

# **ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE**

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

Melbourne—Thursday, 19 November 2020

*(via videoconference)*

### **MEMBERS**

Mr Lee Tarlamis—Chair

Mrs Bev McArthur—Deputy Chair

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn

Mr Matthew Guy

Ms Katie Hall

Ms Wendy Lovell

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Cesar Melhem

Mr Tim Quilty

Dr Tim Read

**WITNESSES**

Professor Axel Bruns,

Associate Professor Daniel Angus,

Dr Timothy Graham, and

Dr Sofya Glazunova, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Queensland University of Technology Digital Media Research Centre.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open the public hearings 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 peoples, 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 are here today to impart their knowledge of the issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings.

I welcome Professor Axel Bruns, Associate Professor Daniel Angus, Dr Timothy Graham and Dr Sofya Glazunova from Queensland University of Technology's Digital Media Research Centre. I am Lee Tarlamis, the Chair of the committee and a Member for the South Eastern Metropolitan Region. The other members of the committee here today are Bev McArthur, Deputy Chair and a Member for Western Victoria; the Honourable Wendy Lovell, a Member for Northern Victoria; Andy Meddick, a Member for Western Victoria; Cesar Melhem, a Member for Western Metropolitan Region; and Dr Tim Read, Member for Brunswick.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action in Australia for what you say here today. However, if you repeat the same things outside this hearing, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible. I now invite you to make a brief opening statement, which will be followed by questions from the committee.

**Assoc. Prof. ANGUS:** Thank you so much for the invite. It is a pleasure to be here today. I would like to start by acknowledging that we are joining you today from the country of the Turrbal and Yugara people, lands that were never ceded. We pay our respects to their elders past and present and thank them for their wisdom, forbearance and spirit of sharing. I am Associate Professor Daniel Angus. I am joined today by submission co-authors and fellow members of QUT's Digital Media Research Centre Professor Axel Bruns, Dr Sofya Glazunova and Dr Timothy Graham, with an apology from Tegan Cohen. The DMRC is Australia's leading digital media research centre, with key projects that align with the topics of your inquiry, including in-depth research into social media and politics, mis- and disinformation, abuse and hate speech, platform regulation and automation, and social bots. I would like to briefly highlight some key points from our submission and welcome questions on these key points.

To begin we would like to stress that digital media is a highly dynamic and diverse landscape. The challenge for policymakers is that the space is constantly shifting, and as such policy must be alive to that fact. It is for this reason we commend the Victorian Parliament for embarking on this inquiry but stress that it is an issue that will need to be constantly revisited at periodic intervals. The shifting landscape also underscores the need for sustained investment in research capacity in our universities and independent research organisations to help be able to keep abreast of changes and be able to report findings in an impartial manner. It is also important that we treat social media platforms as media forms in their own right, rather than applying ill-fitting metaphors from communication such as telephony or from broadcast and print media. These metaphors are clumsy at best, but at worst they can hamper efforts to effectively regulate these new media forms. Social media demands its own language. We urge all governments to make real-time investments in addressing issues of mis- and disinformation, which can have a corrosive effect on our civic institutions.

Mis- and disinformation characterise the inadvertent or deliberate sharing of false and misleading information. Whether organic or state or industry backed, these campaigns can work to undermine trust in government and

scientific institutions. They demand solutions that are tailored toward the specific platforms and domains where they occur. Recent examples include the arson emergency and anti-5G disinformation campaigns that have made global headlines. We have been at the front lines in an effort to help combat these disinformation campaigns, but much more could and should be done.

An effective strategy would be to establish a dedicated entity such as a communication crisis response centre to bring real-time monitoring and transparency and proactively respond to emerging issues with political independence. Such a capacity would need to include media and communication, law and policy as well as computer science expertise to be effective. We also stress that mis- and disinformation is not a phenomenon limited only to social media spaces. It becomes problematic especially once such content is amplified by celebrities, mainstream media and political actors. We therefore urge all parties to work together in a bipartisan manner on this issue to promote truth and restore trust in our institutions.

Pressure also needs to be applied to Facebook and other major platforms to urgently provide better tools to allow transparency on social media activities and online political advertising. In particular, Facebook's ad library is far too limited to be useful and especially misses third-party campaigns not affiliated with official parties and candidates—similar in some ways to rogue election flyers but at a much bigger and pervasive level.

To finish, we would like to highlight the huge and sustained interest from local and international media in our own election tracking and social media research activity, most recently including the Queensland election, but stress that much of this is not directly funded or supported at a national level. We work presently out of our goodwill and an interest in bringing transparency to the process, but our concern is that without continued funding, and with the funding pressures on our sector, our ability to continue to provide such work and services is contingent on our limited time and resourcing. We have done the groundwork but stress that there is a need for continued funding for a national social media observatory.

We are now keen to receive your questions, and while we will endeavour to provide answers to these questions today, we note that our DMRC law colleagues could not be with us so we may take some of these questions on notice and respond to you at a later point. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, very much. We will go straight to the Deputy Chair, Mrs McArthur.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. Would you consider yourselves independent, unbiased commentators?

**Assoc. Prof. ANGUS:** Yes, of course. We are academics and so we conduct our research according to scientific methods. Our datasets are available and our methods are fully transparent. So, yes.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Would you agree that perhaps the only way on social media platforms that we can be assured that there is transparency is if the social media platform providers insist that owning an account can have a verifiable name and address and contact details that they have to agree to?

**Assoc. Prof. ANGUS:** I would have concerns about notions where social media accounts that are, I guess, names, members of public would be the only way that someone could participate online in social media spaces. Some of our colleagues, particularly those at Monash University, have done significant research into this—the ability to be anonymous online—and certainly these are questions that I could direct to their recent work on this issue, because, yes, there is in some cases a need to be anonymous online and very good reasons for that activity.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** I will let somebody else ask questions now.

**The CHAIR:** No worries. Dr Read.

**Dr READ:** Thank you. I wonder if you could go into a little more detail on microtargeting and why this could be a concern.

**Assoc. Prof. ANGUS:** Sure thing. Axel, do you want to—

**Prof. BRUNS:** I guess we are talking particularly here about platforms like Facebook, where advertising can be microtargeted to particular demographics and particular individuals based on their gender, their ethnicity, their geographic location, their political interests, their sexual interests and so on. The problem here is that of

course it then becomes possible to direct misinformation, or disinformation more likely, specifically at particular groups in order to inflame them against others or to even have content that targets both groups on both sides of the conflict and inflame the conflict between them for various political or other reasons. And of course that ultimately undermines the cohesion of society. It can generate some very significant both physical as well as emotional violence, and of course it can be used in many other ways also to misinform, to mislead and, yes, to inflame tensions in the community.

**Dr READ:** Can I just follow that up with: does microtargeting enable purveyors of misinformation to find vulnerable audiences who might be less sceptical and more likely to believe their message?

**Prof. BRUNS:** That is certainly possible. Yes. If people declare themselves to be interested in particular topics or perhaps already to be supportive of particular conspiracy theories for instance, then of course you could further target them with additional material that supports those views.

**Dr READ:** Great. All right. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Melhem.

**Mr MELHEM:** Thank you, Chair. I think you have probably covered that, but I would not mind going through it again. Which jurisdictions are doing a good job in responding to the impact of social media and online advertising, obviously during election times? Are you able to take us through their response? What has been made effective or what obstacles did they have in responding to or overcoming the problem? How did they do it? You can take us through that now, unless you want to take that on notice. I am happy either way, but I am curious about your thoughts about what the experience has been in other jurisdictions. Particularly I believe you have appeared in a number of overseas inquiries as well, so I am keen to your thoughts on that.

**Assoc. Prof. ANGUS:** For sure. I will take it first, just with one, and then I might pass over to other members here. So yes, you are right. There are measures that have been taken by other governments to try and curb some of the bad behaviour perhaps and try and rein some of this in. Canada is an interesting example, where they have passed particular legislation targeted at maintaining public registries around particular partisan and election advertising materials. And that underscores I think a move by some governments, not just in Canada but elsewhere, to bring transparency to this process.

And certainly in our submission we underscore the need for greater transparency, and that transparency needs to come from in a lot of cases the platforms themselves. And so it is not something that governments themselves can act on, but through legislation they can force the platforms to be more transparent or to try and move around the platforms in some way.

I will open up to other members here if they have got any other points to make.

**Prof. BRUNS:** I guess one more general point is that again this is one area that is better covered by our colleagues from the law faculty at QUT. So I am hesitant to go too deeply into the regulation discussion, to be perfectly honest with you, but we can take those questions on notice and pass them on to our colleagues.

I would make a general point here that these regulations often of course again are trying to address a very moving target. And so as the platforms and as the platform affordances—the various tools and technologies that the platforms provide—are changing, the legislation ends up having to change with them as well, because very often that legislation might address particular forms of activity that are possible on platforms at particular points in time. And as the platforms change of course users and particularly the more exploitative users will find new ways to exploit these affordances in order to spread mis- and disinformation, to mislead, to purvey hate speech and so on.

**Dr GLAZUNOVA:** I can speak for some authoritarian regimes which have a really high level of censorship, both on platforms and the media. And of course political ads on some of the platforms can be used as an instrument against political minorities or for political outsiders who cannot enter the political system. In particular, ads can be used not to let these actors progress further into these regimes. We have seen these examples in Russia, and I have provided also some information in the report about this.

**Mr MELHEM:** If I can do a follow up—a quick one—do you favour self-regulation or more regulation? So which one: less or more? What would be your preference in the current environment? I will give you a comparison: I am not looking to a China or North Korea type of example, or Russia, versus, let us say, the US, the UK or Australia. If you were giving advice to the government now, is it for more regulation or less regulation? And how much can we trust self-regulation?

**Prof. BRUNS:** I would say the devil is in the detail of the regulation of course [Zoom dropout]

**Mrs McARTHUR:** And the regulators.

**Prof. BRUNS:** Yes, thank you. The balance I think at the moment is possibly too far towards self-regulation. The platforms are largely intransparent about what they are doing. They certainly make announcements from time to time about the measures that they are taking, but it is very difficult to verify the effectiveness of those measures independently, unfortunately, in part because it is so difficult for people like ourselves or for others who are independent observers of how these platforms operate to fully evaluate the effects of the self-regulation that they say they are putting in place. For instance, we can see the announcements of platforms saying that they have taken down so many bots or so many abusive accounts and we can see what they are saying about how they are changing particular elements of the platform in order to limit the spread of mis- and disinformation, but it is very difficult to assess how effective that actually is. There was one study just recently that reported the warning labels, for instance, that have been put on Donald Trump's tweets and some other tweets, most recently in the context of the US election, have only reduced the circulation of those tweets by about 8 per cent. That may or may not be true. It is very difficult for us to verify this. We actually need more research that does that, and the platforms are making it more and more difficult for us to do that kind of independent scrutiny.

**Assoc. Prof. ANGUS:** I would underscore Axel's point as well on the idea of transparency—that regulation without the adequate transparency for us to test whether that regulation is having any kind of impact is no real regulation at all. Particularly with Facebook, I was listening to Facebook making their statement previously, and it is interesting that they kind of make these broad statements around 'We make public reports' and 'We bring transparency around removal of accounts'. We do not see that from an academic perspective. We need the granular detail to be able to properly evaluate their claims around how well they are doing around cleaning up the platform and that they are striking the right balance in terms of what speech they are allowing and what is being taken away.

I would say that it would be good to look at the Santa Clara principles that one of our DMRC colleagues, Professor Nic Suzor, has published and put out there for public consumption, which are a set of very, very easy to follow principles that every social media company, I think, should be held up against. They are just principles that talk about what kind of information we might demand from social media platforms to provide us to be able to make assessments as to what their role is and how well they are doing within our civic institutions.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. And I think there was another element to that question that you were going to get the faculty to take on notice for the faculty of law to provide some information too. That would be very helpful as well. I might go to Ms Lovell for a question.

**Ms LOVELL:** Thank you. I just want to pick up on something that you said earlier—that there might be a reason for people to be anonymous online. I just wonder why you would think that given that anything that ever comes to me written anonymously I completely discount, because if somebody cannot put their name to it, it is not worth considering. But also our last session that we have just had was the Labor Women's Caucus, who were presenting a position that both Bev and I agree with as Liberal women wholeheartedly, and that is about the inappropriate bullying of women MPs and the gender-biased comments that we receive on social media. So why do you think it is okay for these people to have anonymous accounts and to bully us in that manner?

**Prof. BRUNS:** We are not saying that it is okay to bully you of course, but with roles reversed there is also a value in anonymity for vulnerable communities. There are many people who are using social media in order to form communities—for instance, women who have been abused; for instance, other groups in society who are vulnerable for whatever reason—and they are quite often online on social media anonymously or pseudonymously in order to support each other, but obviously they are not going to use their real names in doing so because that would again enable their abusers to find them. So while, yes, the anonymous abuse that

members of Parliament and other public figures receive is deeply problematic and there is more that the platforms need to do about this, at the same time there is a value in anonymity, there is a value in pseudonymity for those groups who are being abused by others, who often are doing this actually using their full names as well as in full view of the public. So for those kinds of groups it is very important to be able to be online without having to use their real names so that their abusers cannot find them.

**Assoc. Prof. ANGUS:** I guess, to kind of just pick up on Axel's point, it is a bit of a false dichotomy to equate one with the other. Really we have to look at this as a much more complex issue. I would certainly encourage, if anyone is interested in this issue, to pick up work from colleagues such as Dr Emily van der Nagel, who has written extensively on this topic—her entire PhD thesis was on this. Also other members of our digital media research centre, who look specifically at issues of gendered violence, who talk about these issues at breadth as well. I am more than happy of course to connect the committee to those members of the academic community to provide further comment, because I think you have picked up on a very important point here. We would certainly say that we abhor all forms of abuse and hate speech as much as anyone—even more so—and certainly much of our research is dedicated to looking at that issue, its complexities and ways in which we as a whole society can stamp out those practices, because it is a significant problem.

**Ms LOVELL:** Yes, I would suggest that in those sort of cases where you are talking about people who want to speak out about issues but do not want to identify themselves there are other ways for them to do it—through a support group page where they speak like they do in the newspaper, where their story is told but not their name, that type of scenario—but allowing anonymous accounts actually encourages the keyboard warriors and hate speech.

**Assoc. Prof. ANGUS:** That is not really backed up by the evidence that we see in the scholarly community, but I do take your point that it is a significant problem, abuse and hate speech. But certainly I would like to just underscore that the evidence that we have in the wider academic community suggests that these two issues we need to look at need to be looked at somewhat independently.

**Ms LOVELL:** Thank you.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Can I just butt in there, Chair, because I think this is a really serious matter if academia is suggesting that anonymity is okay on social media. It is not okay in conventional media, as Wendy has pointed out—if you want to make a comment anonymously, it will be 'name withheld'. The conventional print media, other media, do that very well. Even television media can do that. So you suggesting—and you are suggesting the entire force of academia is suggesting—that anonymity in social media is the only way to go seems to be very questionable.

**Prof. BRUNS:** If I can turn this around again, if you are saying that everyone should be on social media under their own name, under their personal name, then essentially in doing so you are banning people who are vulnerable to abuse from social media. For instance, again, women who have escaped abusive relationships, members of the LGBTIQ community who are at risk of abuse, people with particular political views or who are of particular ethnic extractions would then not be able to be online on these social media platforms if they are identified, because their abusers might find them. That would be problematic because the central role that, for better or for worse, platforms like Facebook and Twitter and others have in society now means that these platforms are also a really important space for support, a really important space for social connection, a really important space for getting in touch and for sharing experiences with others. So if we require people to be there under their real names only, then anyone who for whatever reason is at risk of abuse, at risk of persecution, at risk of violence cannot be using these media, and that would be very deeply problematic because that would actually victimise them further.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** So you are saying the other forms of media have to be treated differently to social media?

**Assoc. Prof. ANGUS:** Absolutely. In our opening statement we certainly made that point—that I think it is wrong to try and equate different forms of media together. Part of the problem of current regulation and current approaches is that it is too simple to try and equate the two, and they do need to be looked at differently. Also I would stress platforms themselves have to be looked at differently. It is very, very different to regulate, say,

Facebook than it might be to regulate WhatsApp or it might be to regulate YouTube for that example. These are entirely different systems that operate under very, very different technical and social considerations, and so any kind of attempt to, I guess, regulate or to look at and examine these particular platforms needs to be done with very much a platform-oriented view where we look at it and develop a language around it which is attuned to that platform itself.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I would like to talk about the Facebook archive for a moment. I am conscious of time, so some of this you may want to take on notice and provide to us later, but I am interested. You spoke about how there can be improvements there because there are some shortcomings with regard to it not picking up on that third-party advertising and obviously it does not do things like segment that microtargeting that occurs and it does not have information about what demographics have been targeted—age, gender, those sorts of things—or how many hits, those sorts of things. And it is not easily searchable by those they are targeting either. So I am just wondering what your view would be about a publicly available, easily searchable database of all paid advertisements, including third parties and everything, that would actually have to store this information that could be readily available for transparency purposes so that if there is a misinformation campaign being run, it could be counted because that information is available to see that occurring, but also for research purposes in terms of seeing what trends, what is happening and those sorts of things. It would be a valuable tool for both those perspectives. And if there was to be such an archive, where that might best be located, what features should it include, and are there any jurisdictions that have something similar that is operating?

I know there is a lot in that, and given the time that might be something that you want to take offline and have a think about and provide to the committee, but I think that is an area that we would be interested to hear your feedback on.

**Assoc. Prof. ANGUS:** For sure. I could give a very brief answer, but I would like to take a little bit of this on notice and we can provide a much more detailed response. But certainly, yes, the idea of bringing transparency to this is something that we would wholly support. As I have already noted, the Facebook ad library is a step in the right direction, but it is a tiny step. And it is very limited in the sense that for the election advertising we monitored through that tool for the Queensland election, most of it was limited to the whole state but we know that there was advertising that was targeted to specific electorates. So that information was not forthcoming from Facebook. It gave a very gross breakdown across age and gender, but it listed no other information around interest or other details of demographic data that we know the Facebook advertising library supports the targeting of. And it is not really real-time. The Facebook ad library at the moment is usually two to three days out of date, and in an evolving election campaign timeliness is incredibly important. So I would underscore that in any kind of attempt to do transparency that kind of real-time capacity has to be something it is considered, because particularly for our work—the arson emergency work that Tim largely spearheaded, the 5G conspiracy theory work that Axel and others have been working on—timeliness is of critical importance here. We need to be on top of these disinformation campaigns before they really kind of take hold and then take over these online spaces.

That is I guess a brief response of support for such an attempt, but certainly we can take that on notice and provide a few more details around thoughts we might have to throw in the mix.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic. No worries. Thank you. I think that is it for questions from the committee, unless anyone has got anything else. No? On that basis, I would like to thank you for your time today. It has been really helpful and insightful, and we look forward to receiving that additional information. There may be some additional questions that we think of that we may forward on to you as well, and we appreciate your support in providing us with additional information in those areas. But thank you again for your time today, and we apologise that we are running a little bit behind as well.

**Assoc. Prof. ANGUS:** No, that is fine. Thank you so much, and once again, well done on the inquiry. It is a really important issue, and you are doing a fantastic job. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** No worries. Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**