

## Questions on Notice

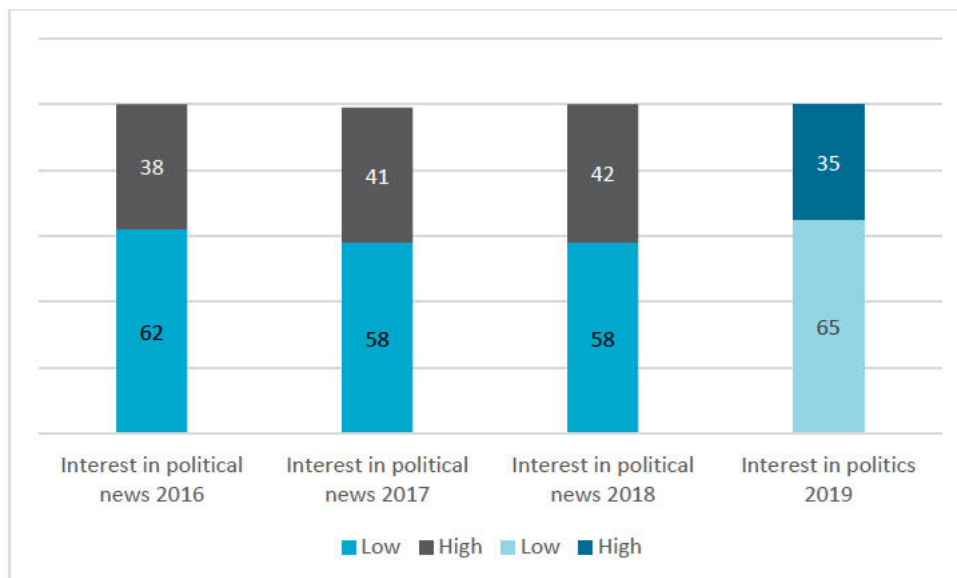
### 1. Chair (Senator McGrath): Political interest and news interest since 2016- 2020

#### Response from Dr Caroline Fisher

In 2019, the Digital News Report: Australia (DNRA) asked specifically about news consumers' interest in politics for the first time. It found that 35% of participants said they are extremely or very interested in politics and almost two thirds (65%) said they have low to no interest in politics. However, this changes with age, gender, education and location. Older news consumers are more interested in politics than younger. Those aged 73+ are the most interested in politics (50%) and those aged under 54 are the least interested (approximately 30%). There is also difference between city and regional news consumers. In 2019, 37% of major city news consumers said they have high interest in politics compared to 32% of regional news consumers. Similarly, a slightly larger percentage (59%) of those who live in cities say they have high interest in news compared to 56% of regional consumers.

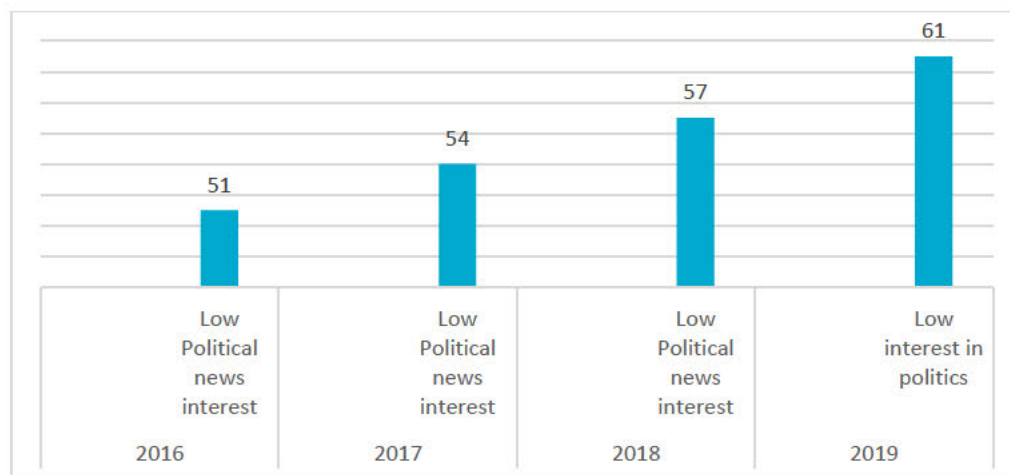
In previous years (2016-2018) the DNRA asked about interest in political news rather than politics specifically (Figure 1). While the items being measured are slightly different, Figure 1 shows interest in political news and interest politics are consistently low across the four years 2016-2019. However, interest in politics specifically in 2019 is lower than interest in political news over the previous three years.

Figure 1. Interest in political news/politics (%)



There is also a strong correlation between low interest in news and low interest in political news and politics. As Figure 2. Shows more than half of news consumers who have a low interest in news also have a low interest in political news and politics. This trend appears to be increasing in relation to political news and is strongest in relation to politics generally.

Figure 2. Low interest in news and low interest in politics/political news (%)



## 2. Senator Marielle Smith: Regulation of third-party data transfers and how well Australia regulates that?

### Response from Dr Caroline Fisher

This is not my area of expertise and I would prefer not to respond.

## 3. Mr Stevens: Chinese sponsored content

### Response from Dr Mike Jensen

There was an agreement signed in 2016 between China Daily and Fairfax to place eight-page inserts entitled 'China Watch' in their newspapers. The content reflected CCP positions on issues and sought to encourage a favourable view towards deepening Australian-PRC relations

(<https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/chinas-propaganda-arms-push-soft-power-in-australian-media-deals-20160531-gp7yz6.html>).

The content is produced by *China Daily*. The irony here is that *China Daily* was created as a result of a series of exchanges between Australian and PRC-based journalists. A partnership with staff from *The Age* was critical to the creation of *China Daily* as the first Mainland Chinese English daily (<https://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/foundations-councils-institutes/australia-china-council/40th-anniversary/Pages/promoting-australian-expertise-journalist-exchanges-and-the-china-daily>). The Australia China Council, a creature of the Australian government, created in 1978 to foster exchanges between the Chinese Mainland and Australia.

### Response from Dr Caroline Fisher

Through my research into sponsored content I have become aware of Chinese sponsored content being provided to news outlets that do not have editorial oversight. For instance, the New York Times (NYT) runs regular advertising/editorial content provided by 'China Daily'. See this link for an example:



<https://www.nytimes.com/paidpost/china-daily/elderly-dig-deep-into-their-memories-to-find-pearls-of-wisdom.html?searchResultPosition=1>

This piece of content in the NYT is marked as an 'advertisement' at the top and has the following disclaimer: "This content was paid for and created by [China Daily](#), People's Republic of China. The news and editorial staffs of The New York Times had no role in this advertisement's creation." The use of Chinese paid and/or sponsored content such as this has been characterised by commentators as an attempt to spread positive images of the country around the world. This following item from the Guardian explores this issue

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/dec/07/china-plan-for-global-media-dominance-propaganda-xi-jinping>

Generally speaking, sponsored content is a form of advertising that mimics journalism and aims to fit in seamlessly among other journalistic content. News organisations are increasingly relying on these new types of narrative advertising as a way to remain financially viable. This has raised concerns about it being deceptive to consumers by trading on the reputation of journalism but is in fact a form of advertising for commercial or other interests (Schauster, Ferrucci, and Neill 2016, CAJ 2015). There are different types of sponsored content, some are more independent of the hosting news outlet than others (Sonderman and Tran 2013). Some sponsored content is created by journalists, special content hubs or by the advertiser. Disclosure is key and news outlets have different ways of disclosing the varying type of sponsored content.

#### 4. Political orientation by age; urban/regional; education; income; gender

##### Response from Dr Caroline Fisher

As requested by the committee, we have supplied additional information from the *Digital News Report: Australia 2019* (DNR: Australia 2019) about the political orientation of news consumers. Some of this data appears in chapter 5 of the DNR: Australia 2019 which is dedicated to the issue of political orientation and news consumption and the 2019 federal election. Additional analysis has also been provided here. A pdf copy of the 2019 report has been attached, but it can also be accessed online here <https://apo.org.au/node/240786>. The methodology of the survey is fully described in the report.

- Overall political orientation of the survey participants

The survey participants are asked how they identify along the political spectrum. In the 2019 survey (Figure 3), the following graph shows the breakdown. As raised in the committee hearing there is a portion (17%) who do not know what their political orientation is. (DNR: Australia 2019, p. 65)

Figure 3. Political orientation of survey respondents (%)

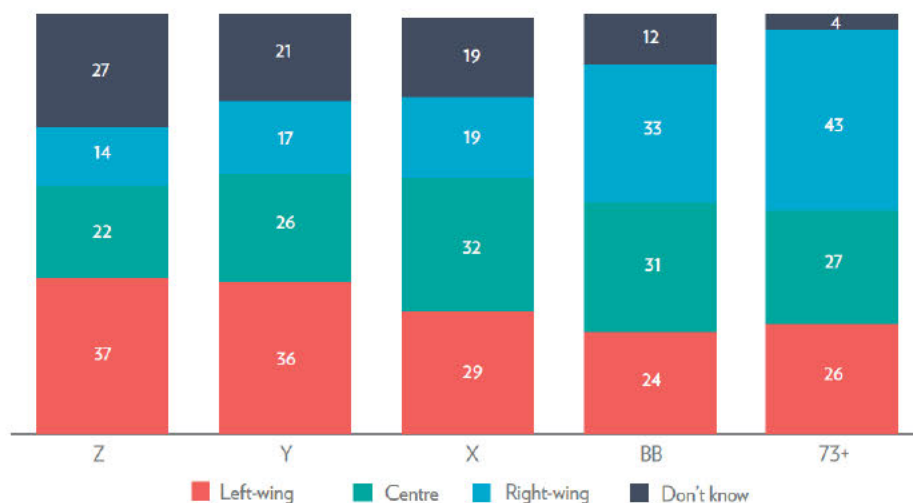


Q1F. Some people talk about 'left', 'right' and 'centre' to describe parties and politicians. (Generally socialist parties would be considered 'left wing' whilst conservative parties would be considered 'right wing'). With this in mind, where would you place yourself on the following scale?

- **Age and Political orientation**

Older generations have a higher proportion of right-wing news consumers; 43% of 73+ say they are right-wing, compared to 14% of Z Gen. The younger generations have a higher proportion of 'Don't knows' (Gen Z, Y and X) (see figure 4). In relation to gender, there were more right-wing oriented men (30%) compared to women (18%). More than double the number of women (24%) said they "don't know" their political orientation compared to men (10%). (DNR: Australia 2019, p 65).

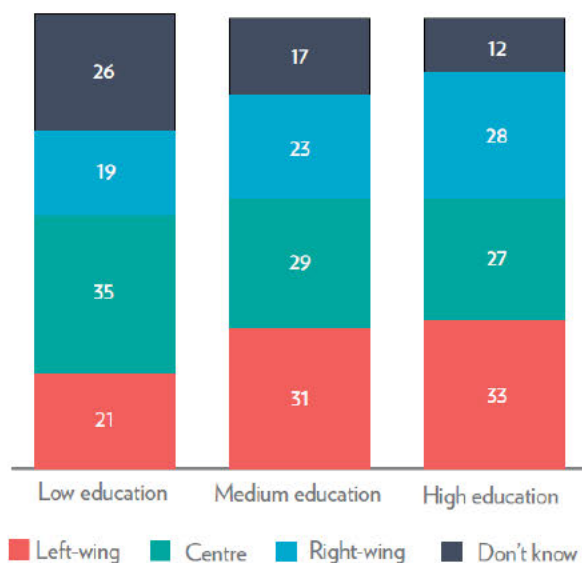
Figure 4. Political orientation of news consumers by generation (%)



- **Education and political orientation**

Almost one third (26%) of news consumers with low education said they "don't know" their political orientation. This is a high figure compared to those with medium (17%) and high (12%) levels of education. News consumers with lower levels of education are also more likely to identify with the centre of politics (35%) than either left (19%) or right (21%) (see figure 5). These demographic differences are important and help explain significant variations in news consumption behaviour across the political spectrum that are described in chapter 5. (DNR: Australia 2019, p 66).

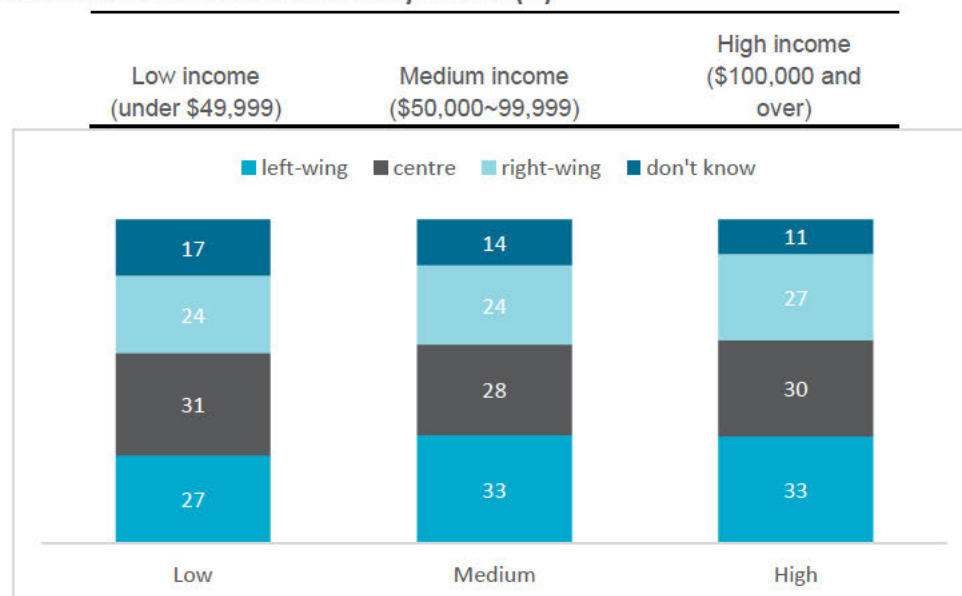
Figure 5. Political orientation of news consumers by education (%)



- **Income and political orientation**

This analysis does not appear in the 2019 report and is provided here for the committee (Figure 6). Those on low incomes are more likely not to know their political orientation. Higher income earners are more likely to identify with left, right and centre politics. Low income earners and high-income earners are more likely to identify with the centre of politics.

Figure 6. Political orientation of news consumers by income (%)



- **City/Regional and Political Orientation**

Again, this data does not appear in the DNR: Australia 2019 report and is provided here for the Committee (figure 7). As the graph below shows, there is a 4% difference in left wing orientation between city and regional/rural news consumers. 31% of those in major cities identify as left wing compared to 27% of those in regional/rural part



of the country. The classification of city/regional is based on the ABS geographic classifications. We have combined inner/outer regional, rural and remote under the single banner of 'regional'.

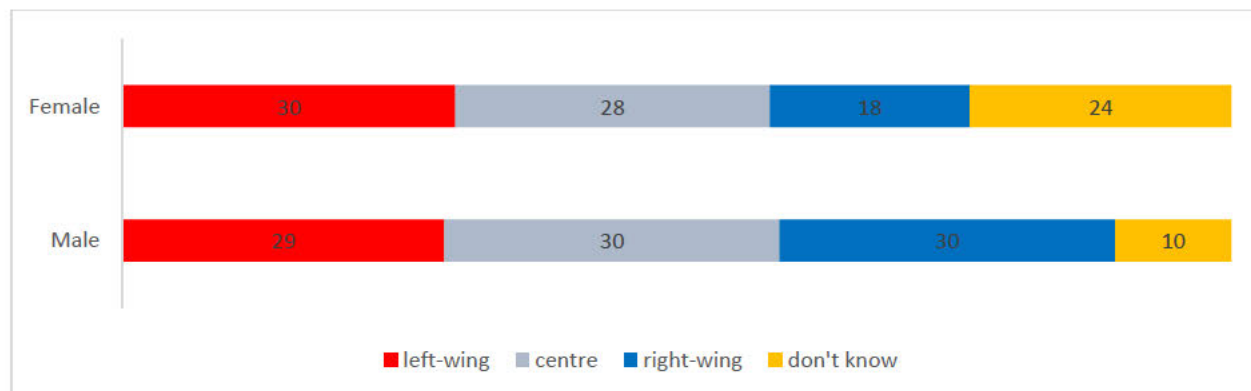
**Figure 7. Political orientation of news consumers by city/region**



- Gender and political orientation**

This additional analysis for the committee shows strong gendered differences in relation to political orientation of Australian news consumers. Women are much more likely not to have a political orientation than men. As figure 8 shows 24% of women say they don't know their political orientation compared to 10% of men. Women are also less likely to identify as right wing.

**Figure 8. Political orientation by gender (%)**



## Additional Questions on Notice

### 1. Why do you think that state actors will interfere in the next national election in Australia?

#### Response from Dr Mike Jensen

I don't know if a foreign state actor will attempt to interfere in the next national election in Australia. However, I think Australia should be prepared for such interference. Additionally, the focus here has been exclusively on foreign state actors, but I think we need to be prepared as well for nonstate actors which might find it in their interests to shift the politics one way or another. At this point I don't see evidence that a foreign terrorist or criminal organization might seek to interfere, but it is conceivable. More broadly, the greatest risk involving nonstate actors likely involves the use of proxies to carry out activities. In the American litigation against the Internet Research Agency (IRA) and Concord Media Group, its parent company, a defence strategy has been to prevent the prosecution from claiming that the IRA is linked to the Russian government. Recent news has pointed out that the IRA used NGOs and other persons located in several African countries recently to amplify certain narratives about race in America. The Mueller report has made that claim and I have come across evidence that I think proves that it operates as an agent of the Russian government. But to the main point is, governments use proxies to hide their involvement and that is something the committee needs to be aware of. In this regard, the FITS legislation more adequately captures the domain of concern. It covers activities involving not just foreign principals, foreign political organisations, and anyone or any organisation acting on behalf of a foreign government.

I assess that the People's Republic of China (PRC) would represent the greatest risk for interfering in Australia's next election. In saying that, I don't know how high the risk. Going into the 2019 election, there was evidence indicating that the PRC had a preference for Labor in the election. That said, I am not sure how they assess a) their capability to effect a change in the outcome and b) their estimates of the risks involved and any potential blowback from such an operation. I would suspect that they are more likely to concentrate on specific seats rather than the electorate as a whole.

Further, I would note that actors have at their disposal more than social media operations or hack and leak operations targeting parties at their disposal to influence the outcome of an election. They can influence the financial markets or specific companies. Some of that may be information operations to undermine confidence in key parts of the Australian economy, but it can also involve using economic leverage, or there may be hack and leak operations targeting sensitive financial information of public and/or private organisations. The suspected hack of Burisma by APT 28 ("Fancy Bear"), one of the Russian government entities that targeted the DNC in 2016, demonstrates that companies and other entities associated with specific candidates, parties, and organisations may be also subject to cyberattacks in an effort to obtain potentially damaging material.

## 2. Do you have a view on whether social media and search platforms current business model of micro-targeting, along with algorithmic amplification, poses a risk during elections?

### Response from Dr Mike Jensen

I do not have a full assessment of the risks associated with microtargeting and algorithmic amplification. As I noted in my testimony, Eitan Hersh has developed evidence on that suggests the incorporation of marketing data had little additional predictive benefit in estimating vote choices. However, that does not entirely answer the question.

One concern about microtargeting is that it increases the surface space along which interference operates. Consider Operation Infektion which claimed that AIDS was created by the US government to target African Americans. That narrative was a single claim that was not adapted to the specific worldviews and belief sets of members of the African American community – a community that is diverse. Similarly, appeals to Indigenous Australians writ large are less likely to as effective as communications targeting specific indigenous communities or those who identify as indigenous in different places as those identities are negotiated in specific ways.

However, by studying the communications and the engagements of specific groups of people, situated in their everyday life, it may be more possible to figure out what moves them to act and what moves different groups to act. This, in theory, substantially increases the capacity to manipulate persons as it is easier to identify which beliefs need to be amplified to get a target to act in ways that are contrary to their other interests and beliefs.

These campaigns are not normally about persuasion in the sense that traditional political campaigning seeks to persuade swing voters. Rather they often involve creating resonances which help them become parts of communities within online digital spaces. From this perch, they are positioned to activate or deactivate voters or to mobilise or demobilise citizens to take or refrain from taking specific actions.

In terms of microtargeting, as I noted in my remarks, there is little evidence of the effectiveness of microtargeting within political science research. Recent research estimates that the net effect of advertising during a campaign is close to zero. However, these studies have not really traced microtargeting effects, they are narrowly focused on voting decisions at a specific time. Finally, they may be capturing a situation where campaigns are essentially running to stand still -- campaign advertising may be quite effective, but to the extent campaigns are generally competent, the effects cancel each other out.

I do think there may be effects from microtargeting that have not been adequately measured. It is possible to create communication strategies better tailored to the motivational structure of specific segments of the distinct communities. A/B testing is commonly practiced by companies to refine their advertising messages for specific groups. The IRA used different versions of their ads as well. It is an area where we need more research in order to determine the extent to which foreign interference campaigns produce attitudinal and behavioural change with regards to political issues.

As I indicated in my remarks during the session, to the extent that microtargeting customizes messaging for audiences, it increases the surface area of belief systems that can be targeted for manipulation. The more tailored



a message is to an audience, the more specific parts of a belief structure can be amplified through a resonance strategy. This makes it easier to manipulate audiences by distorting their thinking about a topic, raising the salience of one consideration at the expense of other aspects of the issue or the wider issue context.

Whereas campaigning in a broadcast era was often focused on information provision regarding policy positions, an idealised conception within academic theories of representative democracy, microtargeting can focus more on the politicization of identities. While there has always been an identity component in political mobilization (e.g. the working class, an ethnic group, those who hold “postmaterialist” values and have flocked to Green parties around the world), those are broad identity categories within civil society – and parties have formed historically through the political organisation of civil society.

The kind of identity politics that microtargeting facilitates involves an inversion of that relationship whereby parties – or other entities such as malevolent foreign actors or outside groups – are increasingly politicizing social identities. The reasons for this stem from growing societal complexity and fragmentation. However, this is a form of messaging that I would argue is qualitatively different than in previous eras as it aims to shape identities through both long and short-term communication strategies.

While identities in a country are subject to change over time, changes in communication strategies change the relationship between parties, organisations, foreign actors, and Australian citizens in ways that do not fit with our common understandings of democracy. It is less about representing constituencies and more about creating constituencies.

This raises serious and troubling questions. What does it mean to live in a democracy today? During the Cold War, Western political leaders would make the case for the superiority of democracy. What would that case look like today? And who would make that case to the wider global community? Today see younger generations indicating greater scepticism towards democracy as a form of governing than their parents and grandparents. What does or what should democracy mean today? This is a matter that we as a country need to have a serious conversation about.

### 3. Do you have an evidence to suggest that non-state actors are also involved in disinformation campaigns in Australia?

**Response from Dr Mike Jensen**

This was partly answered in my response to the first question. I do not have evidence of non-state actors. This does not mean there are none, just that I do not have direct knowledge of it. I have heard of the use of “trolling” services targeting market actors. This form of interference does not necessarily directly target political events and actors. Instead it is often done for financial and/or market advantage. There are scenarios under which economic manipulation could be a means of producing political outcomes as well. An example of this might be a trolling attack, potentially combined with hacks against companies, which could undermine the economic performance of a government in an effort to impact an election. As a government’s economic performance weighs heavily on voters, this is not far-fetched.

#### 4. What about domestic misinformation and disinformation campaigns –are these just as serious a threat as foreign interference?

##### Response from Dr Caroline Fisher

Arguably yes. As stated in our submission there was little to no evidence of foreign interference in the 2019 election campaign. But there was concern about the possible impact of misleading political advertising on the outcome of the election<sup>1</sup>. Misleading statements from institutional political actors can equate to forms of mis and dis information. As for mis and dis information generated by other local actors – individually or on behalf of groups – we do not have any data to shed light on this.

##### Response from Dr Mike Jensen

Yes and no. On the one hand, foreign interference is uniquely problematic as it substitutes the political will of Australians for that of a foreign entity or government. That is fundamentally incompatible with the capacity for self-governance.

On the other hand, domestic actors are often more adept at manipulating Australians than foreign governments as our marketing and campaign firms routinely study how communication campaigns can get different segments of the Australian population to act in a predetermined way or to adopt an attitude. Domestic actors have greater capacity to manipulate an Australian audience, all things equal, than a foreign entity.

And the consequences are not benign just because the actors are domestic in their location. Electoral democracy relies on people being able to connect their preferences to vote choices. Manipulation involves deceiving people about their strategic intentions in a situation. We fixate on lies in political advertising and statements -- and they certainly are a part of the problem. However, the history of propaganda shows that most propaganda involves true statements, often organised in highly stylised ways which lead people to draw conclusions contrary to their interests if they had a better contextual understanding. Politicians know this well as much of what they do is not well-understood by the public, so they are often criticised on grounds that cite facts but those facts in isolation can be misleading. You can fact check a false statement which can have limited effects in countering it, but it is much harder to combat statements that are technically not false.

The question, as posed, is a normative question, not reducible to empirical evidence. But every politician, campaign, party, and outside group have choices to make as to whether they seek to deceive voters or not. And research has shown, when political authorities speak out against things that would presumably advantage them, this can be a powerful counter to misleading, deceitful, and false narratives.

#### 5. I note your recommendation that the Government encourage the use of credible information sources. Who would determine what a credible source is and what is not?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.marquelawyers.com.au/assets/crikey-22.05.pdf>; <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/may/27/designed-to-deceive-how-do-we-ensure-truth-in-political-advertising> ;

#### **Response from Dr Mike Jensen**

I agree that the government cannot be in the position of identifying credible sources. This would be self-defeating as such a list would become tarnished by politics. Instead, I would recommend reliance on a strongly supported, editorially independent public broadcaster. To the extent that the ABC continues to be seen as a credible news source – and to the extent it operationally can maintain that credibility – the ABC can help address the dangers of foreign and domestic manipulation operations. It can do so by providing context to persistent deceptive narratives and thereby educate the electorate. This should not reduce to a partisan policy priority. Defence of a serious, independent, and credible public broadcasting system is fundamental for the defence of our national information environment.

### **6. How can the political advertising blackout be extended to global social media and other online platforms?**

#### **Response from Dr Mike Jensen**

Platforms could be required to not publish advertisements that contain materials related to the election or politics. The Australian Electoral Commission has criteria which they apply to the disclosure laws regarding political advertising and those criteria could be extended to the enforcement of restrictions such as a blackout period. I will bracket the normative questions about whether this is a good thing.

One thing that concerns me is that even in the absence of advertising, malign actors (foreign or domestic) can promote deceptive and manipulative communications during the blackout period. This can be amplified with bots and human “troll” actors. Paid advertisements can be a way to reach a large audience quickly and respond to such manipulation. While politicians can go on television or the radio, many people are not politically interested and will never see that content. Meanwhile, content can be covertly distributed through non-political, “third spaces”, and campaigns have little ability to respond and counter this activity.

### **7. Is there a distinction between political advertisements, political comment, or sponsored content that communicates on social, political and economic issues that do not come within electoral contests? Do we need consider regulating all these areas?**

#### **Response for Dr Mike Jensen**

Conceptual distinctions depend on the wider theoretical context for which they are useful. As a scholar of political communication, I think about these distinctions in terms of the capacity to reach audiences and the shape and structure of communication channels. One can also think in terms of organisational development and regulatory frameworks, and so forth. I will frame my answer in terms of the structure and shape of communication channels. Social media platforms treat advertisements and sponsored content in the same way as one pays to target them at a specific audience or set of audiences. Platforms vary in the targeting criteria available. But this distinguishes a paid promotion from political comments that are not promoted. Ordinary political comments are seen by

followers or friends of a user, or someone searching for specific content. Paid content would reach that audience plus additional audiences that had not opted into to that content – an audience selected on the basis of their believed susceptibility to the message.

#### **Response from Dr Caroline Fisher**

Yes, there is a distinction, but it all lies along a continuum. All political comment and content are types of advocacy that promote the interest of the political actor who produces it, whether that be a speech at a townhall meeting or a post on Twitter. It can range from straight forward provision of public service information through to overt partisan claims. Traditionally there was a formal distinction between political advertising and other types of content, but it is increasingly blurring in digital practice. Prior to the internet, advertising was one of the few ways politicians could get their message across unfiltered by the news media. Today, political actors can publish whatever they like to their followers and beyond with little gatekeeping.

Outside of electoral contests I think it is very difficult to regulate. In an ideal world, the variation of content and its intent would be more transparent to the consumer. For example, in journalism, labels and disclosure are used to distinguish between independent journalistic reporting and content produced to promote political and commercial interests. For example, most news organisations clearly label opinion, sponsored content and advertorial. Labelling of political content on social media particularly, would be very useful for consumers to help distinguish one type of content from another.

Just as news organisations are adopting greater transparency to improve trust with consumers through clearer labelling and disclosure, perhaps politicians and parties could do this too. It would be very interesting to conduct research into audience perceptions of clearly labelled political content versus not clearly labelled to gauge if it has an impact on trust perceptions. We would be very keen to conduct that research.

### **8. What about content that has been created with a political motive – but is presented as parody or satire. Is it a problem?**

#### **Response from Dr Caroline Fisher**

Parody and satire have long played an important role in political discourse and should continue to do so. Clear labelling of social media content that is parody or satire could also be considered.

#### **Response from Dr Mike Jensen**

Whether satire or parody are a problem is a normative question. Those are techniques that allow claims which have been suppressed in our ways of thinking to be made present and relevant. Humour works by getting an audience to think about something or think about it in a way that that is unexpected.

There is a famous clip from the BBC where a parody group, The Yes Men, convinced the BBC that one of their members was a Dow Chemical spokesperson who then went on to claim Dow was taking responsibility for the Bhopal disaster created by Union Carbide, which Dow had just purchased

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LiWlvBro9eI&t=2s>). The claims made in the video as well as the claimed



identities are all false. But by carrying out this stunt, the Yes Men were able to draw attention to the disaster again and open a discussion about whether Dow needs to take responsibility for what happened. Some might call this “fake news”. The Yes Men call it “truthing” as it brings to light a truth that otherwise would not be made visible. Above I gave examples of true statements can be used to deceive, this would be a case where deception is used in the first instance in order to provide context as silences about subjects can also manipulate (this is why countries like the PRC invest such resources into censoring political content online). These are reasons why I suggest that the focus on “fake news” and false information or misinformation are not helpful in understanding the problem.

Satire has long played an important part in political life because it allows us to present certain ideas as absurd. In that sense, it is more adept at demolishing a position than demonstrating support or reverence for a position of authority. There is a political orientation to satire and parody, then, as both tend to be tools for attacking existing orders. Restrictions on satire or parody would generally be difficult to reconcile with protecting political speech.

## 9. Are you aware of where Australia is collaborating on international regulation in this area?

### Response from Dr Caroline Fisher

No, I am not aware of any work in this area.

### Response from Dr Mike Jensen

I am not aware of any such collaboration, but I am not an expert on that specific matter.

## 10. There are many problems that need to be addressed by way of regulation, including hate speech, fake news, identity bubbles, election influence and interference.

- a. What is the biggest problem?
- b. Where should we start to solve this problem?

### Response from Dr Mike Jensen

This is hard to answer given the space available. For me the biggest problem is election interference, this is why I study the topic. Hate speech is certainly a problem but there are difficult speech issues that come into play which I am not an expert on. I have analytical problems with the concept of “fake news” so I won’t use it. Some of the issues I have with that term have been explained here and in a series of articles I have done for The Conversation (e.g. <https://theconversation.com/weve-been-hacked-so-will-the-data-be-weaponised-to-influence-election-2019-heres-what-to-look-for-112130>). Filter bubbles seem less of an issue when examining the actual behaviours of users. The Digital News Report data shows that people do not normally consume ideologically homogeneous news and so has recent work by Axel Bruns on the topic.

As for solutions, I suggest some approaches in this piece from The Conversation:

<https://theconversation.com/fake-news-is-already-spreading-online-in-the-election-campaign-its-up-to-us-to-stop-it-115455>.

#### Response from Dr Caroline Fisher

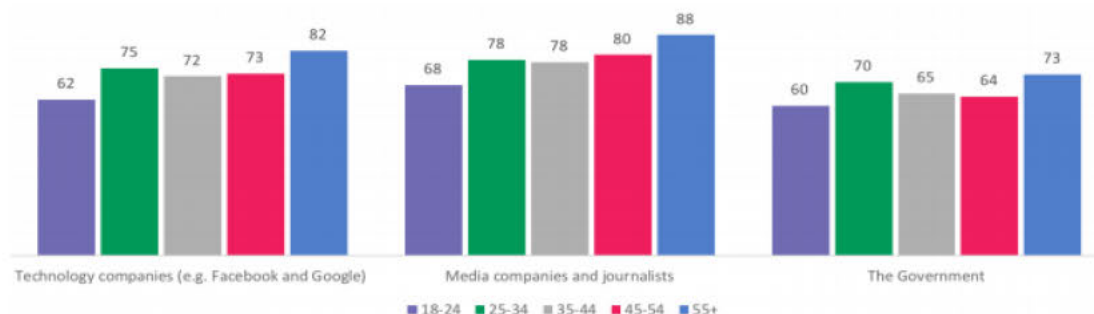
I am unable to answer your question directly, but I can offer some insights into perceptions of fake news by Australian news consumers. In relation to fake news, Australians think everyone has a roll to play in combatting it (figure 9). *DNR: Australia 2018* (p. 38) found that almost three-quarters of Australian news consumers (73%) have experienced fake news and are very concerned about it. Poor journalism (40%) is the most commonly experienced type of fake news but news consumers are the most worried about politically and commercially fabricated stories (67%). Most respondents (81%) believe that media companies and journalists have responsibility to stop the problem of fake news. The majority (68%) also believed the government can do more to combat fake news.

Figure 9. Who is responsible for fixing fake news online? (%)

#### AUSTRALIANS WANT TO SEE ACTION TO COMBAT FAKE NEWS

News consumers think media companies and journalists (81%) are responsible for taking action to reduce fake news, more so than social media companies (75%) or the government (68%). Older Australians think that media

companies, journalists, government and technology companies should do more to reduce the amount of misinformation, as figure 3.7 indicates.



#### • Filter bubbles

I recommend you speak to Professor Axel Bruns from QUT, who specializes in the issue of filter bubbles. His recent book 'Are filter bubble real?' (Bruns 2019) argues concern about the impact of filter bubbles and echo chambers is overstated. Other research by Fletcher and Nielsen (2017) share this view.

### 11. Where should the responsibility for truth in advertising lie – with the authoriser or the publisher/broadcaster?

#### Response from Dr Mike Jensen

This is a normative question. I would tend to say the authoriser as in a sense, that is the person speaking or on whose behalf communication is occurring. Who is speaking often matters greatly as it impacts on the meaning and significance of what is being said. It can impact on the authority of the communication or its value for a

community. If it is unclear who is speaking or the identity of a speaker is misattributed (such as in covert information operations on social media), that can deceive an audience. These are reasons why the authoriser is most important as far as I am concerned.

Publishers might have ethical responsibilities as well, lest they become complicit in the malign activities of other actors. In legal terms this might include the role of publishers or platforms in enforcing compliance with existing regulations and to take steps to counter malevolent, even if legal, uses of their channels or platforms.

#### **Response from Dr Caroline Fisher**

I assume the question is referring to political advertising and I will answer it based on that assumption. This is a complex issue with no clear answer. It is an issue with a vexed history federally in Australia. In 1983 legislation was enacted but then repealed on the basis it was unworkable. However, truth in political advertising laws do exist in South Australia and New Zealand and may soon be operating in Queensland.

A recent report by the Australia Institute (Browne 2019) found the vast majority of Australians want truth in political advertising. Renwick and Palese (2019) found while there are issues with operability, there is no in principle objection from politicians in South Australia or New Zealand to the existence of the legislation. While there are difficulties, the researchers do not conclude the legislation is not worth having as a guiding framework. I support this view and would argue in favour of trying to find an effective model, rather than throwing our hands up and saying it is all too hard.

In light of falling levels of trust in politicians, politics and government, we need to find ways to help arrest further decline in trust. More research into the efficacy of these laws needs to be undertaken.

### **12. Late last year Twitter made the decision for a global ban on political advertising. Have there been any studies to identify how the ban has worked in practice?**

#### **Response from Dr Caroline Fisher**

I am not aware of any studies to date.

#### **Response from Dr Mike Jensen**

Not that I am aware.

### **13. What mechanisms are available to ensure Facebook's transparency measures cover the full range of political advertising?**

#### **Response from Dr Mike Jensen**

The AEC has a working relationship with Facebook regarding the disclosure of entities promoting political ads. This disclosure requirement applies to all political ads, independent of whether there is an upcoming election. If there were regulations requiring greater transparency in political advertising online, presumably they could work with Facebook to get that implemented. The ad library that exists for other countries may be a starting point.

However, we may also wish to consider the unique context of threats and concerns facing Australia as well as consider other aspects of online information diffusion that could benefit not just Australia, but other democracies.

#### 14. Given data regarding the rise of disinformation and foreign interference in Australia, what could the government be doing to ensure Australian users have the same transparency safeguards as other countries before the next election?

##### Response from Dr Mike Jensen

In terms of transparency, I think the most important thing is get the regulatory framework together now and work with the platforms to implement it.

Transparency with respect to the sponsorship and authorship of social media posts in Australia is important, but the policies need to go beyond that. Some of what I think needs to be done I outlined in my prepared statement. It comes down to a whole of society approach that includes education programs for youth on up through adults. That people understand we all have a role to play in protecting the Australian information environment. That it is on each one of us if we irresponsibly share misleading news stories or participate in the amplification of identity-based vitriol, etc. But it also requires that civil society organisations and universities have support to carry out research and publicise efforts to manipulate our politics. Civil society organisations and academic researchers will often cover the similar terrain as the Australian intelligence community, albeit limited to open source materials and without the same training. However, whereas the intelligence community normally cannot make public their findings, independent researchers can. It requires cooperation between the nation's law enforcement and intelligence agencies along with entities like the AEC to coordinate responses to threats in real time as there are complementary equities that each of these agencies bring. In addition, this involves working with platforms to get information on malign content as well as get it removed in a timely fashion. Finally, Australia is not alone in facing this threat. It is important that Australia works with allied governments to share intelligence so that both Australia and its allies can more effectively protect against efforts to interfere in democratic politics.

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