

# Distorting the public square

## Political campaigning on social media requires greater regulation

---

*Micro-targeting and regulation of political advertising on social media are key unresolved issues, as evidenced by the 2019 Australian federal election. Other countries are looking to address these issues, and Australia should do the same.*

Discussion paper

**Jordan Guiao**

Adjunct Fellow, Centre for Responsible Technology

**November 2019**

## About The Australia Institute

The Australia Institute is an independent public policy think tank based in Canberra. It is funded by donations from philanthropic trusts and individuals and commissioned research. We barrack for ideas, not political parties or candidates. Since its launch in 1994, the Institute has carried out highly influential research on a broad range of economic, social and environmental issues.

## About the Centre for Responsible Technology

The Australia Institute established the Centre for Responsible Technology to give people greater influence over the way technology is rapidly changing our world. The Centre will collaborate with academics, activists, civil society and business to shape policy and practice around network technology by raising public awareness about the broader impacts and implications of data-driven change and advocating policies that promote the common good.

## Our philosophy

As we begin the 21st century, new dilemmas confront our society and our planet. Unprecedented levels of consumption co-exist with extreme poverty. Through new technology we are more connected than we have ever been, yet civic engagement is declining. Environmental neglect continues despite heightened ecological awareness. A better balance is urgently needed.

The Australia Institute's directors, staff and supporters represent a broad range of views and priorities. What unites us is a belief that through a combination of research and creativity we can promote new solutions and ways of thinking.

## Our purpose - 'Research that matters'

The Institute publishes research that contributes to a more just, sustainable and peaceful society. Our goal is to gather, interpret and communicate evidence in order to both diagnose the problems we face and propose new solutions to tackle them.

The Institute is wholly independent and not affiliated with any other organisation. Donations to its Research Fund are tax deductible for the donor. Anyone wishing to donate can do so via the website at <https://www.tai.org.au> or by calling the Institute on 02 6130 0530. Our secure and user-friendly website allows donors to make either one-off or regular monthly donations and we encourage everyone who can to donate in this way as it assists our research in the most significant manner.

Level 1, Endeavour House, 1 Franklin St  
Canberra, ACT 2601  
Tel: (02) 61300530  
Email: [mail@tai.org.au](mailto:mail@tai.org.au)  
Website: [www.tai.org.au](http://www.tai.org.au)  
ISSN: 1836-9014

## About the author

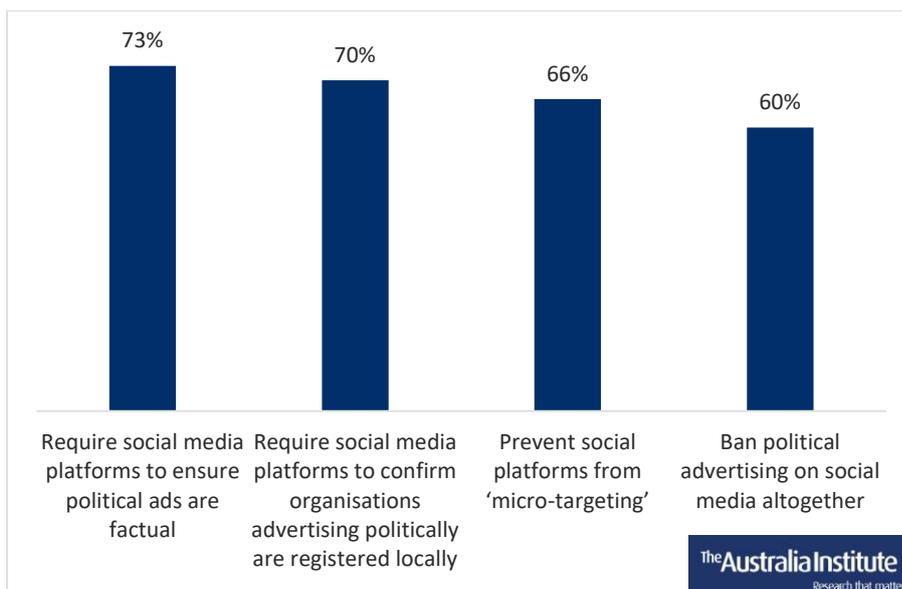
Jordan Guiao is a digital and social media strategist. He is the former Head of Social Media at ABC and SBS. He recently lived and worked in Silicon Valley.

# Summary

Social media has an enormous impact on our political landscape, particularly during election periods. There is an imbalance between the substantial influence social media has on our elections, and the scarce regulatory and management frameworks which govern it. Several issues have come to light during the 2019 Australian federal election, including misinformation, lack of transparency around who is running advertisements and the ability to abuse “micro-targeting”.

New research polling shows that a clear majority of Australians support four regulatory measures for political advertising on social media: requiring social media platforms to ensure political ads are factual and run by organisations that are registered locally, and prevent micro-targeting of ads. 60% of Australians go further, and support a ban on political advertising on social media altogether.

**Figure: Support for political advertising on social media regulations**



Australia is not alone in dealing with the impact of social media on elections. The US and the UK are mobilising ahead of their upcoming elections. In Australia as well, further regulation of social media’s role in the political sphere should be pursued.

# Introduction

Social media is now a powerful force in our society. The most popular social networks, like Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, are used by over 70% of Australians.<sup>1</sup> They are a significant source of news and information. Over 33% of Australians get their news from social media directly. Our major news outlets, like public broadcasters ABC and SBS, commercial news channels like Nine, Seven and Ten, and radio stations rely on social media to drive up to 55% of traffic to their platforms.<sup>2</sup>

Social media platforms also dominate the online advertising market, with Facebook and Instagram's combined share estimated at 51% (Facebook and Instagram are both owned by Facebook, Inc). No other platform has a share of more than 5%.<sup>3</sup>

During election times, social media is a significant platform for news and election campaign information. It is also a significant platform for candidates and political parties to advertise and promote their messages and policies, as well as directly engage with their constituents.

With the technology comes a raft of new issues. The regulatory framework surrounding political advertising on social media is almost non-existent. While other forms of media used during election periods, like television, radio, print and publisher websites are subject to strict election advertising rules, social media is practically a free-for-all.

Social media offers new tools for targeting voters that are subject to abuse and misinformation. Micro-targeting gives the ability to target very specific combinations of demographics, psychographics, user preferences, consumption habits and more to profile voters and spread targeted misinformation.

The lack of governance of political advertising on social media and the issues which result are being looked at on a global scale. In Australia they came to light during the 2019 Australian Federal Election. Internationally, these issues arose during the 2016 Presidential Election in the US and the Brexit referendum in the UK. Both jurisdictions are now investigating measures to regulate this area.

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on unique monthly users; see for example ACCC (2019) *Digital Platforms Inquiry Final Report 2019*, p 43, <https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Digital%20platforms%20inquiry%20-%20final%20report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> ACCC (2019) *Digital Platforms Inquiry Final Report 2019*, p 15, 105

<sup>3</sup> ACCC (2019) *Digital Platforms Inquiry Final Report 2019*, p 9, 97–98

# Political and election advertising on social media

There are several issues facing political and election advertising on social media, including the difference between how social media is regulated compared to other mass media, and the way social media facilitates micro-targeting, unaccountable “dark” ads and misinformation.

## REGULATORY DISPARITY

---

There is a significant disparity in the rules and regulations governing political and election advertising between social media and other forms of mass media. While social media platforms claim that they are not media outlets, many Australians functionally use their services as media platforms. Social media platforms have significant power in the media landscape.

The media regulatory system is a complex structure of separate frameworks for specific media formats. There are distinct regulations between print publications, online news publications, radio and television broadcasting, advertising and telecommunications services. Other relevant content regulations for copyright and defamation also apply.

Part of the challenge with social media platforms is that they have blurred the boundaries between these distinct formats, and their services have applicable functions across all previous formats, like news consumption, content delivery, advertising and telecommunications.

Social media platforms are mostly exempt from the relevant regulations. The table below was developed for the ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry Report, and shows the regulatory frameworks across media channels. Social media is represented by the final column, using the ACCC definition of digital platforms, or “DPs”:

**Figure 1: The regulatory frameworks for media and advertising services in Australia**

Industry/sector	Laws/regulations/codes	Main system of regulation	Regulator	Applies to DPs?
Print news publishing	APC statements of principles, standards of practice, and advisory guidelines MEAA Journalist Code of Ethics	Self-regulated	APC	✗
Online news publishing	APC statements of principles, standards of practice, and advisory guidelines	Self-regulated	APC	✗
	<i>Broadcasting Services Act 1992</i> (Cth) schedules 5 and 7 Internet Industry Codes of Practice 2005 Content Services Code 2008	Co-regulated	ACMA	✗
Radio and TV news broadcasting	<i>Radiocommunications Act 1992</i> (Cth) (RA) and regulations <i>Broadcasting Services Act 1992</i> (Cth) (BSA) and regulations Broadcasting licence conditions under the RA and BSA Apparatus licence conditions Relevant regulatory standards set by ACMA Relevant Industry Codes of Practice	Co-regulated	ACMA	✗
Advertising	(Supplied generally) Codes of conduct adopted by AANA and other relevant industry bodies	Self-regulated	Ad Standards and AANA	✓
	Other federal and state legislation regulating advertising of gambling products, medicine, <sup>45</sup>	Co-regulated	ACMA at federal level State and territory regulators	Sometimes
	(Supplied on TV and radio) Broadcasting licence conditions Relevant regulatory standards set by ACMA Relevant Industry Codes of Practice	Co-regulated	ACMA	✗
Telecommunications	<i>Telecommunications Act 1997</i> (Cth) and regulations Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999 (Cth) and regulations Relevant industry codes of practice, including the TCP Code and industry standards made by ACMA Carrier licence conditions	Co-regulated	ACMA	✗
Copyright	<i>Copyright Act 1968</i> (Cth)	Privately-enforced	NA	✓
Defamation	Nationally-uniform State defamation laws	Privately-enforced	NA	✓

This clearly shows an imbalance between the traditional media channels which need to follow strict rules and with material compliance costs, and social media with significantly fewer regulations.

## NO BLACKOUTS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

---

Election blackout is a legally enforced period designed to assist voters to reflect and manage their voting decision days before election time, with the aim of limiting last minute tactics and untested claims from political parties and candidates. The blackout lasts three days, starting on the Wednesday before polling day. It applies for federal, state and territory elections.<sup>4</sup> The blackout only applies to broadcasters, and therefore only limits a part of the advertising campaigns on political parties.<sup>5</sup>

Online platforms like websites, social media and print media are not subject to these restrictions.<sup>6</sup> Any fraudulent or misleading advertising can therefore be published and shared on social media right up until election day.

Broadcasters have heavily criticised the blackout period as outdated and needing update, and many have used their own online platforms (like Seven's 7plus and Ten's 10play) to circumvent the blackout regulation.<sup>7</sup>

## USE OF MICRO-TARGETING

---

Social media platforms like Facebook provide advertisers with new tools to engage customers and potential voters. Because of the large quantity of personal data available on Facebook, advertisers are able to use sophisticated targeting parameters to tailor their messages to users.

Micro-targeting is the practice of using very specific and sophisticated combinations of personal data in order to create a user profile which can be targeted with personalised advertising messages. Micro-targeting became mainstream knowledge after the 2018 scandal with Cambridge Analytica and Facebook. It was revealed that data firm Cambridge Analytica illegally harvested 87 million Facebook user profiles (including approximately 310,000 Australians) for data characteristics in order to target them for false and misleading

---

<sup>4</sup> ACMA (2019) *Election blackout periods*, <https://www.acma.gov.au/election-blackout-periods#the-blackout-period>

<sup>5</sup> ACMA (2019) *Election blackout periods*

<sup>6</sup> ACMA (2019) *Election blackout periods*

<sup>7</sup> Long (2019) *Australia TV networks to stream political advertising online during election black out*, <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2019/05/13/australia-tv-networks-stream-political-advertising-online-during-election-blackout>

advertising which supported the Trump presidential campaign.<sup>8</sup> Similar tactics were used during the Brexit referendum.<sup>9</sup>

A number of issues arise with the use of micro-targeting.

## User network and consent

The connected nature of social networks means there is valuable data in harvesting user connections and their network effects. Though approximately 310,000 Australians were affected by the Cambridge Analytica data breach, only 53 people actively used the quiz which initiated the data harvesting.<sup>10</sup> Micro-targeting leverages user connections and second-hand data points to its advantage, often without people consenting to being targeted.

## Amplifying fringe views and discriminating against vulnerable groups

Micro-targeting allows for granular categorisation and targeting based on specific characteristics and interests. For example, far right groups interested in nationalism or support Facebook Pages that are opposed to immigration can be targeted with messages that amplify their biases and prejudices. Interest in “vaccine controversies”, “climate change denial” and “flat earth” can be targeted with ads; these ads could stoke particular passion points and outrage. Facebook acknowledges the potential for these categories to be misused, having removed 5,000 targeting options “to help prevent misuse”.<sup>11</sup>

In 2017 it was revealed that Facebook could target emotionally vulnerable people as young as 14, who expressed feeling “stressed”, “anxious”, “useless”, like a “failure”, and more.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Chang (2018) *The Facebook and Cambridge Analytica scandal, explained with a simple diagram*, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/3/23/17151916/facebook-cambridge-analytica-trump-diagram>

<sup>9</sup> Scott (2018) *Cambridge Analytica helped ‘cheat’ Brexit vote and US election, claims whistleblower*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/cambridge-analytica-chris-wylie-brexit-trump-britain-data-protection-privacy-facebook/>

<sup>10</sup> Knaus (2018) *Just 53 Australians used Facebook app responsible for Cambridge Analytica breach*, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/apr/10/just-53-australians-used-facebook-app-responsible-for-cambridge-analytica-breach>

<sup>11</sup> McDuling and Duke (2019) *Facebook targeting of extremists, fringe movements in Australia stokes civil unrest fears*, <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/facebook-targeting-of-extremists-fringe-movements-in-australia-stokes-civil-unrest-fears-20190220-p50yyn.html>

<sup>12</sup> Whigham(2017) *Leaked document reveals Facebook conducted research to target emotionally vulnerable and insecure youth*, <https://www.news.com.au/technology/online/social/leaked-document-reveals-facebook-conducted-research-to-target-emotionally-vulnerable-and-insecure-youth/news-story/d256f850be6b1c8a21aec6e32dae16fd>

Target parameters could also be used to discriminate against specific groups, based on ethnicity, race, sexual orientation or religion.

Facebook has since removed many of the target categories, but only as a reaction to scandals or specific news reporting. Facebook continues to make other micro-targeting options available to advertisers today, including user location, postcodes, education, political inclinations and more.

## “Dark” ads and accountability

Facebook “dark” ads are advertisements that are designed to be seen only by the intended recipient. While most content is published into publicly accessible feeds, dark ads are not public and cannot be seen by any followers or friends unless they are part of the target group.<sup>13</sup> Coupled with micro-targeting, dark ads can be problematic because there is little oversight and accountability over the specific messages contained in the ad. Importantly, external tracking can be challenging because, by design, the ad will only be viewed by the person being targeted and the advertiser.

Dark ads can be a damaging tool encouraging division and polarisation, happening without public accountability or scrutiny.

## MISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

---

Existing regulatory challenges become compounded on social media. With exception to South Australia, which makes it an offence to publish inaccurate and misleading election advertising during state elections under Section 113 of SA’s Electoral Act 1985,<sup>14</sup> lying on election advertising is legal for the rest of the country and for federal elections Australia wide. Ad Standards, the body which manages the self-regulation of advertising and marketing complaints in Australia, states that “currently, there is no legal requirement for the content of political advertising to be factually correct”.<sup>15</sup>

A recent research paper by the Australia Institute<sup>16</sup> outlines the current legal regime and identifies truth in political advertising regulations from other jurisdictions that could be

---

<sup>13</sup> Facebook (2019) *Fundamentals: Beginner’s guide*, <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/835452799843730>

<sup>14</sup> *Electoral Act 1985 (SA)*, s 113

<sup>15</sup> Ad Standards (2019) *Political and Election Advertising*, <https://adstandards.com.au/issues/political-and-election-advertising>

<sup>16</sup> Browne (2019) *We can handle the truth: Opportunities for truth in political advertising*, [https://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/P751%20We%20can%20handle%20the%20truth%20%5BWeb%5D\\_0.pdf](https://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/P751%20We%20can%20handle%20the%20truth%20%5BWeb%5D_0.pdf)

adopted in Australia, including the South Australian model discussed above and the New Zealand model of using an industry body as the adjudicator.

Polling results from the paper show strong public support for a variety of truth in political advertising models, including a range of penalties for inaccurate and misleading ads and support for a variety of adjudicators. Overall, 84% of Australians support truth in political advertising laws being introduced.

The report also discusses the relatively recent phenomenon of ad libraries, where digital platforms like Google, Facebook and Twitter make available, for some countries, some information about some advertisements that run on their platforms. The information typically includes some targeting information, the general budget range that the ad spend falls into, and the contents of the ad (or a still frame in the case of a video). While insufficient, these libraries are already allowing journalists and others to monitor ads for inflammatory language, misleading claims, and targeting patterns.

# Social media and the 2019 Australian Federal Election

Social media is a key campaign battleground during election time as a platform for key messages and advertising and direct conversation and engagement with candidates.

Political parties and candidates spend considerable resources on social media, and social media engagement is a common metric for evaluating a campaign. Griffith University Professor Bela Stantic analysed over two million social media comments from over half a million user accounts to correctly predict a win for Scott Morrison in the 2019 federal election. Professor Stantic used the same methodology to also accurately predict a win for Donald Trump and the Brexit referendum vote,<sup>17</sup> although his prediction for the result of the 2017 same-sex marriage plebiscite was incorrect.<sup>18</sup>

Separate analysis of social media election activity showed that the Liberal Party's performance on social media was better than Labor's. The Liberals' campaign Facebook videos were watched three times more than Labor's, despite Labor having more Facebook fans.<sup>19</sup> Scott Morrison and the Liberal Party were also more widely tweeted about and had their messages more widely engaged with over Twitter than Labor and other parties.<sup>20</sup> Labor's election post-mortem report confirmed that senior party members saw digital as an add-on, rather than a foundational advertising platform, and that Labor "faces an urgent need to dramatically improve its digital campaigning capability ... to be effective in countering disinformation on digital platforms of its political rivals".<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Koslowski (2019) *The expert who predicted Trump, Brexit – and Scott Morrison*, <https://www.smh.com.au/federal-election-2019/the-expert-who-predicted-trump-brexit-and-scott-morrison-20190519-p51owf.html>

<sup>18</sup> Tuffley and Stantic (2017) *We learn from our mistakes: How to make better predictions from tweets*, <https://theconversation.com/we-learn-from-our-mistakes-how-to-make-better-predictions-from-tweets-87599>

<sup>19</sup> Knaus (2019) *Liberal party also beat Labor on Facebook in 2019 Australian Federal election*, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/jun/04/liberal-party-also-beat-labor-on-facebook-in-2019-australian-federal-election>

<sup>20</sup> Hinesley (2019) *The 2019 Federal Election is happening on Twitter*, [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_au/topics/company/2019/the-2019-federal-election-is-happening-on-twitter.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_au/topics/company/2019/the-2019-federal-election-is-happening-on-twitter.html)

<sup>21</sup> Worthington (2019) *Labor says Bill Shorten's unpopularity and the lack of strategy to fight Scott Morrison led to shock election loss*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-07/labor-election-review-blames-loss-on-bill-shorten-unpopularity/11678324>

# FAILURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS TO ADDRESS FALSE INFORMATION

---

The current regulatory and governance frameworks have little impact on the way social media platforms regulate their users' content. Because there is very little incentive or material consequences for ensuring an accurate and truthful election campaign process, platforms such as Facebook have failed to address suspicious and fraudulent political activity, including several incidents on political advertising integrity both in the lead up to and during the 2019 Federal Election.

## Incidents of misinformation in the 2019 federal election campaign

It took more than a year for Facebook to bring its political authorisation rules (meaning political advertisers will first have to verify their identity) to Australia after announcing it as a key election integrity measure in 2018. This was also after the Australian Electoral Commission had agitated for more action from Facebook after complaining about a suspicious page called "Hands off our Democracy" which was posting fraudulent content and paying for advertising about the Greens and advocacy group GetUp. The group also used micro-targeting for Australians "interested in Donald Trump" and paid for advertising to reach the group. The AEC threatened Facebook with a court injunction for fear of more fraudulent ads like these in the lead up to the 2019 Election.<sup>22</sup>

Even after the political authorisation process was in place, it was still subject to abuse. Early in 2019, a lobby group called Energy in Australia ran advertising content which shared pro-coal and anti-renewables messages on Facebook. The Facebook Page was authorised to a former Queensland Liberal National MP. The Guardian later revealed that the group was linked to mining conglomerate Glencore, who funded a large covert campaign to increase support for coal. The AEC were unable to take further action because the page complied with Facebook's authorisation rules.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> McGrath (2019) *Facebook probed by Australian Electoral Commission over mysterious political ads*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-26/facebook-electoral-commission-emails-reveal-political-ad-concern/10834736>

<sup>23</sup> Knaus (2019) *Authorities can do nothing about pro-coal ads linked to Glencore campaign*, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/mar/12/authorities-can-do-nothing-about-pro-coal-ads-linked-to-glencore-campaign>

A group called “Unemployed in QLD” attacked Tanya Plibersek in the lead up to the election and paid for Facebook and Twitter ads which claimed that she “thinks that Indians can’t create jobs in Australia”.<sup>24</sup>

The United Australia Party’s \$60 million advertising blitz included a showcase video advertised on Facebook and YouTube criticised as “tacky scaremongering” claiming Labor had ties with communist China and was planning a “clandestine takeover of our country”. Aside from the obviously outlandish claims and amateurish production the campaign was notable for its high volume and high frequency on social media platforms, including during the election blackout period.<sup>25</sup>

The Liberals used Facebook to target owners and fans of popular car brands including Toyota Hiluxes, Ford Rangers, Mitsubishi Tritons and Holdens, to claim that Labor will create a “car tax”. The false claim was spread throughout Facebook and used its advertising targeting functionality and was broadly compliant with their ad standards despite the outright lie. Car manufacturer Toyota even went as far as to distance themselves from the false advertisements, which featured images of their Hilux vehicles.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps one of the most prevalent and damaging pieces of misinformation was that Labor would implement a “death tax”. This false statement consistently drew negative sentiment and was widely shared, becoming one of the largest themes associated with the Labor campaign. The Labor campaign repeatedly escalated the misinformation to Facebook, who refused to take down the inaccurate content. Labor has since called for the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters to investigate Facebook as a result.<sup>27</sup> Facebook responded by claiming it removed two instances of “coordinated inauthentic behaviour” during the election but has defended its position that it should not be responsible for policing content.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Farhart (2019) *'Nasty' election prompts calls for crackdown on political advertising*, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/nasty-election-prompts-calls-for-crackdown-on-political-advertising>

<sup>25</sup> Loomes (2019) *Clive Palmer’s newest ad picked apart by experts in politics and defence*, <https://www.news.com.au/national/federal-election/clive-palmers-newest-ad-picked-apart-by-experts-in-politics-and-defence/news-story/41b84f2461d77f02784ce87dcebf94f1>

<sup>26</sup> Karp and Evershed (2019) *Toyota distances itself from Liberal ads falsely claiming Labor wants to tax cars*, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/apr/10/liberal-party-facebook-ads-falsely-claim-labor-wants-to-tax-cars>

<sup>27</sup> Murphy (2019) *Labor calls for Facebook investigation after ‘death tax’ election campaign*, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/sep/21/labor-calls-for-facebook-investigation-after-death-tax-election-campaign>

<sup>28</sup> Murphy (2019) *Labor calls for Facebook investigation after ‘death tax’ election campaign*

# Oversight of social media platforms in other countries

Other countries have also felt the impact of political and election advertising on social media. In the United States there is growing criticism and political pressure on Facebook to address these issues. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg was questioned on Facebook's policies during a House hearing and has received criticism from a number of notable Democrats including Senator Elizabeth Warren and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Under questioning, Zuckerberg told Ocasio-Cortez that Facebook would "probably" allow her to run false ads claiming that Republicans support her Green Deal. Warren has run ads on Facebook making false claims about Mark Zuckerberg's dealings with President Donald Trump to demonstrate the inadequacy of Facebook's measures.<sup>29</sup>

While Facebook continues to defend its position on "free expression" and "freedom of speech" grounds,<sup>30</sup> other digital platforms are responding to growing concern. Facebook competitor Twitter announced that it would be banning all political advertising on Twitter ahead of the 2020 elections.<sup>31</sup> Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey said that "political message reach should be earned, not bought", and that "this isn't about free expression. This is about paying for reach".<sup>32</sup>

In the United Kingdom there is also concern over online misinformation. A group of academics and civic groups have called for Facebook and Google to suspend all political advertising ahead of the parliamentary general election in December 2019.<sup>33</sup>

In October 2019, Facebook announced a suite of new features to discourage abuse and election interference. It has updated its "inauthentic behaviour policy" which deals with a range of deceptive profiles and processes. It has also launched a feature called "Facebook Protect" to assist official accounts of candidates and their staff who may be vulnerable to

---

<sup>29</sup> Stewart (2019) *Facebook's political ads policy is predictably turning out to be a disaster*, <https://www.vox.com/recode/2019/10/30/20939830/facebook-false-ads-california-adriel-hampton-elizabeth-warren-aoc>

<sup>30</sup> Molla (2019) *Mark Zuckerberg said a lot of nothing in his big speech*, <https://www.vox.com/2019/10/17/20919505/mark-zuckerberg-georgetown-free-speech-facebook>

<sup>31</sup> Romm and Stanley-Becker (2019) *Twitter to ban all political ads amid 2020 election uproar*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/10/30/twitter-ban-all-political-ads-amid-election-uproar/>

<sup>32</sup> Dorsey (2019) *Twitter thread*, <https://twitter.com/jack/status/1189634360472829952>

<sup>33</sup> Hern (2019) *Facebook and Google urged to ban political ads before UK election*, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/04/facebook-and-google-asked-to-suspend-political-ads-before-general-election>

hacking and foreign interference. Facebook also made updates to its Ad Library, the publicly viewable archive of all political Facebook ads, developing extra contextual controls for the service. It has also made updates to its voter suppression policy which aims to combat campaigns which interfere or attempt to suppress voting. The platform has also pledged US\$2 million to support digital literacy projects in the US.<sup>34</sup>

While these measures taken by Facebook are welcomed by some, there is a sense that they are only addressing piece-meal initiatives and not focusing on the core issues. The most troubling elements of micro-targeting and political advertising remain unaddressed by Facebook because its business model is built on providing advertisers with the most amount of data and features to be able to reach large and specific audiences.

---

<sup>34</sup> Rosen et al (2019) *Helping to Protect the 2020 US Elections*,  
<https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2019/10/update-on-election-integrity-efforts/>

# Rebuilding the public sphere in Australia

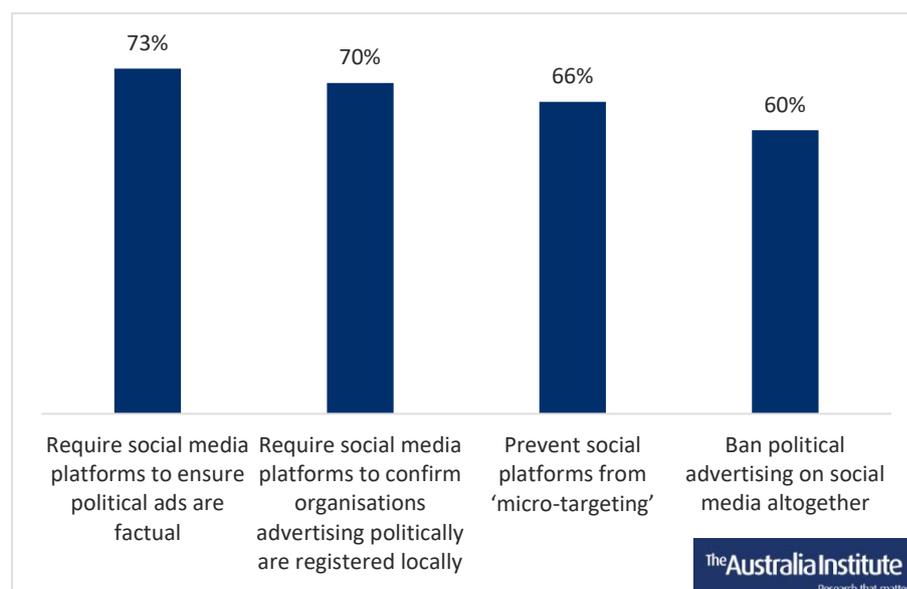
The current regulatory framework is not up to task, given the scale and reach of social media platforms like Facebook. Current social media platforms enjoy close to monopoly status, and as such require stronger regulation to ensure they meet community expectations.

A recent poll by Essential Research shows strong support amongst Australians for stronger regulation of political advertising on social media.<sup>35</sup> Support for reform was high across age groups, gender and voting intentions.

Three in four Australians (73%) supported requiring social media platforms to ensure political advertisements are factual. There was majority support among all voting intentions, with Coalition and Greens voters (80%) and Other voters (81%) most likely to support these measures.

Requiring social media platforms to confirm that political advertising comes from organisations that are registered locally was supported by 70% of Australians. Two in three Australians (66%) support preventing social media platforms from ‘micro-targeting’ specific political advertisements to particular groups. 60% supported banning political advertising on social media altogether.

**Figure 2: Support for political advertising on social media regulations**

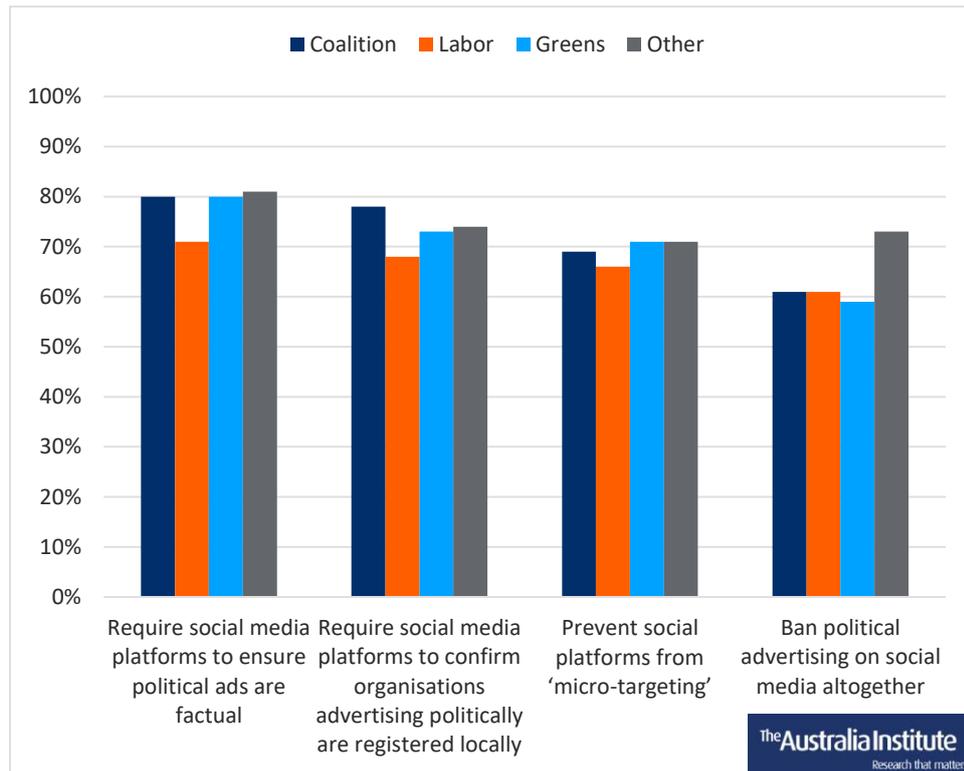


<sup>35</sup> Essential (2019) 11/11/19 Essential Report

Support for these regulations was high among both men and women and across age groups, with respondents 55 years and over most likely to support the regulations.

Support for the political advertising on social media regulations was high across voting intentions, with all four reforms supported by a majority of each party's voters (among Coalition, Labor, Greens and Other).

**Figure 3: Support for political advertising on social media regulations, by voting intention**



# Conclusion

Despite its increasing dominance as a campaign method, political advertising on social media platforms is not subject to the same legislative restrictions as traditional advertising material. As the 2019 Federal election highlighted, spreading misinformation through social media has become a political strategy. Misinformation competed against traditional campaigning, and sometimes dominated the political narrative on that issue.

Social media giants such as Facebook and Twitter have almost monopoly status on the transmission of digital information. There is a severe imbalance between the impact and influence social media has on our elections, and the regulatory and management frameworks which govern it. Recent polling has shown that Australians overwhelmingly support greater government intervention in this area. Australians want social media platforms to take greater responsibility in what content is allowed in political advertisements.

This research shows that as well as requirements for factual advertising, Australians also support preventing social media companies 'micro-targeting' political advertising, based off the personal information of users. There are growing privacy concerns as to what data is mined by social media companies, who they sell this data to, and how the data is then used. Social media users need greater say on what happens to their personal information, and greater transparency from social media platforms.

False information in political advertising undermines Australian's trust in the political system, and damages political discourse. Action is needed to prevent the spread of misinformation, particularly during election campaigns.

# Polling results

## METHOD

---

This report presents and analyses polling data from The Essential Report for 11 November 2019, a fortnightly online omnibus conducted by Qualtrics.

The omnibus usually delivers 1000+ interviews. In theory, with a sample of this size, there is 95 per cent certainty that the results are within 3 percentage points of what they would be if the entire population had been polled. However, this assumes random sampling, which, because of non-response and less than 100% population coverage cannot be achieved in practice. Furthermore, there are other possible sources of error in all polls including question wording and question order, interviewer bias (for telephone and face-to-face polls), response errors and weighting.

The online omnibus is live from the Wednesday night and closed on the following Sunday. Incentives are offered to participants. Essential Research uses the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software to analyse the data. The data is weighted against Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data. All Essential Research staff hold Australian Market and Social Research Society (AMSRS) membership and are bound by professional codes of behaviour.

## FULL RESULTS

*Following elections where social media advertising of inaccurate claims has been made, there have been calls to regulate political advertising on social media.*

*To what extent would you support or oppose changes to the law to..?*

	NET: Support	NET: Oppose	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither support nor oppose	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose
Require social media platforms like Facebook to ensure political advertisements are factual	73%	6%	53%	20%	20%	4%	3%
Require social media platforms to confirm that organisations advertising politically are registered locally	70%	7%	44%	26%	23%	4%	3%
Prevent social platforms like Facebook from 'micro-targeting' specific political advertisements to particular groups	66%	8%	43%	23%	26%	6%	2%
Ban political advertising on social media altogether	60%	13%	40%	21%	26%	9%	4%

	<b>NET: Support</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>18-34</b>	<b>35-54</b>	<b>55+</b>	<b>Labor</b>	<b>Coalition</b>	<b>Greens</b>	<b>NET: Other</b>
<b>Require social media platforms like Facebook to ensure political advertisements are factual</b>	73%	74%	72%	66%	69%	83%	71%	80%	80%	81%
<b>Require social media platforms to confirm that organisations advertising politically are registered locally</b>	70%	73%	67%	64%	64%	81%	68%	78%	73%	74%
<b>Prevent social platforms like Facebook from 'micro-targeting' specific political advertisements to particular groups</b>	66%	67%	66%	62%	63%	73%	66%	69%	71%	71%
<b>Ban political advertising on social media altogether</b>	60%	61%	60%	53%	58%	70%	61%	61%	59%	73%