

AAP FactCheck Submission

Inquiry into the impact of social media on elections and electoral administration

AAP FactCheck - Introductory Statement

Australian Associated Press is Australia's trusted, independent newswire service with an 85-year commitment to unbiased and reliable newsgathering.

AAP FactCheck is a self-contained factchecking unit inside our newsgathering business, and offers this submission at the invitation of Electoral Matters Committee Chair Lee Tarlamis OAM MP.

AAP FactCheck has been debunking misinformation and disinformation in the news and social media market since December 2018. During this period we have factchecked three elections - the NSW state election, the Australian federal election and, most recently, the New Zealand election.

The themes we cover below are not drawn from Victoria but we believe they are relevant across jurisdictions.

In August this year, AAP changed ownership and is presently transitioning to a not-for-profit model with a focus on promoting independent, ethical and sustainable news gathering.

Our new charter also commits us to advancing education to support and develop the use of accurate, fact-based communications in social media and public discourse.

How are candidates, political parties and others using social media and online advertising in Victorian elections?

Social media removes the intermediary from political discourse. It allows politicians and parties to speak directly to individuals and to target them in a way that was not possible pre-social media.

August 2020 data compiled by Vivid Social and published [here](#) indicates there are now 15 million Australians active on Facebook, with half of them said to log in daily. It's estimated half of all Australians access YouTube, one third are Instagram users and a quarter use Snapchat.

All of this means candidates and political parties now have fingertip access to a vast cross-section of voters at no, or low, cost.

That increase in scale is just as valuable as the new capacity to target people by age, interests, location and many other individual markers.

Social media political messaging can be overt, covert, paid for, free, mass delivered or

micro-targeted, coordinated or ad hoc. The electorate does not necessarily know which category of messaging they are receiving, nor who is responsible for it.

This environment makes it difficult to identify and limit misinformation and disinformation, or apply consequences to those responsible.

Facebook leads the way in providing data on advertising on its platform, but even so, the current level of information on social media advertising across all platforms does not provide great insight and transparency into advertising practices.

Even outside of election cycles, politicians are investing thousands of taxpayer dollars promoting their political messages via social media. For example, Facebook's Ad Library data for the past seven weeks (August 5 to September 23) shows Victorian Liberal MP Jason Wood spent \$17,227 on 71 ads. Data consolidated by The Sun-Herald shows Energy and Emissions Reduction Minister Angus Taylor spent \$12,599 on Facebook ads in a one month period. Mr Taylor's office defended his investment in the 27 ads, telling The Sun-Herald it was a more cost efficient way to reach voters, at a fraction of the cost of printing and posting material.

How is social media changing elections?

Social media has become a crucial testing ground for policies. Public opinion can be weighed in real time through comments and other interactions, and adjustments can be quietly made according to that sentiment.

Social media can then be used to grow support and build momentum for those issues, with relatively little investment in time, money and effort.

Political parties and candidates are guaranteed to find a welcoming audience somewhere, and the danger is that ideas may become confined to audience silos, where voters only engage with things they endorse, while social media algorithms confirm those biases.

The end result is a highly-filtered view of politics and a social media electorate at risk of limited exposure to alternate messaging.

It can also mean politicians avoid being challenged, sidestepping genuine debate and the probing questions of opponents and journalists in favour of their virtual supporters.

All but the most discerning and sophisticated social media users are vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation - be it casual content from one uneducated individual or a coordinated political campaign with serious backing.

At one end of the scale are examples like the confirmed foreign interference in the 2016 US election, when Russia created and coordinated thousands of sock-puppet accounts to distribute radical ideas and fake news, while replicating grass-roots activism by organising real-world rallies and protests along the way.

A bi-partisan US Senate panel this year confirmed the attack aimed to undermine faith in the democratic process and elevate Donald Trump into office. US intelligence

agencies' have concluded such electoral interference is "the new normal".

At the other end of the scale are real individuals sharing ill-informed opinions or incorrect information with no malicious intent.

Between the above two scenarios are myriad bad actors capable of influencing elections to varying degrees, in various ways.

Those who generate disinformation can be skilled in mixing manipulation with marketing to spark an emotional response. However, those working against disinformation - like AAP FactCheck - must use the relatively blunt instrument of the facts, which can make it difficult to cut through.

Social media allows all-comers freedom of speech and, quite literally, 'platforms' bad actors.

While radical ideas and conspiracy theories have always existed, their proponents now have the power of virality at their fingertips.

Misinformation and disinformation can spread in a way that was impossible before social media, hijacking genuine political debate despite the hyper-fragmented audiences. And while people with extreme views attract attention online, the middle ground is being eroded.

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

Data from the current New Zealand election and referenda shows all parties are investing in Facebook advertising, with major parties largely using advertising on the platform for the legitimate promotion of their policies.

One example of a possible exception was an NZ National Party ad that used an unemployment figure of unknown origin. (It stated there were more than 200,000 unemployed NZ residents, when the latest available government figures reported only 111,000.)

Fringe parties and lobby groups are also making significant use of social media advertising but anecdotal evidence suggests there is less commitment to accuracy.

For example, Make It Legal NZ, a volunteer-run pro-cannabis organisation, had 350 entries on the Facebook ad library as of mid-September. The First Draft community of factcheckers' Facebook Ad Library Weekly Summary says many of those ads used statistics in a misleading way, drawing on old research and quotes.

The same can be said for the anti-euthanasia DefendNZ group, which First Draft said made false and misleading claims in paid ads against the proposed euthanasia legalisation bill, while New Conservative candidate Bernadette Soares also ran misleading ads about NZ's recent abortion bill.

While it is important to preserve the concept of free speech, content that is capable of, or designed to, mislead voters presents a real risk to a fair election.

[According to a US research study published in March 2019](#) reliance on social media for

political news has increased rapidly.

The study states that in 2012, about two in five Americans used social media for political purposes, and about one in three said they'd encountered social media messages promoting candidates in the month leading up to the US election.

“Four years later more Americans named Facebook as the site they most often used for political information in the month leading up to Election Day 2016 than named any other site, including those of high-profile news organizations such as Fox News, CNN, and major national newspapers,” it said.

And it is important to understand Facebook is not the platform favoured by future voters - they are far more likely to get their current affairs and political information in an incidental fashion from YouTube and Instagram.

Notably, the 2019 research paper goes on to state: “Exposure to deceptive messages is not tantamount to belief in them. Individuals often exhibit credulity, and act in ways intended to prevent themselves from being misled”.

However, it is a complex environment and in this context, traditional media can be seen as a touchstone for reliable news.

The long-established pathways for complaints about traditional media content, and the visible enforcement of standards, become a further endorsement of traditional media's trustworthiness. There is also the traditional media requirement to disclose who paid for and authorised political advertising.

Traditional media content is subject to oversight by professional standards bodies such as the Australian Press Council (advertising is excluded) and the Australian Communication and Media Authority (including advertising). In Australia, the Advertising Standards Bureau covers all advertising, social media and otherwise.

Facebook's policy is to exclude political ads from its third party factchecking program, while Twitter has banned political ads. Google has opted to limit audience targeting for political advertisers, and banned some types of political misinformation (including on YouTube). SnapChat has banned misleading and deceptive political advertising, while political ads are not permitted on TikTok.

But defining what constitutes political advertising can be tricky.

At its most basic, political advertising is paid content promoting a political cause or candidate.

But how do you classify a meme created by a candidate for a specific political purpose that is shared and then goes viral? The impact could be greater than that of a paid ad, but could advertising standards apply?

The meme example also goes to how difficult it can be to discern who is attempting to influence you on social media, and to what end.

The lack of ad data and the ease with which accounts can be created and closed, also means there are few disincentives for those seeking to create an unfair advantage.

Should the Victorian government introduce more regulation in this area? Are there other things the government should be doing?

Cooperation or collaboration between social media platforms, government or other regulators, and independent factcheckers like AAP FactCheck would address many of the issues raised above.

During campaign periods, factcheckers should be funded to scrutinise political statements and advertising. While not every statement can be checked, or is appropriate to check, the ultimate goal of running an independent factchecking service during a campaign is to raise the overall standard of debate and bring greater accountability and accuracy to public statements.

We have seen this in action throughout the NZ Election, with a number of candidates whose statements were factchecked by AAP FactCheck as false admitting to their errors, apologising or clarifying their positions. Ultimately, voters will benefit from clearer, more accurate messaging from the candidates. (Example: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/taranaki-daily-news/news/122924962/national-mp-admits-his-claim-about-offshore-oil-and-gas-ban-increasing-power-prices-was-wrong>)

Anecdotal evidence from our work for the NZ Election has revealed support from the public (via social media channels), as well as from mainstream media, through the on-air discussion of our work, requests for us to check specific claims, and the publication of AAP FactCheck articles.

In a first for Australia, a factchecking service - the Independent Council Election Observer (ICEO) - was established purely to focus on Queensland Local Government elections earlier this year. Partnering with established, accredited, professional factcheckers would bring further credibility to such projects, providing a ready-made robust, cost-effective service. Experienced factcheckers know how to surface the content that most requires addressing, avoiding the reliance on referrals from candidates, as was the case with the ICEO. Factchecking outfits also have established publishing networks to give greater exposure to the outcomes of those factchecks.

Key to addressing the advertising issues is better, more uniform collection and disclosure of data by social media platforms, particularly around political advertising. Greater visibility of the advertising activities in election campaigns would result in greater accountability and may discourage bad actors.

Factcheck services could also be used to make sense of this data, adding context to the data and scrutiny to the content of the ads, as well as campaign insights. This could benefit the electoral commission as well as the public.

Educating consumers is the final piece of the puzzle. Government funding should be allocated to specifically-targeted media literacy campaigns that aim to create a critical

mindset.

The process of creating responsible consumers and creators of media content should begin in primary school and be an ongoing process. Helping people understand what they are seeing, and the impact of what they post, is an important way to reduce the power of misinformation and disinformation.