

# **ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE**

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

Melbourne—Tuesday, 15 June 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

Dr Andrea Carson, Associate Professor, Department of Politics, Media and Philosophy, La Trobe 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 people, 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 may be here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings.

I welcome Associate Professor Andrea Carson from the Department of Politics, Media and Philosophy at La Trobe University. I am Lee Tarlamis, Chair of the committee and Member for South Eastern Metropolitan Region. The other members of the committee here today are Enver Erdogan, Member for Southern Metropolitan; Katie Hall, Member for Footscray; the Honourable Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria; and Andy Meddick, Member for Western Victoria. Other members of the committee may also join 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, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as 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 statement to no more than 5 minutes.

**Dr CARSON:** Thank you very much for that introduction, and I would also like to pay my respects to the traditional custodians of our land, past, present and emerging.

It is a great pleasure to be here, and I commend the committee on setting up this inquiry. Social media and its role in elections is becoming an ever-important issue, and its impact is only increasing. And what you will hear through the submissions and through other presenters is that the use of digital technologies and social media provides opportunities but also challenges to political communication.

My role is as an associate professor in journalism, but I am also a political scientist that focuses primarily on low-quality and high-quality information. In high-quality information I look at evidence-based reporting, such as investigative journalism, and in low-quality information I have done numerous studies that look at misinformation and fake news. Among these studies that I think are pertinent to this committee—and I am happy to answer questions on them—is misinformation regulation in the Asia-Pacific, which is work that was done with Facebook, as well as looking at the way that Australian politicians have used terminologies such as 'fake news', and the weaponisation of that language. Earlier work looked at how Victorian politicians have used Twitter to engage with citizens. A current major project that I am working on with the University of Melbourne is looking at local government candidates and particularly the role of political participation of women, with an analysis that is happening at the moment of the 2020 local government elections and the way that women in particular used social media but also the negativities that came out of that, such as trolling that occurred during that time. And every federal election I also am part of a group of political scientists that write a chapter, as part of a larger book on the federal election, about how the media have covered the elections. That also looks at the increasing importance of digital campaigning. So that is an overview of the type of work that I have done.

I guess in my opening remarks I would like to emphasise that while there are challenges—and these are formidable, and I am sure we will get into them with questions—social media and digital technologies also provide a really important way for those that are not so politically engaged to be able to participate in democratic processes. And that is because there are lowered barriers to entry, beyond traditional media, to

being able to produce information and also consume it. And particularly younger people, who might not engage with politics in a formal sense the way that we might conceive of it, are able to engage with politics in less formal formats through social media. And we have seen that as a global phenomenon with the rise of political protest moments and the capacity for these protest movements to swell quite quickly and fast into enormous numbers through the digital affordances that allow groups to come together.

There has been much work that has been done on this, particularly in the States, and one of the things that I have looked at is how those same digital technologies have been used by investigative journalists to be able to come together across the globe to critique power flows in ways that they have not been able to do in the past. I guess the key example of that is the international consortium of investigative journalists coming together to present the Panama Papers, which was looking at tax evasion right across the world, which led to 93 countries' newspapers, major papers, launching that story on their front pages on the same day after a year of investigation.

And this brings me to another point that I hope we can discuss further, and that is that in looking at social media and digital technologies we really need to look at the whole media ecosystem. A really important component of this still is traditional media and the role that traditional media play in perpetuating but also disavowing misinformation. One of the studies that is just about to be published—it has been through the peer review process—that I have looked at in relation to this is looking at the death tax story that was part of the 2019 federal election campaign and both the role that traditional media played in perpetuating this ultimate falsehood—ultimately a falsehood—but also the role that social media played there. There was an intertwining that allowed that story to have endurance, even though it was not probably as prominent as what may have been portrayed by some actors. We canvassed 8 million Facebook posts and 100 000 news stories and found that it was just a small drop in the ocean in terms of coverage of the 2019 campaign but it had endurance, and the reason it had endurance was because a fake news narrative was able to form around the fake news story that took on different life courses over an 18-month period. I guess these are my opening remarks, and I am happy to take whatever questions.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I might go to the Deputy Chair, Bev McArthur, for the first question.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair, and apologies for my lateness. Would you consider your proposition of the fake news death tax similar to the fake news Medicare scrapping which was done in a previous election?

**Dr CARSON:** Yes, I think they are very similar phenomena. In fact I also did a study with colleagues at the University of Sydney on Medicare. One of the things I guess that was a compelling feature of the Medicare campaign was the influence that paid advertising had. We looked at Vote Compass data, which was about 1.6 million Australian respondents' attitudes to different policies during the 2016 campaign, and what we found was that when Bob Hawke did the ad on I think it was 11 June during that election campaign it changed respondents' most important issue prioritisation—health care jumped right up. Ultimately what we found with Medicare was that the advertising was effective but these things are limited by time. So four days after those ads were launched, and there was an advertisement one week and then a week later, it was picked up by the mainstream media and gave the Medicare campaign significant life. And we found what it did was arrest the decline in Labor's primary vote at the time giving it about a 3 per cent jump in vote share. It had very little impact on well-established Liberal-National partisans but it did have some influence on weak partisans and also those that were swinging voters. However, as I said, that effect wore off at around about four days, and then the injection of a second ad campaign gave it fresh life.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Dr Read.

**Dr READ:** Thank you, Chair. Dr Carson, I am interested in any thoughts you have on what the state government could do on the regulatory environment for social media, particularly around elections. Do you have any suggestions there?

**Dr CARSON:** I do. One of the reports I have just finished is looking at misinformation and disinformation regulation with a focus on Singapore and Indonesia and also Australia's recent introduction of the code of practice by the digital platforms on mis and disinformation, and one of the things that I was looking at was countries that have legislated against mis and disinformation. A few points become fairly salient out of that.

The first is that there are no universal definitions of mis and disinformation, and that is something that needs to be addressed rather urgently. Academics, practitioners and the digital platforms themselves all use slightly different definitions. The definition that I use and I think also was borne out in some of the submissions to this committee, such as the QUT's submission, is that misinformation is false information that is spread usually with no intention to spread it, but I think intention can be difficult with misinformation—that it is misinformation that has spread somewhat haplessly—and with COVID-19 we see some really important examples of how misinformation can also cause harm. Previously it was thought that misinformation was less harmful than disinformation, and I think that is no longer true. Disinformation is spread with a harmful intent or for some sort of political or financial advantage.

I guess the overwhelming finding from my 70 000-word report was that it needs a multipronged approach. Governments alone cannot tackle this program, nor can the digital platforms which are often asked to deal with it. It needs civil society actors working with traditional journalists and academics and the platforms and government, and I think we also need to be really careful what we wish for in this space. Legislating against mis and disinformation has led to further censorship and attacks on political dissidents, and in the last 15 years we have seen an illiberal turn, with liberal democracies and non-democratic states becoming more strident against media and civil freedoms. That is work that has been well documented by Freedom House and other organisations that map democratic indices.

So I think Australia so far has taken the right approach by having a voluntary code of practice for mis and disinformation. It requires transparency from the platforms to be able to say how they are tackling it and how often they are. The very first misinformation action reports have just been released by the signatories to that code, and I think there are about eight signatories. I think that is a good start. I think it needs to be watched very carefully.

I think the other thing that governments can do is ensure compliance. The Victorian government in particular seems to have very good guidelines around political advertising or government advertising, but it is also ensuring that there is compliance around authorisations and that political actors that do put out messages on social media are using the right authorisations and being transparent around that.

**Dr READ:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I might go with the next question. And just following up on those points, would you be supportive of truth-in-advertising laws similar to those that operate in South Australia?

**Dr CARSON:** It is a really good question. I have some caution around truth in advertising for the simple reason that: who is the arbiter of truth? Also in the past when it was introduced in the federal jurisdiction for only a year, political actors gamed the legislation in order to slow down political communication and election campaigns, and I think that is detrimental to democratic discourse. Political campaigns and political communication are essential to try and get mass participation, which is one of the central tenets of a healthy democracy in Australia. I think we are very fortunate to have compulsory voting, so we do have good participation, but another really important element of that is having an informed citizenry that are taking note of what the political communication and the campaigns are in order to make an informed choice when it comes to the ballot box.

My concern around truth in advertising is that it might interrupt those processes of political communication. Of course no-one wants to see falsehoods in advertising, but I wonder if there are other ways that it can be dealt with that are not susceptible to being gamed in the way that a legislative response might deliver. Having said that, South Australia seems to be able to do it, the ACT is about to bring it in and I think the Northern Territory has it. I am sure there are better experts than me that really focus on truth in advertising that can say what is special about those jurisdictions that make it workable. But it was not so workable in the federal sphere back under the Keating era.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. And have you done any work specifically to have a look at the truth in advertising in any of those state jurisdictions?

**Dr CARSON:** No, that is outside the area I am in. I am more around social media and the traditional media and the way that they perpetuate mis and disinformation, whether inadvertently or advertently.

**The CHAIR:** No worries. Thank you. I might go to Ms Lovell for the next question.

**Ms LOVELL:** Thanks very much, Chair. And thank you very much for your presentation, Professor Carson. Professor Carson, you touched on just before about the balancing about misinformation and also the freedom of speech—in restricting freedom of speech. One of the themes that has come through from a number of presenters is that they have been opposed to the government really having too much restriction on what could be said on social media, because of the impact that that could have on freedom of speech. I was just wondering if you could talk to us a little bit about how we can balance that freedom of speech and still prevent the spreading of misinformation.

**Dr CARSON:** Yes. It is really the core question, isn't it? I guess I would start by saying we have never had unfettered freedom of speech in a democracy that adheres to the Westminster system. It is about balancing responsible speech without government overreach, and I think my work looking at Singapore and Indonesia has shown that there has been government overreach in those places. And a clear example of that is that the POFMA legislation that came in in Singapore—which is to deal with fake news—in 2019 has been used something like 70 times. The majority of it was used in the 10-day election campaign in 2020 in Singapore against political opposition and journalists. So there we see that it has been used in a censorial capacity and to limit the communications of those that would oppose the incumbent government. That is not something that I think is desirable or something that we would want to import into our democracy.

What I do think, though, is that there needs to be really sober, sensible discussions about what responsible speech is, and that we cannot have an unfettered space that allows anyone to say anything at any time, for the harms that it causes. An example of that is with the local government elections. We are doing a study at the moment, which I am presenting on tomorrow at a conference in Canberra, which finds that part of the lack of gender parity or of women wanting to put their hand up for local office is that they are victims of being trolled online, of harassment, of abuse, and also that it is those women under 40 that are particularly susceptible to this. When they have also got other competing things that are limiting their capacity to put their hand up for office, this is just another fairly significant turn-off about wanting to participate in political office.

So we find that there is a missing cohort, that women do actually have greater electability, it would seem, by analysing the data, but there are just not as many women putting their hands up, and part of this is because of that online trolling that goes on. So it is a balancing act, and I think it is really important we do not have government overreach but there needs to be mechanisms in place to ensure that harmful speech is stripped off the platforms.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Hall.

**Ms HALL:** Thank you, Professor Carson. That is probably a good segue to my question. Throughout the course of the inquiry I have been really interested in the impacts of trolling on women, and I know myself and many colleagues and many women in the Parliament have some pretty shocking examples of things that are said to them via social media channels. So I was wondering if you could expand a little bit on your work in terms of the research into local government elections and if you had any recommendations in terms of how the platforms could deal with trolling or how we could make any legal changes to better protect women in this environment.

**Dr CARSON:** Thank you. It is a great question. I do not have recommendations that are complete just yet. The work that we have been doing on the Victorian local government election is both qualitative and quantitative, where we have done two surveys, one of candidates and one of those who were successful, to see what motivations there are and what obstacles there are in place. Certainly online trolling comes up as being a real obstacle for women. Men of course are not immune to these sorts of behaviours too, but it seems to us that women are disproportionately targeted, particularly younger women, where appearance and other non-electable qualities tend to get overprioritised in the online space. We have also been doing qualitative research with interviews with 15 women about what their experiences are and have done a more granular look at the things that motivate women to put their hand up for office but also factors that push them out of considering running or of early attrition, and we are seeing that intimidation online is a factor there.

But I can offer some recommendations with the work that I have done on that misinformation report looking at Singapore and also Indonesia with Facebook, and this involved interviews with civil society actors, human

rights activists, the platforms themselves, academics and journalists as well as fact checkers, and what we found there is that the platforms have three major broad strategies to deal with this. It is to inform the public through media literacy campaigns; to reduce misinformation that is not high-quality information, but to take it down would start getting into that area of government overreach or of platform overreach, so it is to turn down the algorithmic response to that; and to take down information that is harmful. And that has until now focused on disinformation, but COVID-19 showed that misinformation can also cause real-life harm, and so the platforms have had to re-evaluate their policies on that, and I think that has been a good thing. They do this both through AI and through non-AI measures, and there is a multitudinal range of ways in which they are able to do those three things, from fact-checking, from community standards, from having users report content and now having an oversight committee to make sure that there is some transparency around those decisions. I think all these things are good. They can be improved, and this is where the misinformation and disinformation code of practice I think is so important, because it ensures that the platforms remain accountable and have reporting mechanisms so that people like you and people like me can scrutinise those reports and see that they are doing their best effort, not just an average effort.

As I said at the outset, I am very cautious about any sort of legislative response when it comes to misinformation. Disinformation I do not deal with so much. I see that as, you know, foreign interference and really deliberate campaigns to harm the democratic process. I look more at the insidious processes of misinformation, which is where everyday people can inadvertently spread misinformation, and I think it needs to have a multipronged approach that involves communication of media literacy campaigns, digital literacy campaigns, particularly through schools. Having said that, with three children I find they have got pretty good media literacy campaigns. In fact some of the studies show it is older people that are most susceptible to this, and so maybe we need to think about reaching those older cohorts that are used to traditional media mechanisms for getting their information about being aware of when they are coming up against information that is low quality online.

**Ms HALL:** So do you think that for younger women it is a disincentive to actually put your hand up in the first place because they see how women are treated, but for older women perhaps the social media literacy is something that you get involved in and then you find out the harsh realities of the way people will speak to you online and the things that they will say and the threats?

**Dr CARSON:** Yes, that is not a bad way of putting it, and it is something I would like to explore further. It seems to be coming out in our interviews so far. I mean, there are a lot of related factors here of course. Older women have often raised their families and are more in a position to be able to put their hand up, and I think there are still limitations around balancing work-life juggles; unfortunately that is a disincentive for younger women. Having said that, we know that Victoria has got the highest level of female local government successful candidates in history. I think it is just over 40 per cent now, which is a record. That is to be commended, and I think the Victorian government is on track at this stage for getting that 50-50 parity by 2025. But there are some hurdles that do need to be addressed, and one is ensuring that there is adequate child care for women to be able to put their hand up—younger women—and to be able to run for office, because I do not think it is a lack of interest. Often we hear that maybe women are not interested in politics. I see no evidence of that. I think they are. It is just these impediments, and the two that we are exploring at the moment with my University of Melbourne colleagues are those work-life impediments and also what is going on in the political communication space with the targeting of women, particularly younger women, in that space.

**Ms HALL:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Meddick.

**Mr MEDDICK:** Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Dr Carson. It has just been really illuminating. I just want to if I can for a minute tap into your journalistic expertise. What I am interested in is the spread of misinformation and disinformation in an intentional manner by people who have a particular political ideology who masquerade as legitimate journalists, even to the extent of, say for instance, converting their garage into having backdrops that they then use for changing the backdrop behind them to look like legitimate news studios and news desks and printing lanyards saying that they are an accredited journalist with that particular organisation. It is not registered anywhere. They just invent it themselves. Then casting that sort of stuff online, which innocent people will look at and think, 'Well, this is a legitimate news outlet spreading particular information, and it must be true because there's a banner at the front that says "XX News"' and stuff like that. I

am wondering if there is from your point of view as an accredited journalist something that we can do—a recommendation in our final report, for instance—from perhaps a legislative perspective, or whether we have got to bring in the big social media players to cut these people out? My concern is that deliberate spread of information that is wrong just because it is ideologically driven and legitimising it when it is not legitimate.

**Dr CARSON:** Yes, it is a complex problem, and you have articulated it really well. I think at one extreme we want to be cautious about any sort of licensing of professional journalists. It is something that marked Australia's very early history when newspapers were licensed and there was a lot of political interference in those very early days of settlement. Having said that, there are actors who deliberately spread disinformation, as you have just described, and I will refer to the death tax, without wanting to be partisan, only because I have done an in-depth study of that. What we found there was that the whole media ecosystem was responsible for that story having so much life, and even though it was only a small number of actors that were spreading it in the online space, it accounted for 0.006 per cent of political chatter during the campaign. It was the same persistent actors that were doing it. I think they fit the description of some of the people or organisations that you might be describing. What was concerning, I guess, most about that was the legacy media, traditional media, that does have trust with the public—and we know this from various studies that are done; the public does not think of the media just as one homogenous mass, it does differentiate between some organisations being more trusted than others—and we found that the NewsCorp media in particular on 51 per cent of occasions did not disavow the audience that the death tax was not a true story, and I think that is really problematic. The other major media outlets, such as Nine and the Guardian and Seven, usually—in most cases—did say that it was not a true reflection of ALP policy.

I think there is a really important role for journalists to play here, and it is a recommendation that we make in this particular paper that is about to be published that journalists have a responsibility to arbitrate on claims where they know what the answer is. It is very difficult for politicians to arbitrate on claims we also found. So one of the things we found with the death tax was that every time Labor had spokespeople that would go out and say that it was not part of their policy platform, it actually increased and amplified the story. International studies also show that political adjudication can lead to a backfire effect and will actually have members of the public more entrenched in their original viewpoints. But when journalists adjudicate, they have a different response. They actually have higher trust in those media outlets and are more likely to return to them. So to answer your question in part, I think there is a responsibility here for journalists to not do 'he said, she said' reporting. I think we have gone beyond that stage. That was a legacy of the 20th century where there was an American ideal of objective reporting. We have moved beyond that now, and we need journalists to be sense makers.

The platforms here play a role as well, as does ACMA, with the registration, I guess, with the ACCC news media bargaining code of who are credible media outlets that produce public interest journalism and who are not. Those producing public interest journalism and those that are eligible to be able to negotiate to get funding under the new media bargaining code from the big platforms, that might be a starting point to be able to sift out between the quality and the low quality. I also think the platforms have the capacity, as part of their inform, reduce and take-down approach, to reduce the algorithmic currency and impact of some of those really low quality news sources once they have been identified as being low quality. However, I do emphasise I think it is a multipronged and multi-actor approach, because just as we do not want political overreach, we do not want commercial multinational companies being the arbiter of what is real and what is not real. That is why I think we need to have all these stakeholders working together, and I am hoping we are starting to see that with the development of the mis and disinformation code.

**Mr MEDDICK:** Thank you so much. It is really illuminating. I guess the most recent example of what I am talking about is the anti-vax movement that have really taken over that space and are pushing that agenda, which is quite harmful when we look at what we are trying to achieve and trying to get out of the situation that we are in. But they are very adept at it.

**Dr CARSON:** May I add something to that, because that raises another really important point, and that is that there is a commitment now—and I think the pandemic has really illuminated this—from Twitter and Facebook and some of the other big tech companies that they will prioritise credible information from the WHO and the medical authorities of each nation. I think that is a really important first step to be able to amplify the credible information and deamplify the information that is low quality. I think when it is misinformation it can be deamplified, when it is disinformation and it is causing harm it needs to be taken down.

**Mr MEDDICK:** Great. Thanks so much. That is good to hear, thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. You mentioned a paper that is about to be published with recommendations. When is that going to be published? Are you able to tell us?

**Dr CARSON:** Hopefully in the next week or two. I mean, in academic publishing you never know when the journals are going to put it up online, but I am very happy to forward it as soon as it is out.

**The CHAIR:** That would be fantastic if you could do that, if you could forward that through our secretariat. Also, you made reference to the in-depth study you had done on the death tax. Is that publicly available as well?

**Dr CARSON:** Oh, sorry. That was the one I was talking about that is about to be published.

**The CHAIR:** That is the one that is about to go; okay.

**Dr CARSON:** The publication with recommendations is already published and available. I can send that through. It is on the La Trobe University website, and I also did a policy briefing on it for the University of Melbourne and it is up on the Melbourne School of Government website as well.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Fantastic. Thank you. Mr Melhem.

**Mr MELHEM:** Thank you, Chair. Professor Carson, it is good to see you again full of knowledge. Mr Meddick actually took my question. But going back to that, are you able to expand a bit on what sort of initiatives governments and social media platforms—you touched on it in your answer—can put in place? Is there any specific initiative we can actually put in place to improve the quality of journalism. The second question is: what do you think of Facebook banning Donald Trump for two years as a case study? Is that something that is a good thing or a bad thing? What do you think about that?

**Dr CARSON:** Well, you certainly ask the tough questions.

**Mr MELHEM:** I can declare a conflict—exactly.

**Dr CARSON:** Let us start with the Donald Trump question. Let us look at the history first of all. Facebook and Twitter had a policy that political actors by definition could not be disingenuous actors. They tend to use the term ‘disingenuous actors’ or ‘inauthentic actors’ rather than ‘disinformation’, and they had the viewpoint 12 months ago that political actors could not be inauthentic actors because by definition they are putting out political viewpoints and whether their viewpoints are true or false, they are political viewpoints. They had to step back from that position—and this is something that comes out in my report—when they recognised that real-world harms can happen through political speech, and Donald Trump certainly demonstrated that with the incitement to violence of Capitol Hill. Because that led to a real-world harm, it led to civilian deaths, it was I think a wise move—although one that came too late—to deal with the political disinformation that was coming from Donald Trump. And so he was taken off the platform and I think he should have been, but I think there was a failing from the platforms around transparency and accountability, and the transparency was to have really clear rules in place.

Their oversight committee illuminated the lack of transparency around application of their own rules and made a ruling that Facebook had to be clearer. It could not do an indefinite suspension because it had not made that one of its rules of engagement or rules of use for their platform. They have since come back and they have made those rules more transparent and have not given Trump a lifelong ban but a two-year ban. I think that is heading in the right direction. I think it is a shame that some of these problems were not pre-empted earlier and that the platforms have come in a little bit late to this, but I think the principles of accountability and transparency need to come first and foremost. Having rules so that everyone knows what they are abiding by and if someone is in breach of that, whether they are a political actor or not, is an important first step.

As to Cesar Melhem’s second question about what recommendations can be put in place with journalists, I mean, this is a tricky one. I think it probably speaks to my answer before about recognising those that come from established media organisations where they have access to press conferences and so forth. And those that do not carry the authority of a masthead or of an established brand, less attention is given to their work unless it is deemed credible under other forms of verification. I do not think there is a clear-cut answer here. I would be against any form of outright licensing of media for the reasons that I have already outlined, but I think working

with stakeholders such as ACMA, with the platforms and working with the journalists union, there is a shared goal there—that we want quality journalism that is conveying accurately political information, and we want this because it leads to better informed citizenry, greater participation and greater democratic health.

**Mr MELHEM:** If I may, Chair, going back to the Donald Trump issue, which I agree with, the downside of that: how can we prevent a platform like Facebook, for example, making a wrong call because another political leader somewhere does not agree simply with his or her comments and barring them from, let us say, Facebook? The same thing goes with Twitter et cetera. So is it then time for us to start thinking locally and globally about how we regulate that industry, or self-regulation should take care of it? Because I can see the danger. I agree with the Donald Trump thing. What about if they make the wrong call because they do not like that particular comment from a particular leader, for example? So what are your thoughts on that?

**Dr CARSON:** Well, I think it gets back to the transparency of having what the community standards are with all the different platforms, and I think they have had some time to mature and to have some fairly detailed community standards now, making those available to anyone that participates in their platforms. Ultimately they are commercial entities, and people engage on the platforms in a voluntary capacity. If they are not prepared to abide by those standards, then I think the platforms have a right to kick people off their platforms whether they are political actors or not. But I also think there is a great reticence coming out of Facebook and Twitter, which are organisations that are born out of liberal democracies, to want to curtail freedom of speech. And I cannot think of any examples that come to mind where just because of a difference of opinion a political actor has been taken off the platform. You might want to correct me on that. The reason Trump was taken off was not because of a difference of opinion; he was taken off because of the incitement of violence which led to real-world harm.

**Mr MELHEM:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Erdogan.

**Mr ERDOGAN:** Thank you. I have enjoyed your contribution, Associate Professor. I just want to ask a question. We have talked about or heard about the problem with separating credible information from low-quality information. We have heard issues about misinformation. The more I hear this the more I think there may be a role for the government to regulate the sector. We have seen the Australian Press Council—recently MEAA withdrew. That is a self-regulatory system that applies to the Australian Press Council. Maybe the landscape is a lot more complex than what was traditionally in Australia and globally, so maybe there is a role for government regulation because of the increasing complexity. And, as you outlined, I do want to say that ultimately to expect social media platforms to self-regulate, with the lack of their commercial interests when it comes to anything interesting, the cynics out there are saying, ‘Why didn’t they take action sooner whilst he was still President?’ and ‘They acted after the fact’—I think that is the issue. What I am trying to say is maybe the government needs to step in because there is a failure of the lack of regulation or self-regulation of the past. Like with any market failure in the economic system, the government has to step in. Would you agree with that?

**Dr CARSON:** I think it is early days for Australia. I would be hesitant about not giving the code of practice time to see whether it works. For example, Europe has been turning its mind to these questions for a lot longer than what we have in a formal capacity. Their code of practice by the digital platforms against disinformation was formalised in 2018. It is an evolving space, as I think everyone here acknowledges. Even in Europe they are now looking at the important role that misinformation plays, not just disinformation. And it is based on some of those conversations that Australia, which initially was looking at a code of practice against disinformation, expanded the title out to include misinformation, with that recognition, as we have discussed here today, that COVID-19 misinformation can cause real-world harm.

That code of practice only came into being in February this year. The first reports were handed down at the end of May by the platforms. One of the things I think we need to think about is that it is voluntary. At the moment it has about eight signatories, and there could be an asymmetry in the expectation of the companies that have signed up compared to those that have not. I would argue that it is the non-signatories that we really need to look at rather than the signatories that at least have a good-faith proposition to be able to improve the quality of information in the online space. Those that are not signatories are probably where mis and disinformation are most likely to go unchecked. We also need to be mindful about technologies that enable encrypted

conversations where it is not clear how much mis and disinformation is occurring, whether that is WhatsApp or other types of grouped communities where mis and disinformation is able to flow.

One of the things that we know from researching other countries is that in Australia the most popular platform is Facebook. Facebook are a signatory. In other countries, such as India and Brazil, it is WhatsApp—those encrypted peer-to-peer networks where mis and disinformation is occurring. So there is not a one-size-fits-all solution. It needs to be tailored to each individual country. But we can learn from other countries.

I think it is worth giving the voluntary regulation a chance, keeping in mind that the ACMA have a watching brief, that if they are not satisfied that the platforms are acting in good faith and dealing with mis and disinformation, they can make a recommendation to the government to go for mandatory regulation, which is something that the EU is considering. But given it has only been in place for three months, I am hesitant to say that Australia needs to go down that path at this stage.

**Mr ERDOGAN:** Just as a follow-up, I guess, on journalism and social media and the way they interact, is it a reflection that a lot of the public have lost trust in mainstream media, that they are going to these alternative platforms as their main source of information? And now that the government has stepped in effectively to protect those with vested interests in the media through the mandatory media bargaining code, we cannot be—again, there was not any interference or any strong lobbying on behalf of certain commercial actors for that code to come about. Again, it comes back to the point that maybe these issues are too important to be left to self-regulation now. They are life-and-death matters now. A lot of people are not going to the mainstream media; they are going to social media. Isn't it naive to just assume that they are going to self-regulate without putting their commercial interests first?

**Dr CARSON:** So a couple of important points there. In Australia we have got about 50 per cent—we are just reaching that crossover of where people get their information from. Up until the 2019 federal election most people were still getting their content from traditional media. Now 50 per cent are primarily getting their news online and 50 per cent are not getting their news online. The US, UK, other places, they have already crossed over that point, and most people are getting their information from digital platforms and from social media sites, as you identify.

Is it true that media trust is falling? Yes, that is true. However, there are a couple of caveats on that. One is that not everyone thinks about media in the same way. When there are surveys—such as when the University of Canberra do their annual state of the news report, which is an arm of Reuters out of Oxford University, or Essential Media—we find that traditional media is still more trusted than social media, and the ABC is at the top of that tree of trust. At the bottom of the trust graphs are blogs and personal websites of those actors or would-be journalists that are putting out information under their own labels, so to speak. The public are reasonably discerning on that. They have very low trust in those settings compared to traditional media.

Now, I did say that media trust overall is tracking downwards. There is an exception to this. We have found with some survey work that we have been doing—myself, with the University of Sydney and the University of Melbourne—and as well this is reflected in the findings of other studies, that during the pandemic media trust has gone up, media use has gone up. I think it is because it is life and death issue. People need to know about the health information and what they can trust, and they have been returning to more credible sources, and I have written about this on the *Conversation* at the beginning of the pandemic.

We have done representative studies across the US and across Australia and in fact we have got one in the field at the moment, the third iteration of this. We found with the first two—the first one went out in the field May last year, when Victoria was in lockdown; the second one went out September last year, when Victoria again was in lockdown; and we have got the third one going out as Victoria emerges from lockdown—that media use had gone up substantially and in Australia Australians and Victorians have much higher trust in established media. There are some partisan differences, but they are nowhere near as pronounced as the US. Australians still have quite a diverse media diet. If you are a left-wing partisan, you are still consuming some right-wing media; if you are a right-wing partisan, you are still consuming left-wing media in your daily or weekly media diet. We do not see that pattern in the US. It is super partisan there, and I think that is something that we need to be cautious of, because what we end up getting is a dissensual public sphere, where you get real polar positions, and it makes enacting public policy really difficult. I think that is why we are seeing disagreement in the US

between the states and the federal government there and between the politicians and the medical experts on how to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Australia we have had disagreements on some things, but on the really important things there has been bipartisan support, which has been shown by having the national response, national cabinet, to deal with the pandemic, and there has been broad agreement that trust in the health advice is something that needs to be taken seriously, and by and large the mainstream media have put out fairly consistent messages around the need for the measures that have been put in place. Of course there is some disagreement, but compared to the United States there is nowhere near the partisan patterns that we see emerging there. So, no, I do not think it necessitates that we need a legislative response to dealing with media quality. There has always been a range of media quality. I guess what makes it so important this century is the global spread—that misinformation can spread much further, faster and wider than what it ever could when it was consigned to geographical borders of how far a newspaper reached or how far the radio transmitter went.

**Mr ERDOGAN:** Thank you for that. If I may be indulged, I have just one short question. Going back to a different point, you had a really good, interesting insight into, I guess, the effects on gender diversity and equality in society. I wonder if there are many studies that have looked at the different impacts on different cultural groups or people from different educational backgrounds, because I see that a lot of the information might be targeted at more of an academic level—tertiary-educated professionals effectively. Are there different avenues or different data on what blue-collar people, more working-class people, might be attracted to or where they get the information from et cetera, how they are impacted by different platforms or how different cultural groups are impacted? It might be different from, I guess, what everyone else sees.

**Dr CARSON:** Yes, it is a really important point, and probably one that I should have highlighted. Yes, we do see different responses with those different demographic groups. We find that those that usually have lower levels of formal education are more attracted to information from friends and family on social media than from traditional media, and we also see that in the United States. English as a second language also places a reliance on peer networks beyond the traditional media. I am not the absolute expert in this, but we do have some of that demographic breakdown where we see differences. I guess what I would say is that compared to what we see in the US, we do not see any of the extremes. But that is not a reason for us not to be vigilant, because there are partisan patterns and there are patterns around demographics that I would not like to see exacerbated.

**Mr ERDOGAN:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mrs McArthur, do you have another question?

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. Yes, I do. I am just interested—the emphasis seems to be that the bias is all in sort of right-wing media or groups that are, as Mr Meddick might put it, not authorised who are coming forward. But is there not bias in the conventional media as well? I mean, many people would think that the ABC is particularly biased. Who judges the bias? Isn't this all a very subjective sort of argument as to how you are going to regulate this sort of opinion?

**Dr CARSON:** So do left-wing groups perpetuate misinformation and disinformation? Yes, they do. I can only tell you what I know from the research that we have done, and we find overwhelmingly when it comes to political weaponisation of terms such as 'fake news', it comes more from the right than it does from the left—that it is right-wing politicians that use 'fake news' as a terminology and 'alternative facts' and 'post-truth'. What we have also found is that it is usually minority parties or those that have a low public profile, with a couple of exceptions, that use those terminologies, and they use them in order to increase their public profile. This is not to say we do not see evidence of it on the left; we do. We just see much more of it on the right.

How do we judge bias? Well, we are not really judging bias. We are judging usage of terminologies, doing a quantitative study of who is using this language and how are they using it. So it is not relying on the subjectivity of the researchers in doing this. It is looking just to see who is using the language and in what context they use the language. I am only speaking about Australia here.

You asked about the ABC. Our study of the death tax did find that the ABC had a higher number of stories where it did not tell its audiences that it was a fake-news campaign or that it was not part of ALP policy, which was a little surprising. I think part of this might go to the charter that ABC journalists adhere to, where they feel that balance is by presenting 'he said, she said' reporting, and one of the cautions that we have made in that

particular paper is that the ABC needs to recalculate the way that it deals with stories like this in future and allow its journalists to be sense makers for its audience. We did not see these sorts of problems coming from Seven West Media, from the *Guardian* or from the Nine media.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Can I just follow that up then? Did you notice that the ABC called out the Medicare campaign?

**Dr CARSON:** I cannot recall on the 2016 study. I would have to go back and read through. We were looking, on the Medicare campaign, more at the political advertising and how it affected audience receptions or voter receptions and their attitudes towards health policy. We also looked at front-page coverage of newspapers, and we looked at the ABC's coverage—how often they had it rather than what the actual content was. We do know that the ABC ran a lot of Medicare stories after the paid advertising around Medicare, just as the 12 daily newspapers in Australia also increased their front-page coverage of Medicare, which added to the thesis that the paid advertising led to a free media increase in attention to that story. But we did not get into evaluating the content of those stories for that particular piece of research, more just the prevalence of it.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Lovell, did you have a question?

**Ms LOVELL:** No, I do not, Chair. Sorry, I am going to have to excuse myself for 3 o'clock.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, no worries. Thank you. Are there any final questions before we finish up? No? All right. I had a couple, but given the time can I thank you, Dr Carson, for your time today. It has been a really interesting discussion. It has run over time, but I think it was really interesting and the content was really valuable for our inquiry. If there are any further questions, would you be willing to take those on notice as well? I was interested in some of the media literacy programs that you mentioned in your report that have been undertaken in Indonesia and in Singapore as well and learning a little bit more about those too, but if we could get those to you offline, that would be fantastic. But can I thank you for your time today. It has been a very valuable session and we will find it very useful during our inquiry, so thank you very much for your time.

**Dr CARSON:** Thank you. It was a pleasure, and I commend the committee on running this important inquiry. Good luck with your findings and recommendations.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, and that ends this session for today. Thank you.

**Committee adjourned.**