DIGI

24 August 2018

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2601

By email:

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters on the *Inquiry into all aspects of the conduct of the 2016 election and related matters*.

By way of background, the Digital Industry Group Inc (DIGI) includes representatives from Facebook, Google, Oath, and Twitter. DIGI members collectively provide digital services to Australians including Internet search engines and other digital communications platforms. These services and platforms facilitate new distribution, marketing, and revenue generating channels for Australian businesses and content creators. They are also driving fundamental changes to the way that business is conducted and content is created and distributed.

DIGI thanks the Committee for the opportunity to make this submission. If you have any questions or require any additional information, please let me know.

Yours sincerely

Nicole Buskiewicz
Managing Director
DIGI

Executive Summary

DIGI welcomes the Joint Committee's interest in exploring aspects of the 2016 Australian election and related matters, with particular reference to:

    a. the extent to which social media bots may have targeted Australian voters and political discourse in the past;
    b. the likely sources of social media manipulation within Australia and internationally;
    c. ways to address the spread of deliberately false news online during elections; and
    d. measures to improve the media literacy of Australian voters.

Democracy, the internet and digital technologies

The rise of the internet and digital technologies over the last three decades have fundamentally changed many industries, including media companies and news publishers. Because of these developments, journalism and the consumption of news has evolved in ways no one ever expected. Overall, however, the consequence of this changing landscape has been positive for both consumers and voters who now enjoy a wider availability of sources, a greater choice of news publications, and access to a greater diversity of voices.

Research from AlphaBeta found that over 658,000 Australian news and politics videos are watched every day on YouTube from over 50 channels, including the Liberal and Labor parties. AlphaBeta also found that the industry concentration has halved over the last decade as a result of the proliferation of new voices[1]. In this context, a number of new media outlets have flourished including internet only news publishers like Crikey, The Mandarin, Yahoo News, BuzzFeed, HuffPost, Mashable, Gizmodo, The Conversation, Junkee, Pedestrian TV, CNET, Mamamia, Women's Agenda, Techcrunch, and many others. Australia has also seen The New York Times and The Guardian launch digital only offerings in Australia.

However, voters are not the only ones to benefit from these developments. There has also been a strong uptake in the use of digital platforms in the lead up to, and during elections by policy makers and political parties, which suggest that these platforms do more good than harm for democratic processes. Australian political candidates and parliamentarians frequently rely on digital technologies and platforms to communicate directly with constituents en masse and read the social and political environment. Politicians have a long history of being on social media, and use of platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube is widespread among Australian politicians. A 2017 survey found that as many as 20 percent of the Australian public is following politicians on social media[2].

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[1] Bigger Picture: The new age of screen content, AlphaBeta, November 2016.
[2] University of Canberra, Digital News Report Australia, 2017

However, one of the challenges of the modern media landscape is that anyone can be a publisher. While on one hand, the rise of micro publishers on the web, where anyone with an internet connection can publish information on events, politics, and ideas, has empowered more voices and offered more views in turn making the media ecosystem more pluralistic and democratic; on the other, everyday people can have huge audiences, but lack any kind of professional training in media and media ethics, which is particularly important in the reporting of public interest news.

Fortunately, the experience of DIGI members and the use of their platforms in Australia, to date there is no evidence to suggest that election manipulation has been a widespread problem in Australia as it has been in the U.S. "

Addressing deliberate misinformation online

In order to play our part in the broader news ecosystem, the digital industry is taking actions to tackle fake news, fake accounts, and misinformation.

DIGI members want and encourage authentic communication - this is what keeps users on their platforms. While there is no silver bullet to tackling fake news, DIGI members are constantly iterating to find the best way to keep it off their platforms. These initiatives include:

- removing economic incentives for publishers of fake news, including through preventing those account holders from monetising the content via ads[3];
- improving ranking algorithms in a variety of ways to demote fake news[4] and elevate quality journalism[5];
- improving techniques to identify and remove fake accounts and automated attempts to spread content on their platforms[6];
- increasing transparency around political ads[7]
- working as part of industry coalitions to accurately report false, misleading and confusing claims that circulate online[8];
- working with fact check organisations to facilitate the labelling of news with fact check tags or similar[9]; and
- verifying legitimate news publishers who use their platforms for the distribution of their content[10].

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[3] See for example Disrupting economic incentives and improving News Feed rankings, How we fought bad ads, sites and scammers in 2016 and Announcement: RT and Sputnik Advertising

[4] See for example Disrupting economic incentives and improving News Feed rankings and Our latest quality improvements for Search.

[5] See for example, Elevating quality journalism on the open web, Greater transparency for users around news broadcasters and A New Level of Transparency for Ads and Pages.

[6] See for example Our Approach to Misinformation and Bots and How Twitter is fighting spam and malicious automation.

[7] See for example A New Level of Transparency for Ads and Pages

[8] See for example industry coalitions First Draft Coalition and CrossCheck.

[9] See for example Expanding Fact Checking at Google.

[10] See for example Getting into Google News.

Improving media literacy of voters

Social media and internet companies alone cannot solve the challenge of deliberate misinformation and should not be the arbiters of truth. We all have a responsibility as news consumers and voters to develop the skills required to understand what we read online. There are things everyone can do to improve their digital literacy, but it's particularly important that we educate the next generation on the changing media landscape.

DIGI members are taking action to help people skill up and improve their digital literacy, including:
● Funding research and projects that help people make informed judgments about the news they read and share[11];
● Convening and collaborating with experts across the technology, academic and journalism sectors to help people get better information so they can make smart choices about what they read[12]; and,
● Working with news organisations around the world, like Reporters Without Borders, members of First Draft and the Walkley Foundation to provide training and education on how to best use our platforms.[13]

We support programs by organisations like the Alannah and Madeline Foundation eSmart Schools program that seek to increase digital literacy among school-aged children, and encourage the government to promote such initiatives, for example, through the Office of the eSafety Commissioner. We also believe that education is key to improving digital literacy, and support the inclusion of digital literacy and critical thinking skills in school curriculums.

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[11] See for example The News Integrity Initiative
[12] See for example The Facebook Journalism Project
[13] See for example Update on Twitter's Review of the 2016 U S Election.