

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Monday, 15 February 2021

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Mr Lee Tarlamis—Chair

Mrs Bev McArthur—Deputy Chair

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn

Mr Matthew Guy

Ms Katie Hall

Ms Wendy Lovell

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Cesar Melhem

Mr Tim Quilty

Dr Tim Read

WITNESS

Mr Josh Gordon, Economics and Finance Editor, RMIT ABC Fact Check.

The CHAIR: I declare open the public hearings 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 ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings.

I welcome Josh Gordon, Economics and Finance Editor, RMIT ABC Fact Check. I am Lee Tarlamis, Chair of the committee and a Member for South Eastern Metropolitan Region. The other members of the committee here today are the Honourable Wendy Lovell, a Member for Northern Victoria; Cesar Melhem, a Member for Western Metropolitan; and Dr Tim Read, Member for Brunswick. Deputy Chair Bev McArthur is also with us, and other committee members may also be joining during the hearing.

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 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 key issues. To ensure enough time for discussion, please limit your opening statements to no more than 5 minutes.

Mr GORDON: Thanks very much for having me. My name is Josh Gordon. I am the Economics and Finance Editor at RMIT ABC Fact Check, and I was previously the state political editor for the *Age* newspaper as well. I will keep this fairly brief. I do not subscribe to the view that the use of social media as a tool to influence elections is harmless. I think it is causing enormous problems, and it is an increasing problem for Australia and internationally. I think political parties and political operatives are using it in a fairly deliberate way to cause trouble, and I believe that it goes against the public interest often. Some of it is of course harmless, and there is a grey area there between people providing political commentary, opinion and entertainment and what is the very deliberate use of misinformation to influence electoral outcomes and to influence voters in a quite a subtle but I believe corrosive way that is, in my view, often undemocratic and potentially dangerous. We have seen that in relation to the latest coronavirus pandemic, where there has been a lot of misinformation spread on social media, and it is often very difficult to control. I think from a regulatory point of view it is highly problematic in terms of what you can do about this problem, and I am not sure what the solution is.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I might call on the Deputy Chair for the first question.

Mrs McARTHUR: No questions at this stage, Chair.

The CHAIR: No worries. Dr Read?

Dr READ: I am inclined to think that more prominence to fact checkers and their work is one possible solution. Perhaps thinking beyond your own unit, your own organisation, do you think fact-checking gets sufficient prominence, and can you think of anything that could be done to increase that?

Mr GORDON: Look, I think it is certainly becoming more important and more prevalent. There are international organisations that are really pushing the fact-checking movement, if you can call it that, as a form of journalism. At RMIT ABC Fact Check we are members of the IFCN, so that is the International Fact-Checking Network. That is sort of an association for global fact checkers around the world, and it really is gaining prominence.

Our own organisation—I know you said ‘think beyond your own organisation’—we are growing, although the pandemic has caused problems for us because we are funded in the university sector, and it has been a tricky period for the university sector, as you know. That has been a little bit of a stumbling block. But I do think there

is a growing appetite among the public for this sort of work. It plays an important role I think holding political figures to account and public figures to account. It is not the only solution. It is one part of a toolbox, I guess, for combatting misinformation. But I think you only have to look at the situation in America to realise that the spread of misinformation does represent a growing problem. As I said in my opening remarks, I do not subscribe to the view that it is a sort of harmless issue. I think it is a very important issue that society really needs to deal with, and I do think fact-checking is one of a number of measures that could be taken as a way of combating misinformation.

I also would note that Google and Facebook have come under, I guess, increasing pressure in recent months and years to combat the spread of misinformation, and they are, after some public pressure that has been brought to bear on them, doing more and more. I know that Facebook is employing its own fact checkers to fact-check content, and content that has been found to be misleading is taken down, but I am not sure that always applies to what politicians say. I do not know that politicians are subject to the same sort of truth-in-advertising laws that other members of the public are subject to. So I think sometimes there are ways around it in politics.

Dr READ: Thanks.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Ms LOVELL: Thanks very much, Josh, for your presentation.

Mr GORDON: Thank you, Wendy.

Ms LOVELL: Obviously for everybody there are limited resources, and your resources would not stretch to fact-checking everything that appears in the media, so I was just wondering how you decide what you are going to fact-check and how you make sure there is a balance in that fact-checking across all political parties and Independents et cetera? As we know, there tends to be more scrutiny perhaps on major parties, and in election campaigns we will see a splurge-o-meter for Labor and a splurge-o-meter for the Liberals, but we do not necessarily see that same scrutiny over Independent candidates or even some of the minor parties.

Mr GORDON: Yes, I think that is a really good question. As I said at the outset, we do have limited resources; we are a very small organisation. As you pointed out, we cannot fact-check everyone and everything. There is a sort of process we go through for deciding what we fact-check. We try to, firstly, ask the question: is it checkable? Because a lot of things that people say are not actually checkable. That could be because of a lack of data or there is just so much ambiguity involved in what someone is saying or it is so vague that you cannot actually in any sort of rigorous way check it without, I guess, just devolving into opinion or overly interpreting what someone is saying. So it is quite a difficult question.

So the first step is to ask that question: is it checkable? And then the second question that we like to ask ourselves is: does it matter? And so we try to pick subjects that are relevant. We are part of a news organisation and so we do try to make what we do relevant to ABC readers, because that is our primary market. That is a sort of subjective question. You try to keep it relevant to what is happening politically at a particular time—what is in the news and what we think will really matter to our readers.

In terms of balance, it is very important to us to be balanced. I know the ABC does get criticised quite a lot in this area, and some of the criticism comes from both sides of politics. At Fact Check we really make a point of leaving any of our own political baggage at the door. We leave any of our own assumptions at the door that we might have, or biases. It is a sort of discipline in a sense. It is an interesting process. You have got to try to put your own preconceptions aside and say, 'What does the data tell us here? What is a reasonable way of interpreting what someone said?'. And that can be quite a difficult process, but I think it is an important journalistic process that we go through at Fact Check—and we really try to make an effort to be balanced in how we go about it.

In fact, interestingly, we have been mentioned in federal Parliament in a positive way by both sides of politics. For example, I did a fact check—this is some time ago—looking at the question of whether or not the Morrison government cut aged-care funding. I looked at a whole lot of different measures and concluded that, no, they had not cut aged-care funding, even though that went against the sort of grain of what a lot of people were saying at the time. I looked at aged-care funding against total spending, I adjusted it for health inflation, I adjusted it for normal inflation, I looked at aged-care spending per resident per day, and just about on every

measure it had gone up. So in fact I concluded that aged-care spending had risen. We are not saying everyone has to agree with us—it is our interpretation of a particular claim—but we sort of try to apply a certain amount of rigour to it and look at it as objectively as we can, which does not always make us popular, but I think it is an important and interesting process to go through.

In terms of balance between the major political parties and, I guess, sort of minor players and minor parties, it is a difficult thing to do because we do have such limited resources and it is a time-consuming process. During elections we have to adhere to the ABC charter, which in broad terms does require a balanced level of scrutiny between different political parties. For example, during the federal election we try to, in fairly rough terms, check a similar number of Labor Party people as we do the coalition, and then we also do One Nation and the Greens and some of the other minor players—but it is a tricky balancing act sometimes to get that right.

Ms LOVELL: Thank you. No further questions, Lee.

The CHAIR: Mr Melhem.

Mr MELHEM: Thank you, Chair. Josh, thank you for your presentation. I just want to take you to the 2020 US election. Do you have an opinion on the intervention taken by social media platforms before and after the 2020 election and the response to misleading information? I am really curious too about your opinion about whether any platform developed models that you would recommend. The second question is: are there any learnings in terms of ways to apply fact-checking?

Mr GORDON: Again a really interesting question. I assume you are in broad terms referring to decisions by some of the big platforms, in particular Twitter—

Mr MELHEM: Yes.

Mr GORDON: to permanently—well, Twitter permanently banned Donald Trump from its platform, which was a radical and very controversial move on its part. I think Facebook, unless I am mistaken, introduced a temporary ban over a period of time and that was all linked to the riots, I guess, or the assault on the Capitol on 6 January, was it, I think? Anyway, look, I think it is a really difficult issue for social media companies like Twitter and Facebook and others. I am not sure I am entirely comfortable with Twitter's decision to permanently ban Donald Trump, although I vehemently disagreed with a lot of what he was saying and I found his use of social media quite disturbing. I think there is a big grey area: how do you decide when someone has overstepped the mark? Where is that mark and how do you assess who should have their right to free speech, I guess, taken away? There is an inherent tension in a lot of these things between that right to free speech and a need to prevent the spread of misinformation and disinformation on those platforms, and I do not think the social media companies have quite come to grips with that question.

Although I am not entirely comfortable with the decision that they took in the United States to ban Donald Trump permanently from Twitter, I think there is an argument that he overstepped the mark. He was using it very much as a sort of megaphone to spread misinformation and disinformation that I think had become quite damaging, and he had so many followers that it was a very powerful, loud megaphone, in a sense, that was arguably causing a lot of damage and was undermining democracy in the United States. So I can understand why Twitter would have removed Donald Trump, but in a sense I think he was such a special case. I do not feel comfortable with the idea that people should be removed because they might be seen as spreading misinformation or disinformation. I think a better approach is to try to provide solid facts to the public as a way of countering the spread of what some people might see as misinformation and disinformation.

Last time we spoke I think there was a point made that some people may view certain arguments as misinformation whereas other people might not see it that way, and so there is some grey area, some subjectivity, in some of these things that makes it difficult, but I certainly think there is a role that fact-checking has to play in terms of combating some of that misinformation. So I think it is a really difficult question. You could go down the wholesale regulatory approach, I guess, similar to truth-in-advertising laws, but I think that becomes difficult, partly just because there is so much of a volume of opinion and information provided on these platforms that it would just be very hard to keep a handle on it in some ways.

Mr MELHEM: Just a follow up question—I agree with your comments: how would you balance that, and I think you touched on that, when you go and regulate that? What sorts of regulations are you reinforcing where you are asking these mega platforms like Twitter to make a judgement? How do you take the bias out of it? It is

something that I think the world needs to pay attention to and find a solution for. Do you have any further comments to make on that?

Mr GORDON: Yes. Look, I agree with you. I think it is a really tricky area. As I said, fact-checking is one way of dealing with it, but I just sort of feel intuitively it becomes problematic if you take a sort of heavy-handed regulatory approach to it because I just do not know how you could do it in a kind of rational, rigorous way that would be effective really. So I guess you could argue that social media, while it has all these problems that we have spoken about, also has huge, enormous benefits and you do not want to crush those benefits because you are trying to deal with the problems. Of course Twitter and Facebook are both very legitimate platforms for providing the public with information or providing the public with a political opinion or highlighting problems that a political party might have or the misuse of public money. It is very valid and it is a very positive thing that people can have a voice on these platforms, so you do not want to stifle that positive aspect of social media platforms by taking a heavy-handed regulatory approach. I just do not quite know what the solution is if you do go down a regulatory path. I do not know quite how you would actually manage it on a massive scale. In a sense Donald Trump was an exception just because, as I was saying, he had such a loud megaphone. He used it in such a strident, effective way to arguably corrupt the political process and corrupt the democratic process that he was sort of seen as a special case in a sense, but I do not know if you would want to apply that model more broadly. I think that could be potentially dangerous.

The CHAIR: Just picking up on some of those points, I think this inquiry has focused on a lot of the submissions have focused on the sorts of the negative aspects and the problems associated with social media platforms and election campaigns and things like that, whereas there are a lot of positive aspects of it as well and the way in which it can be used to communicate in positive ways and empower people and get messages out there and educate people and inform people about very important issues. A lot of very important debates can occur in that space and we cannot lose sight of that as well, so I think part of it is about a suite of measures that gets the balance right. That obviously involves fact-checking and potentially truth-in-advertising laws but also media literacy and how you target that and educate people about what to look out for—opportunities and all those sorts of things as well. In terms of that media literacy, obviously I think there is a lot more that we could be doing in that space. Do you have any ideas about that and where you think more could be done and how that could be done?

Mr GORDON: Yes. Look, I think that is a really excellent point—that often there is quite a low level of media literacy and people are not necessarily always very discerning about where they get their information from. You only have to dig a little bit to realise that Facebook in particular is just rife with conspiracy theories and the spread of misinformation. There is QAnon. There is a lot of misinformation at the moment floating around about vaccines in relation to coronavirus even. I think a lot more could be done in the media literacy space.

At Fact Check we are sort of playing a smallish but not unimportant part. For example, some time ago we built what we call a ‘microcredential’. It is a little online module that people can do—trying to educate students in particular but also younger ABC viewers to just be a little bit sceptical about where their information is coming from. To question the source of a claim is just very important, and that is something that you can provide information about to children and adults, I think. Media literacy could be built into school curriculums—and I think it probably is built into school curriculums—just to question where information is coming from, to ask the question: is it credible? Who is saying it? Do they have an agenda? Or are they trying to manipulate public opinion for their own purposes? I think these things are really important and should not be left out of the mix. I think it is a really good point that you raise there.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Josh, for your contribution. It is most interesting. You have just touched on, in your answer to the Chair, media literacy and finding out facts and information. Now, as we know, we are all having desperate difficulty in finding out what the facts are in relation to the medical evidence that suggests we need to be in lockdown, for example. So never mind trying to get the information out of all sorts of platforms or people’s comments on social media; we are struggling to get it out of the government of the day—so good luck with that.

A broader question in all of this is: if we are going to go down this path of more regulation and even more fact checkers, who checks the fact checkers? I know you have said your organisation is most likely highly

honourable and ethical, but leaving the biases at the door is clearly a difficult problem I would have thought. And you do have to check what is relevant to ABC readers. That is a bit of a worry in itself because what might be relevant to ABC readers in terms of getting some facts checked may not be relevant to others. What you choose to fact-check might also be very different for one group of people or from one individual to another. I think you are right in saying a regulatory approach to fact-checking and so on is highly problematic. When you have got social media platforms that start removing people from their platform, is that not a bias in itself? I mean, they are entitled to do what they like: they are private organisations, and fortunately government does not control them. Do we not have a situation where ‘buyer beware’ sort of comes into this?

Mr GORDON: Yes. I think you have raised some interesting points and some good points. I think at ABC Fact Check we do not claim to be the oracle of Delphi and the purveyor of all truth. I think the notion of truth is a sort of thorny notion. If you talk to a philosopher, they will say, ‘Well, actually truth is one of the hardest things to define in philosophy, and there are only a few things that you can really say are true’. I think you have got to keep that in the back of your mind—that you are not the font of all wisdom on all things to all people and you are never going to be. Having said that, I think it is perfectly legitimate to try to be disciplined and rigorous in your approach and to try to be as balanced and fair and accurate as you possibly can be in the approach you take. Even in doing that, there are going to be people who disagree with you and see things a different way, and that is okay, I think.

I just think as a broad principle it cannot be a bad thing to have fact-checking, and I think the way we would view it is: the more the better. If there are more people operating in that space, they might see things in a different way, and that is surely a good thing. I guess the point you also raise about what is relevant to an ABC viewer or an ABC reader might not be relevant to the broader population is a fair point. I think we tend to operate in a fairly independent manner as a small unit, so we decide what we want to do and we have a fair degree of independence in terms of how we do it and what we are doing, subject of course to the ABC charter. We have got to sort of abide by the broad rules in that charter, but I just think there are important principles that you have got to try to keep in place, and you have to sort of make an effort to be as rigorous and balanced and fair and accurate as you can possibly be. But yes, having said that, I take your point.

The CHAIR: Are there any other questions from committee members? No. On that basis, thank you, Josh, for your time today and for coming along to talk to us. It has been valuable. If the committee members—and maybe some that were not able to make it—have follow-up questions, we would appreciate it if you would be able to provide some assistance with those. Thank you for your time.

Mr GORDON: Absolutely. Thanks very much for inviting me along, and I am very happy to help in any way I can.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. That ends our session today. Thank you.

Mr GORDON: Thank you.

Committee adjourned.