

Inquiry into Civics Education, Engagement and Participation in Australia

Submission to
the Joint
Standing
Committee on
Electoral
Matters

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
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Executive Summary

The University of Melbourne welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' inquiry into civics education, engagement and participation in Australia. This submission focuses on the inquiry's third term of reference relating to the impacts of misinformation and disinformation.¹

Misinformation and disinformation, while not novel phenomena, have assumed an unprecedented prominence and potency in today's digital age. The increasing reliance on social media as a primary source of information, especially concerning elections, has amplified the reach and impact of misleading content.

This shift in information consumption patterns intersects problematically with the cognitive shortcuts that individuals employ to assess the veracity of information. For instance, information that is easily comprehensible or repeatedly encountered tends to be more readily believed. We also tend to share information that elicits strong emotions.

This submission argues that the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation represents a wicked problem for contemporary society, one that defies simple or singular solutions. Traditional fact-checking, while necessary, is insufficient on its own. Instead, a multifaceted, cross-sectoral response is necessary, with concerted efforts across government departments, the private sector, and academia.

Key recommendations to address this issue include:

- **Enhancing media and information literacy education:** Empowering individuals with the skills to critically evaluate information sources and content is essential. This can be achieved through bolstering educational initiatives that focus on media literacy from a young age.
- **Developing assessment tools:** Innovative tools that aid individuals in discerning the provenance and quality of information will help mitigate the spread of false content. These tools should be user-friendly and widely accessible.
- **Legislative action in specific contexts:** While broad legislation may be contentious, targeted legislative measures can play a role in curbing the most egregious instances of disinformation, such as deepfakes.
- **Countering downstream consequences:** It is critical that strategies are developed to address the downstream consequences of disinformation, such as increased support of partisan violence and undemocratic practices.
- **Creating evaluation mechanisms:** Establishing robust mechanisms to evaluate the efficacy of various responses is essential for adaptive and effective policy-making. Continuous assessment will ensure that strategies evolve in line with the changing landscape of information dissemination.
- **Funding cross-disciplinary research:** To comprehensively understand and tackle the complexities of misinformation and disinformation, it is crucial to support research that bridges disciplines such as psychology, political science, communication studies, and information technology.

In short, combating misinformation and disinformation requires a holistic and dynamic approach.

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What is the issue?

Misinformation, disinformation and malinformation are not new. Seeking out legitimate information around elections has always been vexed. Traditional sources of information, including politicians and mainstream media, are prone to sharing mis and disinformation, including through scare campaigns and misleading reporting. Indeed, so-called fake news can be traced as far back as the concept of news itself.¹

What is misinformation, disinformation and malinformation?

There is no one definition for these concepts. However, the Australian Electoral Commission defines **misinformation** as “false information that is spread due to ignorance, or by error or mistake, without the intent to deceive.” Conversely, it defines **disinformation** as “knowingly false information designed to deliberately mislead and influence public opinion or obscure the truth for malicious or deceptive purposes”.² **Malinformation** is elsewhere defined as information “based on fact, but used out of context to mislead, harm, or manipulate.”³

People are increasingly accessing information from informal sources such as social media. For example, almost half (46%) of Australians aged 18-24 years nominated it as their main news source in 2023.⁴ This diversification and democratisation of news means that a wider range of people have been given a voice, but it also means that misinformation, disinformation and malinformation are becoming increasingly commonplace. The cost of entry to publish any claim is lower than it has ever been, meaning almost anyone can spread false information easily and quickly. Information is increasingly narrowcast to individuals – we are less likely to receive the same information en masse – so we may not even be aware of large swathes of mis or disinformation circulating.

This is exacerbated by the factors that influence what we share. Research has shown that people tend to fall for false news that has a high number of “likes” or “shares” on social media. Individuals were also more likely to believe and share news that was in agreement with their own beliefs.⁵ Research has found that we prefer to share things that elicit strong emotions, including self-righteous anger or fear.^{6 7} At the same time, we are more likely to believe information provided by someone we trust and we are more likely to assume people from our own group are more trustworthy.^{8 9} Because social connections (and social media) are clustered, that means it can be easy to end up with whole subpopulations in virtual echo chambers who do not hear important information or believe false information.

Artificial intelligence also complicates this. Bots, deepfakes, and other artificially generated content can make it difficult to know what is real. Our cognitive shortcuts, or heuristics, mean as humans we are particularly susceptible to these forms of disinformation. For example, the more frequently we come across information, the more likely we are to believe it.^{10 11} This can become problematic when algorithms or bots present a piece of information multiple times, regardless of its veracity. Additionally, the easier information is to process, the more likely we are to believe it.¹² This cognitive shortcut means that straightforward narratives, including those supported by deepfakes, are the most believable.

Foreign interference is one driver. In ASIO’s 2024 Annual Threat Assessment, Director-General Mike Burgess said that more Australians were being targeted for espionage and foreign interference than ever before.¹³ This can take a number of forms, including operations to disrupt (through distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks) or through actions taken online to distort political sentiment in an election. The latter can be especially challenging to detect as it may appear indistinguishable from legitimate domestic discourse.

This issue is not limited to foreign actors – malign domestic interference can be a challenge too. For example, the ‘15-minute city’ is an urban planning framework centred around the provision of basic amenities, such as shops, schools, and parks, within a 15-minute walk or cycle. This concept has gained

popularity among governments around the world, but it has also faced significant backlash, fuelled by disinformation that the 15-minute city is actually designed to limit people's movements or increase surveillance by government. The spread of these types of conspiracy theories has led to significant disruptions at the local government level, with some councils erecting physical barriers or closing chambers to public in-person meetings in response.¹⁴

It is worth noting that misinformation, disinformation and malinformation do not occur in a vacuum. They are symptoms – and causes – of a breakdown in trust. The data shows that we are increasingly polarised and that there is an erosion of trust in institutions. The 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer found that the government and the media were the least trusted institutions, with only 45% and 38% of Australians surveyed reporting trust in those respective institutions.¹⁵ International research suggests that the rise of populist politicians who accuse opposing media of spreading disinformation may contribute to the decline in trust for some news outlets.¹⁶ Additionally, the Scanlon Institute reported that trust in the Australian Government to do the right thing for Australian people all or most of the time had dropped to 36% in 2023 from 56% in 2020.¹⁷ It is perhaps unsurprising then that just under half (45%) of Australians said the country was more divided today than in the past.¹⁸ This provides the perfect environment for mis and disinformation to take hold.

Some institutions have sought to counter electoral disinformation. For example, in recent years, the Australian Electoral Commission has operated a [Disinformation Register](#) for federal electoral events. The register lists prominent pieces of disinformation regarding the electoral process and provides details of actions the AEC has taken. For example, it lists disinformation from the 2022 federal election, including that postal vote applications had been submitted and processed for deceased Australians. The register notes that AEC social media accounts swiftly corrected this disinformation and referred the content to social media organisations for their consideration, with posts removed. However, there are debates over the effectiveness of fact-checking, particularly once disinformation has taken hold (see section on possible responses for further exploration of this issue).

What is being done to address this?

Mis and disinformation is a growing area of research across a range of disciplines. At the University of Melbourne, we are developing methods to identify, quantify, and counter disinformation in a number of disciplines and directions. For example:

Social media interaction test environment. We have constructed [MAGPIE](#), a simulated social media environment hosted on a closed Mastodon server in which a few hundred paid or unpaid participants can discuss topics over several days, while their interaction patterns are captured for subsequent computational and manual analysis.

Real-time large-scale social media interaction capture and analysis. A team at the University has built the [RAPID](#) platform for real-time interactive data mining of social media streams that has been used by Australian Defence, the US Army Research Labs, Victoria Police, Burnet Institute, Cancer Council Victoria, and the New South Wales Government. RAPID has an excellent track record in countering disinformation and is able to extract messages and identify users who are actively undertaking disinformation, in real time.

Network behaviour and security. Based on experience using AI techniques for network analysis in Telstra Research Laboratories, we have developed new methods for DDoS attack detection and filtering that have been commercialised by an Australian start-up company IntelliGuard IT.

Identifying and measuring disinformation campaigns. We have developed the framework and metrics for identifying belief systems, affinity groups from which disinformation arise, and metrics for measuring the presence and strength of online campaigns.

Hallmark Research Institute for Fighting Harmful Online Communication. The newly created [Fighting Harmful Online Communication Hallmark Research Initiative](#) coordinates an interdisciplinary response to the

problems of mistaken, misleading, exaggerated, polemic and deliberately false communications, bringing together established researchers from across the University to pursue an innovative interdisciplinary approach to the problem. It targets novel solutions drawing on the University's excellent computational, psychological, and social research as well as its considerable expertise in communication research.

Training and Capacity Building. The Laboratory for Intelligence Research is involved in [training and capacity building](#) both in Australia and internationally. The goal of training and capacity building is to increase the resilience of individuals and organisations to information warfare, disinformation, and malign influence. The Lab is currently working with academics in Psychology and Cybersecurity on a capacity building project in the Philippines, funded by DFAT. The Lab also delivers training for Australian Government organisations.

Disinformation in the City. The Melbourne Centre for Cities is working with the German Marshall Fund of the United States and academic partners to develop a [Disinformation in the City Response Playbook](#). Cities face unique challenges when it comes to disinformation as local authorities are the most accessible level of government to the community. Understanding how disinformation spreads, and how to respond effectively, is therefore increasingly critical for city governments tasked with leading and implementing effective collective decisions. The playbook will collate city experiences of disinformation, existing scholarship and global responses, working with academics, city representatives and other relevant organisations to translate this to the specific contextual framework within which cities operate. The University of Melbourne has also teamed up with the Municipal Association of Victoria to provide a [course](#) to council candidates to help them spot and combat disinformation before council elections.

What more should be done?

The rise of mis and disinformation is a wicked problem facing society. Unfortunately, this means there is no silver bullet solution. Instead, it will require an ongoing whole-of-government and even whole-of-society response that is continuously monitored, evaluated and adjusted.

It is important that responses to misinformation and disinformation move beyond simple fact-checking, as this may not be sufficient on its own. Misinformation and disinformation are effective not because they trick voters into accepting falsehoods, but because they resonate with or affirm significant aspects of the voters' emotions or identity. In short, they fulfill an underlying psychological or social need. In this context, fact-checking has minimal impact, as it is usually performed by an external group and is often perceived as an effort to impose meaning on individuals and their in-groups.

Fact-checking can also be confounded by motivated reasoning, a theory that people “do not approach messages even-handedly and that preexisting beliefs play a major role in determining the way information is processed even in the face of concrete evidence and mounting facts.”¹⁹ This means that mis or disinformation that accords with individuals' world views can be difficult to fact-check or correct.

It is unsurprising then that a meta-analysis found that the effects of fact-checking on beliefs are “quite weak” and become “negligible” the more the study design resembles a real-world scenario.²⁰ This is backed up by research into responses to conspiracy theories. A systematic review of interventions to counter conspiracy beliefs found that counterarguments against specific beliefs tend not to be effective if the individual has already been exposed to a conspiracy theory. Prevention tends to be the best cure.²¹

Responses should include:

Bolstering media and information literacy education: Civics education, as identified in the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, is important as it helps individuals to understand the structure and function of government, the rights and responsibilities of citizens, the electoral process, the rule of law, and how individuals can actively participate in their communities and society. However, this is insufficient in the face of mis and disinformation. Research from 2021 suggested that 30 per cent of all Australian adults had low levels of media literacy. This figure was even higher for those aged 56-74 (57 per cent) and those aged over 75 (75

per cent).²² This makes it challenging for people to evaluate sources, recognise bias, engage critically and identify false or misleading content. Media and information literacy education must form part of the response to mis and disinformation. This should start in primary school (see the approach used in countries such as [Finland](#)) and include additional support for school teachers, such as relevant professional development, to ensure they can confidently deliver this education.²³

Developing tools to help people assess provenance and quality of information: Even the most media literate person can still believe mis or disinformation. Most people lack the time or resources to determine the truthfulness of every claim or piece of information they come across. Instead, people use shortcuts, for example, looking at where consensus lies. However, it can be difficult to assess the quality of that consensus in an online environment, as the sources or evidence behind messages about that claim may be unclear. To make this easier, we need to develop tools that can help people critically assess the provenance of information in near-real time. This could be facilitated by AI (like the [Advancing SOCRETIS](#) project).

Legislating in some (limited) circumstances: Last year, the Government released an exposure draft for the *Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2023*. The powers proposed in the exposure draft would “give the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) reserve powers to act, if industry efforts in regard to misinformation and disinformation are inadequate.”²⁴ However, the draft was met with significant criticism, including from the Australian Human Rights Commission and the Law Council of Australia, who warned that it risked impacting freedom of expression.^{25 26}

Legislation that seeks to counter mis and disinformation has the potential to unintentionally undermine Australia’s democracy if it is not carefully calibrated and balanced. Legislation should therefore be the last resort and target the most extreme and egregious forms of disinformation. For example, the Government could focus on regulating the creation and sharing of deepfakes, where there is considerably less ambiguity over truth. The Government could also consider introducing regulations that require platforms to minimise users’ ability to misrepresent their identity (e.g. [Twitter’s original blue checkmarks](#) that verified users’ accounts prior to 2023). Given that we are more likely to believe information from those we trust, this could have significant impacts on the spread of mis and disinformation.

Developing ways to counter downstream consequences of disinformation: There is a need for interventions that deal with the downstream consequences of disinformation, such as increased support of partisan violence and undemocratic practices. These effects cannot be countered through simply correcting the disinformation and so alternative approaches must be explored. For example, a project led by the University of Melbourne, University of Western Australia, and Curtin University is looking to co-design and test efficient, scalable and cost-effective approaches to counter these downstream effects based on interventions shown to be effective in the United States.

Developing evaluation tools: In 2023, the Information and Influence University Partnership (made up of the University of Adelaide, University of Melbourne and University of New South Wales) made a submission to the Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media. It noted that, “We have no ways today of measuring to what extent we are experiencing coordinated disinformation activity. And we have no ways of developing and tracking techniques to combat such activity.”²⁷ This makes policymaking in this area exceedingly difficult. It is therefore important that we create tools to evaluate effects of malign influence and potential counter-measures (for example through controlled social media environments like MAGPIE, outlined previously in this submission).

Funding cross-disciplinary research: As mentioned above, mis and disinformation is a growing area of research that spans multiple disciplines, including cognitive science, experimental psychology, sociology, communications, computer science, political science, and data science. Ongoing investment into this research is required so we can adequately identify and understand the problem, build cross-disciplinary theories, and develop evaluation tools which can help inform policy responses.

Case study: The Voice Referendum

In the lead up to the 2023 referendum on the Voice to Parliament, the University of Melbourne committed to providing clear and concise information to help Australians make an informed decision. This included developing a range of resources and hosting in-person and online events. The approach is in line with our commitment to encourage the expression and exchange of academic expertise and insights, and to be a leading voice in policy discussion and debate.

Despite a large program of initiatives and resources, the University struggled to cut through the huge amount of dis/misinformation surrounding the referendum. The consequences of dis/misinformation go well beyond the referendum. The campaign, characterised by misinformation, conspiracy theories and racial abuse resulted in a surge in Indigenous people accessing mental health services.²⁸ It has also led to an unravelling of bipartisan support for the treaty process in some States.

The University's experiences of the Voice referendum provide key insights into approaches to counter mis and disinformation:

Media and news literacy - Education plays a critical role in assisting the population to discern through fact and fiction and to find reliable information online. Education institutions need to include information literacy education for students on how to spot disinformation tactics and avoid misinformation traps.

Countering misinformation in migrant communities – The Voice campaign highlighted that migrants from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds possess varying levels of literacy regarding Indigenous affairs, highlighting the need to craft messages that are linguistically accessible and adapted to the information consumption habits of migrant communities.

Anti-racism programs – Initiatives such as The Australian Human Rights Commission's campaign, *Racism. It stops with me*, which invites all Australians – at the individual and organisational level – to reflect on what they can do to counter racism are critical. The University is currently developing the University's first comprehensive Anti-Racism Action Plan.

Truth-telling – The Voice referendum revealed significant gaps in understanding the past and how this continues to impact the present. More needs to be done to enable Australians to participate in truth-telling and for public education about what truth-telling encompasses.

The Voice referendum revealed the scale of mis/disinformation and its potential to weaken social cohesion and breed distrust, highlighting the need for public institutions, government, the media and individuals to work together to combat mis/disinformation.

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