

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

WITNESSES

Ms Holly Nott, Managing Editor, and

Mr Peter Bodkin, Editor, AAP FactCheck.

The CHAIR: I declare open the public hearing for the Electoral Matters Committee's 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 is gathered on today, and paying 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 Holly Nott, Managing Editor, and Peter Bodkin, AAP FactCheck Editor, from AAP FactCheck. 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 Katie Hall, Member for Footscray; Cesar Melhem, a Member for Western Metropolitan Region; and Dr Tim Read, Member for Brunswick. There are a number of other members who will be joining us online shortly.

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

Ms NOTT: Thank you for the invitation to be part of this hearing this morning. We appreciate it greatly. As your introduction stated, we are from AAP FactCheck. I am Holly Nott, Managing Editor, and Peter Bodkin runs the day-to-day operation of AAP FactCheck as the Editor. AAP FactCheck is a unit within the news gathering business of AAP, which you may know is transitioning to a not-for-profit model and has an ever-increasing focus on fact-checking as part of that model. We were invited to give a submission to this inquiry, I believe, because of our fact-checking work in the context of elections. Since we were established in late 2018 AAP FactCheck has focused on the New South Wales state election, the federal election and most recently the New Zealand election, and we have a little bit of experience of what that looks like and what it means for the electorate.

AAP FactCheck is focused primarily on misinformation in online platforms, specifically Facebook and Instagram, but we also work across other platforms, independently of our contract with Facebook, as a third-party fact-checking partner. And we do work separate to that as well, which allows us to establish the veracity of statements made by public figures in the traditional news media and other platforms, as I have mentioned. So we have a range of content sets that are quite similar but distinct, and they are all focused on helping to build trust in media and trust in content online. Ultimately we would also like to work more on the space of building media literacy skills to allow people to have the confidence and the skills to understand what they are seeing in the proper context and to bring a critical mindset to what they consume online and in the more mainstream media.

For the purpose of this inquiry, which is obviously specifically relating to social media and elections, AAP can say that we bring an independent voice to the issues that are being debated, and we would ultimately hope that we can create more confidence in the electorate in the processes and the political debate that is being carried on around the election cycle. I will keep my opening remarks very short, but we have detailed in our submission some of the impacts we have had in the New Zealand election that demonstrate the practical outcomes of that work—namely corrections or retractions or clarifications that have come about because of a focus on a particular issue that we have taken. We have seen that work embraced by the media in New Zealand and also by the general public, and we can track that via their comments on social media and in other places. We feel that this work is important, and we would like to see it become entrenched as part of the political cycle because we believe that we have a role to play in cleaning up some political debate and also just making sure that the

things that are being discussed and are circulating in relation to election cycles are accurate and are sensible and contribute to the process rather than detract from it.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Peter, did you want to add anything?

Mr BODKIN: No; Holly has covered it well there. But I am certainly happy to field any questions about how our fact-checking operation works and anything else that might be of interest.

The CHAIR: No worries. Thank you. I might just kick it off with the question that is always asked: how do you prevent fact checkers' own beliefs from influencing their determinations about what is and is not factual?

Ms NOTT: Well, I think we would say that we believe there are such things as facts, and all of our reporting and our work on AAP FactCheck is driven by that. AAP FactCheck has grown out of the long, over 85-year, history of unbiased and reliable news gathering that AAP is known and trusted for, and all of those editorial principles dictate what we do on AAP FactCheck. But we also have an additional layer of accountability as IFCN signatories—that is, signatories to the International Fact-Checking Network, which is administered by the Poynter Institute in the United States. That is the peak body of fact-checking work, and it has quite rigorous and stringent requirements for joining that network. We have been a member of that since 2019 and have maintained that membership through our diligent and careful work in this space.

I suppose everyone brings their own world view to whatever they are doing, but in our particular circumstances we go into it with a specific motive to follow the factual information. We do not express opinions of our own. We rely on opinions of people who are far more informed on whatever the subject matter may be. So we look for experts in their field, and we rely on a diverse range of experts. We do not focus on one person over another. We always seek multiple points of view. We look for peer-reviewed research, for example. We try and look at best practice examples of information or samples of information, and we do not overlay any particular agenda on that.

Our work is strenuously subedited and pulled apart in multiple layers and multiple times in its production process, and I feel like we have a very robust product at the end of that. I do not think that you would find any examples that would demonstrate anything other than what I have just outlined for you. As I have said, we all come to it with a particular world view, but the fact is that AAP FactCheck has no particular investment in the outcomes of the fact checks we produce, so we are not motivated one way or another. In the case of election cycle fact-checking, I would say we would be more neutral than any party who has a candidate in the race. We are a very neutral territory, and by injecting ourselves into that process we provide people with that alternative that they know will be coming from an unbiased platform.

Mr BODKIN: I just wanted to add to a little bit more to what Holly was saying about how we work on a day-to-day basis to explain some of the things that are built into our processes to make sure that we are free from bias—or as free as can be possible. One of those is that we are very transparent in how we go about our fact checks. We show the sources for everything that we are including. So, for example, if we are quoting statistics, we will cite the report that they came from. If we are talking to an expert, then they are always named; we do not use unnamed sources. We do not use off-the-record comments. The entire structure of our fact checks is built around people essentially being able to repeat the same steps that we have taken and to essentially return the same verdict as we would find, ideally, unless we have misinterpreted something.

As Holly mentioned, everything that we do goes through multiple hands. So as a minimum, generally our fact checks would be seen by at least three people—that is, the journalist and two editors—so there is no scope for something to slip through that is one person's opinion or one person's interpretation of something. All of that is interrogated by multiple people, so anything that could smack of someone's personal prejudices on a topic we aim to make sure that we block out completely through that kind of process. Also, as Holly mentioned, we look for independent experts and sources, so we do not generally take comment or opinion from lobby or interest groups. We will look for academics who are outside of that process or reports that are from independent bodies, official sources like government agencies, and rely on that information as much as possible.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Hall.

Ms HALL: Thank you. Thanks for your work. I think it is really fascinating and a very important part of our democratic process these days. I am interested in how the social media platforms respond to, I suppose, misleading information and how quick they are to take it down. I noted before that you mentioned you have got

the formal partnership with Facebook. Could you just elaborate on that and provide the committee with some information around how quickly the social media platforms are to respond to your fact-checking work?

Ms NOTT: Certainly. I can say that from AAP's perspective the third-party fact-checking partnership with Facebook allows us to work on their Facebook and Instagram social media platforms. They have algorithms and ways and means of identifying content that may be suspect, and we work from a pool of content that has been previously identified as part of that contract. So then we would apply our own editorial decision-making process on top of what we select to engage with, and some of that might be our own selection criteria, which is it has to be, for example, fact not opinion that we are fact-checking. It is stating the obvious, but there are some criteria that we layer onto that before we engage with something and fact-check it. The fact-checking partnership runs across New Zealand as well as the Pacific Islands and Australia, so we have access to content from those geographic territories and we work across those territories regularly.

As far as Facebook's own processes, I think that all we can really say about that is from our point of view we like to address and file our articles that specifically debunk misinformation, for example, that we have chosen from their queue. We do that as quickly as we possibly can so we are turning it around within a day or to from identifying it at our end. Facebook have their own processes, which they are probably better placed to speak about. I could not give you any authoritative information about exactly how fast that works or how they triage things at their end. I am afraid we are quite separate processes. We do the fact-checking, we write articles and then we submit those articles, and what happens from there is really a Facebook process. We do not have this visibility over that entire process.

Mr BODKIN: There are kind of two distinct processes at play here, just to explain that a little bit further. Facebook have their own independent criteria for taking down content. You may have seen recently that they said that they were taking down more content surrounding coronavirus or vaccine misinformation. That is an independent process to the fact-checking work that we do, so we do not have the power to take down content. For example, what happens when we fact-check a Facebook post is if we do find that claims being made there are false or misleading, a tag will appear on that post that then explains to people who see it that it has been independently fact-checked. People can still see that content, so you can click through that label and you can still see the post; there is no censoring per se. It is really about informing people so when they see that information they will have a counter view presented to them which is based on facts, and Facebook will also limit the distribution of that content, so people can still see it but it may not spread as virally as it would if it had not been fact-checked. That process is quite separate to Facebook's own take-down policies, as it would be to Twitter's take-down policies or YouTube's take-down policies, all of which are independent of any of the work that we do.

Ms HALL: You probably do not want to express an opinion on this, but I know that personally I found Facebook's responses in terms of their responses to trolling and their take-down policies about trolling were pretty slow, and unacceptably slow in a lot of circumstance. As fact checkers, once you have done the work is there a lag time that you monitor or that you are aware of and can that be a bit frustrating?

Ms NOTT: I think that the big challenge in terms of the timeliness is just the sheer volume of content, of misinformation that is circulating at any given moment and the scale of it, where we are able to attack it. I accept that it can take a long time for some pieces of misinformation to come across our desk, for starters—to be identified and for us to see them—but also we can be looking at a queue of hundreds of items. We are a relatively tight team and we are addressing everything that we can, but I would suspect that part of the problem is just the sheer volume of content that requires fact-checking that might contribute to some of the delays, I guess, in flagging and tagging misinformation that may be harmful or may be on the verge of going viral or going viral. I am sure, Peter, you might have some comments to add on that front as well.

Mr BODKIN: Yes. As Holly mentioned, there is a large volume of potential misinformation that could be fact-checked. For that reason we try to, I suppose, triage what we fact-check—so we look at things that are the most potentially damaging misinformation, the things that are the most viral to kind of prioritise what is most important out of all that potential material. Once we do that we can act quite quickly, and that process is independent of Facebook. Once we identify something that is misinformation, we go through our normal fact-check process, and then once that is finished and we have come up with a verdict, we can immediately tag that information on Facebook. But, as I mentioned before, that is separate to Facebook's own take-down policy, which we have no input into really, whatsoever. I think the only delay and slight frustration with the fact-checking work is that sometimes there can be something that is certainly on the face of it obviously

misinformation or false, but we as a fact-checking organisation need to go through the same steps and show the same rigour with everything we do, whether it is a completely ridiculous claim or whether it is actually quite accurate but is being presented in a misleading way or something like that. We still need to go to original sources, go to experts and things like that, which can stretch out the process. But there is not really much we can do with that, other than cutting corners, which we would not want to do, so we can show the same level of robustness to all of the fact checks that we do.

Ms NOTT: And just to add to that, in our submission I sort of made mention of the fact that people who are creating disinformation with deliberate deceptions and agendas in mind, those people are very, very skilled at making their misinformation look like it is valid content and be attractive to trigger an emotional response. AAP FactCheck and other members of the IFCN who are doing similar work are confined to using the very blunt instrument of the facts, and that can be time-consuming to establish and difficult to present in a way that would attract the same level of engagement. But we take a lot of care to make sure that we do get that information right. We do not have any tricks up our sleeve, really. It is just good old-fashioned journalism and a reliance on the facts. But, yes, as Peter notes, it can take time to get there, and that is possibly part of the reason why things might linger longer than we would hope.

Ms HALL: Great. Thank you very much for that.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Ms LOVELL: Thanks very much, and I apologise: I could not get back into the meeting earlier—I was having some IT problems. But it is good to be back with you now. You spoke about your processes for ensuring that there is no bias in the checking that you do, which was great and certainly I am not implying that AAP have any bias, but I am just wondering how extensive is your reach for fact-checking across the media? Obviously you cannot check every single article, so how extensive is the reach that you actually can get for fact-checking?

Ms NOTT: In theory there is nothing to prevent us from fact-checking a statement no matter where it appears. In reality we are bound by the resources that we have available to us at a given time. That can impact on the amount of work we can do. We would certainly like to be doing more but we are part of a business model, so we have to operate within the constraints of that. I would say that part of what we are trying to do is triage, as Peter said, so we are looking for things outside of our Facebook contract. If I can speak about the other side of what we do, what we are looking for are things that might be hot-button issues or things that are being repeated heavily or things that are getting a lot of attention—they might have started in traditional media and they are getting a lot of attention online. We look for those kinds of factors before we are engaging with things.

We tend to run our traditional news media fact-checking on more of a campaign basis—so with an issue or a time frame in mind just for reasons of resourcing at the moment. AAP has been in a state of transition for quite a few months, so in future our model would be that we would like to do more on both sides of the coin: more for our fact-checking partnerships but also more of our independently generated fact-checking. We see a way forward in that as being collaborations and engagement with specific issues, such as elections, and focusing on those, because that is when there are real consequences to misinformation. So there are a number of factors that influence what we look at and how much we can look at, but I think that is a fairly decent summary.

Ms LOVELL: Okay. Do you set any targets, like during an election campaign, to check so much of the Labor Party's claims or so much of the Liberal Party's claims so that you have an equal investigation of both sides of politics—and the Greens, so it is tripartisan?

Ms NOTT: Yes, that is a very good question, and we do take a lot of care to not exhibit any bias in the number of fact checks we do or the sources of the fact checks or the issues of the fact checks. We try to have a range, but we also accept that numbers alone are not a very fair indication because it depends on the coverage that party brings. A party might be constantly giving out misinformation but might not be making headlines, for example. We have to weigh that a little bit, so we look to have a reflection of the discussion that is happening in the election cycle but we do keep an eye on balance overall. We do not want to focus unduly, or be seen to focus unduly, on one party over another, so we do take care to avoid that perception of bias, even though we do not believe that it specifically indicates bias.

Ms LOVELL: That is good. Thank you. Also you mentioned the transition phase for AAP and can I just say how disappointed we all were to see AAP go into that transition phase too, particularly those of us who are regional members of Parliament, who know that our local papers rely on you so heavily. We really appreciate the work that AAP do to get those messages out there.

Ms NOTT: Thank you very much for the support. We appreciate it.

Ms LOVELL: That is okay.

The CHAIR: Dr Read.

Dr READ: Thank you. I will second Wendy's comments. I am interested if you could just go a little bit more into how you decide what to fact-check. I think there are a lot of claims that influence election outcomes or are said to influence election outcomes that might be tricky to fact-check—like the 'Medicare' campaign, death taxes, Labor's electric vehicle policies, a 'war on the weekend', and I am sure the Greens are guilty too somewhere—where the claim is kind of an allegation about someone else's policy, really, and its implications. How do fact-checking organisations deal with that sort of thing?

Ms NOTT: I might defer to you, Peter, in this instance, if that is okay. We do have selection criteria that help us guide our decision-making, but I think Peter might be better placed to discuss that in more detail.

Mr BODKIN: Yes, I am happy to field that one. I think one of the key things in our processes—even aside from our internal policies, which anyone can read—would be that we cannot fact-check opinion, because by its nature it is not per se based on a fact, it is based on what someone thinks. But we can fact-check opinion when it is based upon a claimed fact. I think the death tax example that you gave is a good one. That is something that we could and would fact-check, because you can look at a party's policies, you can look at their stated positions and then you can say that if there is zero evidence that this is true, on that basis it is false, which is a bit different to where someone is expressing an opinion about particular things that may happen in the future, like the effect that a policy will have or things where there is not a specific kind of claim that can be identified and then can be pulled apart. That is a key part of our processes. And probably a lot of our time in election campaigns, for example, is spent identifying what can be fact-checked and kind of splitting that out from what may be interesting or what may be a common slogan, say, that has been used by a particular party in an election campaign—splitting that out from what can we actually fact-check, what can be potentially identified as being true or false. We do have a verdict, and we do look at things which are not necessarily provable, so we are doing a little bit more of an investigation to see what factual basis there is for something. And then if we find that there is not any but we cannot really definitively say 'True' or 'False', then we will essentially say, 'Look, it's unproven, and these are the reasons why we have come up with that finding'. So there is scope to kind of investigate without being categorical, but that still does stray away from the more opinion-based kind of electioneering that you would see in a lot of campaigns. Hopefully that answers your question.

Dr READ: Thank you. That is great. Chair, just a quick follow-up, if that is okay. What proportion of your verdicts or the stories you put out actually get a run in metropolitan dailies and other big-name media outlets?

Ms NOTT: I am happy for Peter to chime in anytime on this one too, but I can tell you that in our last election fact-checking example, the New Zealand election—I do not have the numbers to hand, I am sorry, but I could provide those if they are of interest—we were run in every major metropolitan news outlet in the country during that period. I am not saying it was every article every day, but we certainly did get attention from all of the major metropolitan news outlets, and we were regularly discussed on morning television and radio and in blogs and in newspapers. Newspapers would not only run the articles but would use portions of those articles in their own context and use them as a springboard for follow-up articles, for example. We were very much part of the conversation—part of the debate—there, and I feel like that was a really successful example.

Day to day here in Australia it is a little different. We have had a model for FactCheck that has quarantined it from our news wire, partly because our independence is extremely important to us and we did not want to put content on our wire that was part of a commercial arrangement. So that was one of the reasons why we treated the content separately and did not push it into newsrooms. But we also have different distribution models, and we are investigating ways that we can get more attention and get more focus for the important work that we are doing. We recently had a series of environmental fact checks that ran across—correct me if I am wrong, Peter

Bodkin—all the ACM titles. They treated it like a feature series. So we know that there is an appetite for this work, and we also know that there are things we can be doing to draw more attention to it and to make it more of a part of the fabric of the conversation that is being had.

Mr BODKIN: Just one point I want to add on that: in addition to working with the third-party publishers, which we traditionally have during specific campaigns, particularly election campaigns, we also publish on our own website, and that material goes through a Google process which gives it prominence in searches. So if there is a particularly hot-button issue in an election campaign—to use the death tax example again, if a whole lot of people are simultaneously googling, ‘Does Labor have a death tax?’, then one of the first results they should see in their searches if we have done a fact check on it and put it through that process will be AAP’s fact check, published on our own website, with the finding displayed in the search results. So people do not even necessarily need to read the fact check to kind of get a feel for what finding we have had, but they can then click through that on our site, and some of those fact checks will have quite high viewership just by virtue of being put in front of people’s eyes when they are doing those searches and they are interested in the issue.

Ms NOTT: Tens of thousands; right, Peter?

Mr BODKIN: Yes, potentially. I mean, some of the things we have had have been well into the tens of thousands, so if it is enough of an issue that a whole lot of people are looking for information on it at once, then certainly our aim and part of our process is to put it in front of as many of those people as possible, and that is quite effective from my perspective, looking at it as an observer.

Dr READ: Good to hear.

The CHAIR: I just had a question around microtargeting. A number of submitters have raised concerns around it from a number of different perspectives, but one has been around that the currently available ad archives do not capture all political advertising, especially microtargeted advertising. I was wondering about your view about introducing a requirement that all political advertising, and certainly paid political advertising, must be added to a publicly accessible ad archive in real-time, which includes things like who paid for it, how much it costs, who are targeted by age and gender, how many views it has had and so on, which would provide transparency and accountability and enable political opponents to respond and counter it in real time but also provide valuable research and information over time as well. Is that something that you think would be a good idea and be supportive of?

Ms NOTT: Yes, I would be supportive of that. I think AAP FactCheck would support that because we are coming to this space from a media literacy perspective. We would like people to understand better what they are consuming and what the motives behind it might be and what the alternative sources might be saying about an issue. And it is very difficult to do that if you do not understand that you are being specifically targeted with a specific message, with a specific purpose. We feel that any transparency that can be added to that will only benefit the consumers of that content and bring more accountability to the people who are creating that content, and it would be very difficult to argue as to why you should not have that, I would think. I think there would be few valid and reasonable arguments to the contrary.

The CHAIR: And also with regard to furthering literacy, you recommend media literacy campaigns. Do you have a view about what sorts of things they should include, how they should be run and who might be best placed to run them, and maybe if there are any other jurisdictions that are currently running these type of campaigns that you could recommend or models that we might be able to look at?

Ms NOTT: Yes. AAP FactCheck is looking at creating some resources. Late last year, I think November last year, we commissioned a report from UWS academic Tanya Notley, who is an expert in this field, to give us an overview of what resources there were currently before Australians in this media literacy space, who they were targeting and what the gaps might be. So we have a pretty good understanding of what the space looks like in Australia, and from that report we identified that there was a serious lack of resources targeted to adults. There is a whole lot of resourcing that is looking at building skills amongst children, for example, but there are very few resources for grown-ups who are consuming content who are not native users of social platforms, for example, and who might not get all the nuances.

We have a project on the horizon to create some resources that both illuminate fact-checking processes and underline some very key, basic principles that people can bring to their own media consumption that can help

them with the critical thinking required. But obviously that is just one very small initiative. There are lot of great examples, and the one that we were advised was best practice internationally was, I think, a project that was created by Stanford University. I can provide you some further details of that if that is of interest, but I would hate to give you an incorrect or half-baked summary of exactly what that program entailed so I can do that offline if that is of use. But here in Australia there are lots of gaps in our media literacy initiatives. There is nothing specifically talking about elections but I do not think that necessarily you need to build skills in that niche, just generally help people to understand what they are consuming and to be more responsible not only in what they are consuming but what they are sharing and creating and to take that moment to think critically about what they are doing online. That is what we personally are going to strive for this year—to create some information that we can put out into the world that will hopefully help build those skills. I think that probably answers your question, Lee.

The CHAIR: Yes, that is fantastic. It would be great if you could provide that information offline through Chris and the secretariat. That would be fantastic.

Ms NOTT: Will do.

The CHAIR: Do any other committee members have any follow-up questions? No? If not, I thank you, Holly and Peter, for speaking to us today and for the information you have provided. It has been very insightful and helpful. We look forward to receiving that information. If we do have any follow-up questions, we hope that you would be able to provide us with some additional information. We thank you for your time today.

Ms NOTT: Thanks for the opportunity. We appreciate it a lot.

Mr BODKIN: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thanks.

Witnesses withdrew.