Submission to the Select Committee on Future of Public Interest Journalism

News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra
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Background
The News and Media Research Centre at University of Canberra (canberra.edu.au/nmrc) investigates the evolution of media, content and communication and the impact of online and mobile systems. Since 2015 the Centre has published the *Digital News Report: Australia*, a national online survey of over 2,000 adult Australians which tracks changes in news consumption in Australia over time, particularly within the digital space. The Australian survey forms part of a global study of 36 territories by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford.

The *Digital News Report: Australia 2017* can be downloaded via canberra.edu.au/nmrc

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Dr Fisher is an expert on lack of trust in news, news avoidance and the emerging use of social media by politicians. She has served as a reporter for ABC News and a media adviser to former Queensland Premier Anna Bligh.

Responses to selected Terms of Reference

(a) The current state of public interest journalism in Australia and around the world, including the role of government in ensuring a viable, independent and diverse service.

The assumed importance of news media and the profession of journalism in liberal democracies are based upon a normative belief that there is a positive relationship between number and diversity of news publishers and quality of democracy. In the previous era dominated by broadcast and print media this relationship, and therefore an indirect account of democracy itself, could be represented in terms of number and diversity of news sources to which news consumers had access. This was

because news publishers largely also controlled the distribution of news. Therefore an increase in the number of news sources meant an increase in the health of liberal democratic societies.

In an era now characterised by the networked distribution of news-based media content and a scarcity of news consumer attention for – rather than a scarcity of access to – this content, it is no longer appropriate to assume a relationship between number and diversity of news sources and the health of liberal democratic society. To put it another way, simply having access to a diverse range of sources of news is not a sufficient measure of the health of society. Access does not lead to consumption, let alone the critical engagement required of citizens to develop a functioning democratic public sphere.

Recommendation. Further research is required to establish a relationship between the number and diversity of news sources in the contemporary public sphere and how this shapes civic engagement.

(c) The impact on public interest journalism of search engines and social media internet service providers circulating fake news, and an examination of counter measures directed at online advertisers, 'click-bait' generators and other parties who benefit from disinformation.

Please refer to Digital News Report: Australia 2017, p.36, section 4, Social Discovery of News.

The 'filter bubble'. Today's media-literate consumers can and do decide which news and current affairs they want to engage with – and when, where and on which device. This has led to concerns of a so-called 'filter bubble' in which consumers only receive content from their personal contacts and other so-called 'influencers' within their social networks. As a result, these consumers are only exposed to news that fits very closely to their own views, and which may not be reliable.

Concerns. (i) If the emerging generation of digital consumers continue to access news content via their online, mobile and social feeds and eschew 'appointment' or scheduled news bulletins via broadcast or print platforms respectively, then increased public funding for new media formats that distribute trustworthy news beyond established news bulletins are required.

(ii) There is speculation that citizens within filter bubbles will only consume inaccurate news and current affairs that fits a narrow personal profile, or in some cases might be deliberate misinformation – whether hard or soft news, advertising or otherwise. *In extremis*, this might lead to antisocial or even extreme behaviours.

Recommendation. No action required. Based on our survey findings, there is little evidence of a so-called 'filter bubble' *if* this is understood in terms of exposure to alternative sources of news. Only 16% of Facebook users disagreed that they often see news from outlets that they would not normally use and approximately the same share (15%) disagreed that they often see news they are not interested in. When asked if they often see news stories that they are not interested in more than half of Facebook users (52%) indicated they either agreed or strongly agreed.

Indeed, almost half (49%) of respondents that use Facebook as a source of news indicated that they agree or strongly agree that they often see news from outlets that they would not normally use – in effect, the opposite of the filter bubble effect.

In terms of appointment news, although younger demographics do prefer social as their main source of news, many adult Australians across age groups consume news from multiple platforms including social, online and broadcast.

This is clearly indicated in Figure 1.2 below, which shows that although there are clearly age preferences for news via TV, online or social there is little evidence for platform exclusivity: rather, news consumers use multiple platforms (see *Digital News Report: Australia 2017* p.7).

FIGURE 1.2: MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS BY AGE (%)

(e) Examination of 'fake news', propaganda, and public disinformation, including sources and motivation of fake news in Australia, overseas, and the international response.

Please refer to Digital News Report: Australia 2017, p.58, section 7, Trust in news: Australia.

News avoidance. 63% of participants said they were extremely or very interested in news – a figure consistent with our 2016 survey. Yet 56% of respondents said that they occasionally or often try to avoid the news. Reasons provided for avoiding the news are shown in Figure 1.11 over (see *Digital News Report: Australia 2017* p.14). 32% of all news avoiders said that they "can't rely on news to be true".

Looking more broadly at lack of trust in news, only 42% of respondents said that they trust most news most of the time. Significantly, less than half of adult Australian news consumers trust the news that they themselves choose to consume.

Concerns. Fake news and disinformation are not new phenomena. However, we are concerned by the survey data that suggest (i) Australians are interested in news but (ii) a significant segment avoid news at some point because they can't rely on it to be true, and (iii) less than half of adult Australian news consumers trust the news that they choose to consume. One might speculate here that news is being treated increasingly as a commodity by Australians to the extent that we consume it because it is usually 'free' – but we don't really trust it and we occasionally or often avoid it because we don't think it's true. This would be a dire state of affairs for the fourth estate in a liberal democracy yet our survey data suggest this possibility.

FIGURE 1.11: REASONS FOR AVOIDING NEWS (% OF ALL RESPONDENTS)

Q1dii_2017. You said that you find yourself trying to avoid news. Which, if any, of the following are reasons why you actively try to avoid news? Please select all that apply: It can have a negative effect on my mood; Graphic images upset me; It disturbs my ability to concentrate on more important things; It consumes too much of my time; It leads to arguments I'd rather avoid; I can't rely on news to be true; I don't feel there is anything I can do about it; Other; Don't know.

Recommendation. Further research is urgently needed in order to establish the extent to which fake news is impacting news consumption behaviours including lack of news and news avoidance. It is likely that comparison to other countries' and territories' responses to fake news will not be readily applicable to Australia due to our unique circumstances, including: compulsory voting; concentrated print media ownership; 'free' access to news sources from multiple international players, onshore and offshore; and high smart device penetration.

(f) Any related matters.

Please refer to Digital News Report: Australia 2017, p.42, section 5, Following politicians on social media.

Following politicians on social media. Further to Terms of Reference (c) and (e) the *Digital News Report: Australia 2017* conducted new research into those news consumers who follow the social media feeds of politicians and political parties, in effect bypassing the intermediary role of public interest journalism. We found that 20% of survey respondents said they followed a politician or political party on social media. This represents 20% of Australia's adult online population and 36% of those who use social media for news. When asked similar questions in our 2016 survey, 13% of respondents indicated that they followed politicians and political parties. This increase might be attributed to the high level of coverage of the US Presidential campaign at the time of survey administration (Jan/Feb 2017). Key reasons provided for this behaviour by respondents in 2017 include:

- They don't want their information to be filtered by reporters.
- Mainstream media does not provide enough information.
- They do not trust the news media to be fair.

Figure 5.1 below compares six countries, based on which the USA has the highest rate of people following politicians on social media and Germany the lowest (see *Digital News Report: Australia 2017*, p.43).

FIGURE 5.1: FOLLOWING POLTICIANS ON SOCIAL MEDIA (%)

Q12gi. When using social media for news (e.g. Facebook, Twitter or You Tube) have you followed or subscribed to a channel/page of a politician or political party? Please select all that apply: Yes, I follow a politician or political party of the left; Yes, I follow a politician or political party of the centre; Yes, I follow a politician or political party of the right; No, I don't follow any politician or political party via social media.

Concerns. This type of direct publishing by politicians and parties only matters if news consumers eschew mediated sources of political information in favour of direct political feeds. So far, our data indicate that those who follow politicians have a high interest in political news and so continue to consume other news media as well. Therefore any perceived concern of consumer reliance on unfiltered political public relations material for their political news remains small.

However, the ability for politicians and their teams to bypass the scrutiny of the press gallery only makes it harder for traditional gatekeepers to perform their role. We might envisage a future in which some journalists could increasingly rely on pre-packaged content from politicians' social media because they simply do not have the resources to attend all political briefings etc. in person.

Recommendation: The Select Committee itself may be in a unique position to provide guidance in this area. Any form of regulation of commentary by politicians would be inappropriate in the advanced democracy which Australia enjoys. Conversely, the purposeful use of disinformation within political/campaign advertising must be addressed in order to avoid further erosion of trust in news, especially when social networks can allow fake news go viral in a matter of minutes. Whether the kind of fact-checking that occurs during election campaigns could be applied to politicians' use of social media posts is one avenue for exploration.

Submission ends.
The submission authors are happy to provide further information to the Select Committee if desired.