support The Nationals and so on. They were not going to the parenting forum because they support one party or another. And because they were going there because of a shared common identity that was not political, when they talked about politics—and they had a thread that was about the election—what we found was that actually it was really of a higher quality and supportive. There was one parent there who said, 'I support Pauline Hanson', and then there were comments there saying, 'You're still a good mother' and 'You're still a good person'.

There is this kind of way in which the discussions work when we are having these sensitive political discussions that we might otherwise avoid. People often just avoid talking about formal politics because they do not want to upset their family or their neighbours or whoever. But actually what we see often in these third spaces is that there is a lot of political talk but also there is a lot of political action too. What we have shown

using content analysis is that often people start talking about walking the dog and then it ends up becoming a discussion about public policy around dog registrations and mess in the park and all of that, and then that leads then to a discussion about, 'Should we do an e-petition?'. So what we are seeing there is kind of like protopolitics becoming politics and becoming that kind of civic space that then feeds into, eventually, elections and all of that.

Ms LOVELL: Thank you. So you have not seen any evidence of, like, political parties deliberately invading these spaces to put messages out?

Prof. WRIGHT: I mean, it is hard to prove, right? But certainly I have spoken to moderators of forums, and I have certainly had people say to me, 'This certain person appeared about three months before the election and started talking about politics', and they felt like that person was not there as a natural member of the community—that they were actually going there to put a perspective in there. And that certainly happens. I mentioned it in one of my comments—that one of the potential dangers about third spaces is that people's guards are down often because they talking amongst friends.

Mike Jensen from the University of Canberra was talking to me about this—about more disinformation campaigns—essentially saying that there is some evidence to suggest that these campaigns are going in there, spending a bit of time to build trust and then turning the debate to whatever their specific agenda might be. So I think there are definitely dangers of that kind of thing happening, but it is really hard to know. It is really hard to study, because they are normally closed groups. But based on interviews with moderators, they have certainly said to me, some of them, that they have perceived not necessarily that there was disinformation but that there were people who had gone in there who then started talking about party politics, and it made them feel uncomfortable about what was happening.

Ms LOVELL: Okay. Thank you. And just one last question: you talk about not so much the quiet Australians but the unheard Australians and the need for journalists and researchers to talk to them more; how do you propose we actually do get journalists to do that given that the noisy minority are obviously the ones that run sort of disorderly protests et cetera that the journalists love because these sorts of things sell papers, when it would be far more productive to actually be reporting on what the ordinary Australian really wants?

Prof. WRIGHT: Yes, look, I think that is a difficult question for sure. I would say that—I guess focusing first as researchers—it is hard. These people may not want to speak to you, but in my personal experience they actually were quite happy when we went and spoke to them. They were actually kind of thankful that someone was listening to them. It is not that you cannot get them to speak in terms of kind of like a survey or an interview kind of research design. What we are often doing is actually just studying in terms of online because it is public, it is an online forum or whatever. We can just go and capture that content and look for where political talk emerges, so we can then see in this sports forum that there are these seeds of political talk that emerge. Often it is quite frequent, honestly, as well. We talk about needles in a haystack in previous work, but actually it is much more common that what you might think.

Getting the journalists, I think, interested in that is a really thorny—it is not a thorny question, but I think you are right, it is a difficult question. It might not be the most attractive in terms of news values, but we do see the media having citizen panels and we do see the media having different kinds of attempts to hear from the public—you know, 'Australia says'; I cannot remember what it is called now. But they are doing things to try and hear from, in quotes, 'ordinary Australians', so I do think that there is capacity, that there is something there. The other thing I would say is that it is also probably about awareness. Actually we need to get in the ears of the journalists and say to them, 'You know, there are these groups out here. Go and speak to them, right? Get out there. Try and speak to the moderators and try and get their voices'. I agree, it would be hard in terms of the journalism. I would have to think about that some more though. I guess I have not really thought about it from the journalist's perspective in terms of engaging with those spaces.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Hall.

Ms HALL: Thank you. That is probably a pretty good segue to the question that I had, which was around how often you think journalists or mainstream media outlets are picking up items of fake news through social media channels and then repeating them when they are unchecked or unverified. How frequently is that happening in a Victorian or Australian context?

Prof. WRIGHT: I have not specifically studied that, so it is hard for me to give you a definitive answer. There are two people or groups that are getting at that stuff, and I think you have heard from them—that would be DMRC at the QUT, so Axel Bruns and colleagues, Dan Angus and those people; and then Andrea Carson at La Trobe as well. I mean, Andrea's work here around the death tax has been particularly important, and it is coming out soon. I am co-editing a special issue of the *Journal of Language and Politics*, and that includes that paper—her paper—and others that are interested in discourses of fake news.

I do think, without being able to answer your question specifically, that the journalists have a really important role to play in all of this, and that works, I guess, in probably two ways. One is that when we have observed discourses of fake news being used by Australian politicians, what we realised was actually it was often the journalist that would say, 'Is this an example of fake news?', and then the politician would reply and talk about fake news. So actually it was the priming by the question of the journalist that led to that discourse. The second point, which is more to your question, is when there is a—I say in quotes 'verifiable'—story which we know is fake. I mean, Andrea talks about the death tax, you might talk about the statistics on the battle bus for Brexit—you know, 'If we leave, Brexit, we're going to save hundreds of millions to save the NHS'. And I do think that journalists, as Andrea argued in her work, need to do more to call that out and not just let this story constantly be repeated. Do not just let the battle bus be in the background for every single interview if you have already had fact checkers say that this is verifiably incorrect. So yes, I do think there is much more that could be done around that. It is also on politicians too, but obviously the politicians have got their own interests that they are pushing, from whichever side of politics, so it does have to be on the journalists.

The third thing to say about that is that when the journalists do it I think the evidence suggests that people are more likely to trust it as well, so the journalists are probably in some ways one of the best or most effective ways we can intervene in those kinds of issues.

The CHAIR: Mr Melhem.

Mr MELHEM: Thank you, Chair. Scott, thank you for your evidence. Just looking at the paper you have put in, I just want to talk a little bit about the threat of regulation or not having regulations. I think you did mention in your paper how Facebook in the US, for example, paid more attention to fact checking and fake news et cetera but they did not pass on the same courtesy to Australia when we had the election. On the one hand you are sort of talking about the importance or the threat of having regulation, but then you are having a second thought towards the end about whether we need regulation—so get the stick, but you are not sure whether to sort of use it or not, that type of thing. Can you take us through that thinking and what are sort of the ups and downs of having a regulation or not having a regulation?

Prof. WRIGHT: Look, I mean, I wrote that this morning. As you probably can tell, I was quite torn in what to say; I put something in and then I took it out. Look, regulation of these issues, formal regulation, is really hard, right? You have seen a lot of the evidence from all of the sides. As I ended my introduction to the special issue, just because it is hard does not mean that we do not do anything. So there is part of me that says we need to do more. Ideally—I would call it panoptic policy-making. So if you think about the panopticon, you do not need to do anything to the prisoners because they just do not know when the action will be taken and when they are being observed. A lot of what I think we are seeing with the platforms is a form of panoptic policy-making, really, where the threat of regulation, the concern to stop regulation, is actually bringing them to the table and making them do things. So what we have seen, I think, in the last couple of years is really significant progress from the platforms.

Two years ago I did an interview with a journalist—I put part of it in there. In it I was absolutely furious, really, that they have got these tools that they were allowing in some jurisdictions but not using in Australia around political advertising. I have done work with platforms, I have interviewed platforms—well, I have not worked with them, but I have done interviews with platforms—and it can be really hard to get them to speak to you. Journalists have those same issues. But they have become much more open in the last couple of years. I feel like the panoptic policy, whatever you want to call it—that threat of regulation—has really brought them to the table. I think there has been a lot of progress, but there are also issues too, going to the stuff we talked about with advertising, how they have done some stuff but could go further around the political advertising.

My big concern is that regulation is hard but if we do not have that regulation the danger is that things start slipping again. If we are going to basically use the threat of regulation to get the ends that we need without

actually having to do it in practice, which in some ways is the best outcome, arguably, we really need to make sure, though, that there is still someone watching—in the panopticon tower someone is keeping an eye on what the platforms are doing—and that we have got access to enough data that we can really check and see what is happening. I think I need to think more about it, and that is probably where my answer ended, as I felt at 8.30 this morning I really needed to send this in. I have not had a chance to come to a firm conclusion, unfortunately. But if we are not going to have those regulations, I think we need to keep a strong eye on what is happening.

Just to say as well, with things like DIGI, there has been a lot of progress made. I would say that we need to see what happens with things like DIGI. Let us see how effective it is. We have also got the body—I cannot think what it is called off the top of my head—for Facebook, the committee that is observing and taking complaints from the audience. So if this stuff is not effective, if actually we think, ‘No, the self-regulation isn’t working’, then maybe we need to then revisit this stuff, but let us have that threat of regulation there in the background to keep them honest. I will not say the other word that is in that statement, but yes, to keep them honest.

Mr MELHEM: Just a follow-up, Chair: how do you balance the responsibility of the platforms versus the individuals? I will break it down into two parties: one is recognised organisations and individuals, whether it is the politicians, journalists or organisations, versus an ordinary person. When they actually post fake news, lies et cetera, et cetera, how do you balance their rights or their responsibilities versus the platforms? Is there a way to balance that?

Prof. WRIGHT: It is a really deep philosophical question that gets to questions of free speech and who gets to arbitrate on what truth is. Yes, it is really hard. I think I put in a quote from the late great Jay Blumler and Stephen Coleman from Leeds University, where they say basically that without regulation free speech becomes just noise and it can descend into the law of the most obsessive, loquacious posters. And that happens online when you have got disintermediation. We cannot see each other, like we are seeing now. There has to be personal responsibility. But also if you are running that forum, whether it be the forum at the local level or Facebook, if it descends into just a toxic mess, most people will just stop participating. They will give up, they will leave, so your group will die, your platform will die. They have, you might argue, no pure ethical reason—although I would argue that they do—to intervene. There is a business logic that occurs there as well. It is a philosophical question, right? It is not one that you can give a definitive answer to, but there is definitely responsibility for the individual. In designing the platform, in moderating the platform, they create the playing field, and so that playing field shapes the nature of the interaction. So if it is not necessarily around pure censorship, it is around the facilitation and giving people information, putting in the fact checks and the kinds of things that we have seen being done more recently—flagging stories. I mean, we have seen some progress on that stuff. So essentially it is both is what I would say.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Yes. Just picking up on that point, I think it does need to be a multipronged approach to deal with it. As you said, there has been a lot more cooperation I think currently than there has been in the past from the platforms and a willingness to kind of work, but the question is because of that threat of regulation. I think that has brought them to the table, and we need to keep that pressure there to keep progress going. I know that Australia has embarked on the voluntary co-regulated model that is being overseen by ACMA to bring into place that code to deal with misinformation, disinformation. They have handed down their first progress report. Time will tell. There are only a small number of players that have sort of signed up to that, so time will tell as to whether that actually delivers what it needs to deliver or whether you need to move to a mandated co-regulatory model or legislate.

But in the interim there are other sorts of tools in the toolkit that we can do, and that is part of what we are looking at in terms of more transparency, whether that is to shine a light on what is occurring so that we can then look at applying additional pressures in terms of regulations or things like that or also educative measures and stuff as well. I know you touched on it in your paper you sent through this morning, around educative measures, and you spoke about a social media simulator or suite of packages to provide media literacy training that could be rolled out to schools but also to journalists and politicians and so on and so forth. I was just wondering if you could elaborate on your ideas around that a little bit more.

Prof. WRIGHT: Definitely. I do training with social media engagement with my students, and I have been asked to do some training by the McKinnon Institute for leadership. The hard part when it comes to actually training people in social media, especially the skills, and also journalists—and I should say that Monash, the journalism school, has got a board of senior figures from the different newsrooms, and one of the things that we

regularly hear from them is that we need to give greater training in how to better engage online. I would argue that it is for journalists in particular and for politicians. Often it is just not tenable. There would be significant downsides if they were to just withdraw from social media, because it has significant value for lots of reasons. So I think we need to look at how we can better train journalists, trainee journalists, politicians and the like in how to build constructive engagement, often called engaged journalism for the journalists, and how to then also manage, respond to, different forms of abuse.

The hard part for us is that you cannot just go on Twitter and start testing this stuff. You can show people examples and ask what they might do with said example, but it is not perfect. It is a really hard kind of place in which we can do training to make it real. So one of my ideas has been that we could create a kind of social media simulator—basically it looks like Twitter or Facebook—in which we can not necessarily just do role-plays but we can actually have a multiple choice option: ‘What do you do if this happens?’, you choose A or B, and then it takes you a different route through the exercise. That might work for schoolkids, for example. Then also, if you were working with a journalist or a politician, ‘We are going to ping you with messages and then you respond’, and then we can discuss what are the ways in which it could have been more effective. So I guess what I am getting at in all of this is that we do need more training. We need more media literacy in general, and we have had some good progress on that in schools in Australia, but I do think that there is space for some kind of social media simulator, in which we can make it real, make it a bit more exciting when it comes to, say, children and students, but then also where we can, I guess, help provide a richer kind of training and feedback. So, yes, I am really in favour of the idea. It is quite a practical thing that we can do.

There are potential concerns, you know—that you might trigger people, for example. You have got to be careful about what you say, when it comes to, say, if you are going to send an abusive message to someone. But the fact that it is offline I think is a big plus—that it is not in the public sphere. The idea is that we would work with, say, the Dart Centre, which deals with psychological trauma for journalists in wars primarily, or the Australian Community Managers association to design these exercises in ways that we can make productive responses both to build positive engagement and then also to handle more negative experiences.

The CHAIR: And do you have a view about who would be best placed to provide that training or run that simulator so it could be seen as being impartial and things like that as well? Because that is always a question when you develop these sorts of things: who is best placed to run it or facilitate the program?

Prof. WRIGHT: Yes. I mean, I think that is a really good question. I guess when I thought about it initially, I assumed that the university would do it initially and then we would test it with our journalism students and online community management students in marketing and so on, and then we could basically test the interface that way. Then I would also try and use it with my training with politicians, and then into the newsrooms.

I guess in the long term—once we have kind of got proof of concept that it works and we have refined it to a point that we are happy—the university might, say, spin it off to a commercial company. But I would say just create a not-for-profit, and then we can basically lease the idea, lease the platform, to different businesses. We might offer at-cost training, where we provide the facilitator for the newsrooms or whatever it might be, and then that could also go nationally and internationally; it could be used in America, the UK, you know, Latin America—wherever. Obviously if you are going to go outside of Australia, you need to have context-specific training. So I think that is the key part there—we need to be aware of national and local regulations but also cultural issues and so on. So yes, it is not straightforward to just kind of say, ‘Oh, release this thing’, and it goes global. But yes, I am thinking that it would be run as probably a not-for-profit organisation.

One idea is that it becomes run by the ABC in Australia or a public service broadcaster. Stephen Coleman and Jay Blumler in that work I cited earlier talked about realising a civic commons in cyberspace 20 years ago, in which they said that we need a body similar to the BBC that can be set up that holds these kinds of debates, that creates these kinds of online communities, and putting that into this kind of space is a potential idea. I had concerns about that at the time. I think when you are working with journalists, having it run by one organisation—I am not sure that is the best way, myself, for this particular idea. So yes, I think an independent not-for-profit is probably the best model.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Are there any other questions from committee members? No? On that basis, can I thank you, Professor Wright, for your very valuable contributions today, your submissions. It has been a really

interesting conversation. I think we have all taken a lot out of it. If there are any follow-up questions that we have, would you be happy if we forwarded those through the secretariat to you to follow up?

Prof. WRIGHT: Absolutely. Yes, thank you. And thank you for your time. Thank you for the questions. I have really enjoyed this discussion.

The CHAIR: No, thank you very much. We look forward to using the information you provided us with today as part of our deliberations to come up with some recommendations going forward when we compile our report. So thank you very much.

Prof. WRIGHT: Thank you.

Committee adjourned.