

Submission to the ‘Inquiry into the impact of social media on elections and electoral administration’ by the Electoral Matters Committee of the Parliament of Victoria

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How is social media changing elections?

The first point to make is that while social media is certainly changing the way that political communication takes place – and thus having an effect on the business of elections – it is very difficult these days to isolate its influence from the influence of media and communications practices more generally. In other words, while a focus on the impact of social media is important, it needs to be viewed as part of a wider media ecology and not considered as an isolated ‘tech problem’. Any examination of the spread of misinformation and disinformation (which is at the heart of the impact of social media on elections) needs to consider the phenomenon from both a technological *and* social perspective, and look at how social media and ‘traditional’ media are together altering the way in which political communication takes place.

The premise underlying any concerns about the ways in which social media is changing elections is that a healthy democracy requires the circulation of reliable information about social issues so that the electorate can make informed decisions about which candidates they wish to put their trust into. Since approximately 2015/16 concern has grown that social media is no longer allowing for an opening up of the democratic process, but is instead being gamed by certain parties to corrupt political discourse and to spread misleading, overly biased and often inflammatory information. There are a number of basic reasons inherent in the nature of social media which allow for this. Social media thrives on engagement with content (people producing, commenting upon and sharing opinions), and engagement is triggered by emotive, unusual or extreme stories. As such the

content which is most widely shared tends towards the sensational, the stark and the controversial. The way information is circulated also allows for it to be easily taken out of context, and thus be used to create false impressions of the original speaker/writer's intentions. All of these issues exist in traditional media as well, but on social media they happen at a scale and speed which is noticeably more problematic than in the past. It is this that can then be gamed for propagandistic purposes.

What problems have you seen with social media and online advertising around elections?

Social media can be used for political advertising and propaganda in two ways. The first is the traditional use of bought adverts which show up in people's feeds, or on the layout of webpages embedded via links in people's posts. Problems around this sort of political advertising primarily come when it is 'disguised' as something other than it is (for example by taking over the mast head of a newspaper or website), or when it is targeted in covert ways (for example, the microtargeting of adverts enabled by personal data scraping).

There is also, however, 'non-official' advertising – i.e. that created by users in the form of memes or other sharable content – which is then circulated and boosted by campaigns. This can range from a clip from TV shared along with a comment, to sophisticated amateur videos, and it is now an equally important aspect of modern political advertising. As this type of content does not originate with official campaigns, the question of possible regulation of it is far more complicated.

What actions have you seen governments take in relation to social media/online advertising and elections? What are the most effective ways to address any problems with social media and online advertising around elections?

Actions in response to the problematic effects of (official) online advertising mostly relate to either *accountability* or *transparency*. Reports, such as that from the UK Parliament's Select Committee on 'fake news', have made various recommendations relating to these (the extent to which governments have then acted upon these reports is another issue). A first recommendation that has been put forward in various quarters is to ensure that online advertising by political parties is subject to the same regulations that offline advertising is. This would involve ensuring that advertising is labelled as such, and that its source is made clear. A related issue is that there is transparency about what advertising is being used by political parties. This would ensure that so-called 'dark advertising' – that which is sent only to a select target audience and is not visible to other audiences – has an element of accountability to it.

A more problematic issue is the extent to which political adverts should be regulated in respect of the truthfulness of the claims they make. It would be extremely difficult to create parameters for what qualifies as truthful or not in all but the most extreme cases, and is likely to prove counter effective in that controversy will generate increased publicity and thus again be open to manipulation.

More effective is likely to be investment in media literacy education, along with cooperation between local bodies and the tech companies to identify ways in which the specific issues that surface for a particular election (and thus require localised cultural knowledge) can be addressed.