

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

Mr Benjamin Cronshaw

Organisation name:

Your position or role:

SURVEY

Q1. Encouraging social media platforms to take more action against inappropriate activities (such as bots, harassment, trolling, spreading fake news).

Response: Very good idea

Social media companies have a responsibility for the content that is spread on their platforms. Harassment and trolling can have a negative impact on public discourse, including freedom of speech. People may be intimidated into not expressing themselves online if they face harassment. The spread of fake news can also have a negative impact on public knowledge. Taking a stronger stand on these negative behaviours would help make social media a positive place for everyone to express themselves and find accurate information.

Q2. The government funding media literacy campaigns to help people know what they can trust online.

Response: Good idea

A government funded media literacy campaign would be a good idea. There is a range of misinformation and scams being perpetrated online, including relying on people being inexperienced or gullible about online claims. A literacy campaign could help people discern what is true or not online, which could apply to political fake news, fake news in other areas (e.g. health) and scams.

Q3. Requiring public disclosure of all online political advertising (for example, webpages created by social media platforms showing all of the political advertising on their platform and who paid for it, or webpages created by parties/candidates showing all of the online ads they have run).

Response: Good idea

Transparency in political advertising is important. Requiring public disclosure of online political advertising sounds like a reasonable idea, which would enable greater transparency about the spread of political information on social media.

Q4. Requiring online electoral advertising to state who paid for it.

Response: Very good idea

Transparency around political donations and funding is critical for the maintenance of a healthy, democratic system. There is concern that people or organisations with more money can have undue

influence over the political system, by ingratiating themselves with candidates and political parties through donations. Donations are a legitimate form of political engagement and for people to support policies and parties that they agree with. However, given the influence that monetary donations can have on the political process, there needs to be transparency about the source of funding for political advertising. This means that donations or who pays for political advertising (hence who could have more influence) can be publicly known and scrutinised.

Q5. Government support for independent and trust-worthy organisations that can fact-check claims or identify misinformation.

Response: Very good idea

Fact-checking groups play a critical role in reviewing claims and arguments in the public sphere. It is important to hold all sides to account. The mere existence of fact-checking groups, moreover, can encourage politicians to avoid making untrue statements (which could be exposed as untrue). It is good to have vigorous and passionate debate, but we should also have a common appreciation for the truth. As the New York Senator Daniel Moynihan once said, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts." The RMIT ABC Fact Check (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/factcheck/>), for example provides a good service. Funding for independent and trust-worthy organisations that can fact-check claims or misinformation would provide an invaluable service. Beyond politicians, there are also many spurious claims made by other groups. These claims can be sponsored by foreign groups, including trying to spread misinformation and destabilise our democracy. The involvement of Russia in western elections has been particularly concerning, such as with the 2016 American Presidential election. Fact-checking can provide a great service to the community to see whether certain claims are true or not, but also see the broader information (e.g. if something is somewhat true, but exaggerated or misleading). Fact-checking serves to hold public debate to a higher, more accurate standard, which is good for democracy and effective public discourse.

Q6. Using independent organisations (e.g. the Victorian Electoral Commission) as a source of reliable information about electoral candidates.

Response: Very good idea

The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) could have a good role in providing reliable information about electoral candidates. This could include their work experience, community organisation involvement and so on. This would provide a good service for the community to find some background information about candidates in their area.

Q7. New laws requiring truth in political advertising.

Response: Good idea

I believe political advertising should not contain information that is untrue. It is not clear how this would be regulated or enforced, particularly over contestable claims e.g. the claim of one party that the other one would, say, cut funding in a particular area. Requiring truth in political advertising would be good so far as it can be realistically enforced.

Q8. Are there other things you'd like to see the government do relating to social media or online advertising and elections?

Response: This is an important area. It is good to get ahead of the problem, so that social media does not have an adverse effect on the conduct of Victorian elections. We have already seen the potential negative impact of social media on the free conduct of elections e.g. foreign interference and spreading of fake news.