

Inquiry into Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy

89 Degrees East - Dr Rebecca Huntley submission

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Dr Rebecca Huntley is Australia's leading climate change and environmental social researcher. Dr Huntley is a Fellow of The Research Society, the author of *How to Talk About Climate Change in a Way That Makes a Difference* (2020) and was integral to developing *The Climate Compass* project.

Dr Huntley is the Research Director of 89 Degrees East, a national research, strategy and communications agency dedicated to supporting the clean energy transition. 89 Degrees East has worked with Offshore Wind Energy Victoria, Marinus Link, Bass Offshore Wind Energy (BOWE), Elanora Offshore, Clean Energy Council, Clean Energy Finance Corporation, Nature Conservation Council and The Sunrise Project.

This submission draws on research conducted by 89 Degrees East on attitudes and beliefs around clean energy solutions, the energy transition and energy transmission infrastructure. Additionally, Dr Huntley's extensive experience in climate research provides a rich historical understanding of the sentiments and messages that circulate among the Australian people and can undermine the climate response.

Researcher's comment

I have been a social researcher for two decades, focussing on community attitudes to climate, nature protection and the energy transition for the last five years. During that period, I have seen rapid changes in my research, both qualitative and quantitative, in how Australians consume media and how those changes have impacted what information they judge to be true or false. During COVID-19 in particular it was clear the extent to which mis and disinformation, circulating largely on social media and online channels, was fuelling conspiratory theories about the agenda of institutions both public and private and those people who lead them.

In the area of climate and energy transition in particular this culture of suspicion, resentment and denial – fostered and maintained by some legacy media as well as social media – has made an already anxious and overwhelmed population even more anxious. Further, it is undermining confidence in our nation's progress on renewables, limiting our collective ambition about what renewable energy can do for our economy and our society and stifling social licence for energy transition as a whole.


If the nation, in particular those communities who are at the front line of climate impacts and construction of renewable energy projects, is to truly benefit from the energy transition, there needs to be a collective effort to address mis and disinformation.


The Information Gap


Energy in all its facets is highly complex and therefore it's understandable that many Australians lack a thorough knowledge of the system and what the transition looks like in their day-to-day lives.


Most Australians (90%) don't have detailed knowledge of how electricity is generated and distributed to households. Energy transmission infrastructure, which is critical for increasing the availability of renewable energy, faces prevalent information gaps with 40% of Australians reporting that they *haven't heard anything* about building renewable energy transmission lines.

This is consistent with some at home renewable alternatives. A quarter of Australians (26%) report having heard nothing, positive or negative, about converting their homes to be free from gas.

 **Melbourne**
Level 12, 90 Collins St
Melbourne VIC 3000

 **Canberra**
48/14 Trevillian Quay
Kingston ACT 2604

 **Byron Bay**
21/5 Easy St,
Byron Bay NSW 2481

 **Brisbane**
Level 2, 100 Creek St,
Brisbane QLD 4000



Additionally, some Australians are also receiving their information through passive consumption, such as TV or news websites, rather than seeking it out. Free-to-air TV is the most popular source for Australians to find information about transmission infrastructure. Incidental information exposure, that lacks conscious engagement, leaves Australians more vulnerable to misinformation.

These information gaps create space for misinformation or disinformation to take hold. Paired with a tendency towards passive or incidental information consumption, rather than actively searching for accurate and reliable news or information, means that we lack the foundation for conversation and action that reflects the reality of the climate and energy landscape in Australia.

Personal vs Perceived Community Support

Many Australians are actually personally optimistic about the energy transitions - and this is good news. However, perceptions around community support - *do people like me support this* - often lag behind personal support.

Misinformation and disinformation have left many Australians believing that their personal support for renewables is a less widely held opinion than it actually is. This means people are less willing to vocalise their support to others in their communities. Many Australians also underestimate the amount of renewable energy already powering our country, making the energy transition seem like a bigger disruption than in reality.

Disinformation and misinformation strengthen the weight of minority opposition to renewable energy and climate responses, redirecting our focus and delaying action.

Decline in Positive Renewable Stories and Perceived Danger

Recently, there has been a decline in positive media coverage of renewables, with only 21% of Australians reporting positive coverage. This again contributes to the sense that positive feelings around the energy transition are not widely held.

Over half of Australians (64%) say they are seeing about the same amount of positive and negative news stories about renewable energy, and media noise is less positive for people living in renewable energy zones. On social media, most Australians (69%) say they are seeing about the same amount of positive and negative content about renewable energy on social media.

Unfounded anxieties around the dangers of renewable energy technologies are some of the key drivers to opposition. Perceived danger is among the top three reasons people oppose at home solar panel installation (10%) and solar batteries (25%).

We know that to build support for climate responses, the presence of positive news is not enough. Support for clean energy solutions strengthens when the gap between positive and negative noise is widest. It is vital not just to strengthen positive noise based on research and fact, but to actively combat the prevalence of negative and especially false stories and claims.

The information in this submission is drawn from the following reports:

- Energy transmission: National community sentiment research with a focus on transmission - affected electorates, Energy Networks Australia and 89 Degrees East
- Clean Energy Solutions Index, Boundless Earth and 89 Degrees East
- Sunrise Sentiment Tracker Report Wave Three, Renew Australia and 89 Degrees East



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Impacts

- 1. Many Australians feel that their community does not support the energy transition, even when that's not the case.**

Therefore, people are less willing and likely to advocate for domestic or infrastructural clean energy solutions.

- 2. Australians are not seeking out reliable and trustworthy information, with many passively consuming stories they come across.**

This leaves people vulnerable to misinformation or disinformation that they lack the foundational knowledge to dismiss or will not verify.

- 3. Opposition and support for renewable energy are being given equal weight in both traditional and social media**

This does not reflect the reality of the Australian public's stance on climate change and legitimises either misleading or minority held beliefs.

Recommendations

I recognise that addressing mis and information is a complex and seemingly impossible task at this time, akin to 'Whac-A-Mole'. Broadly, however, I would argue more attention, including funding, needs to be directed towards:

- Primary and secondary education around the science of climate change including the solutions to address climate change
- Energy systems could become a core part of the science curriculum for secondary education in particular, providing non-partisan, evidence-based learning about energy for a generation who accept the climate science and whose future employment prospects and wellbeing relies on addressing climate change and developing a reliable, affordable and productive energy system
- More effective public education around the pace and capacity of the energy transition
- More research into the nature of mis and disinformation and ways public institutions can counter its impacts in their engagement and communication with the public

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