



# AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVES ON MISINFORMATION

**MATHIEU O'NEIL & MICHAEL J. JENSEN**

**NEWS & MEDIA  
RESEARCH CENTRE**

 **UNIVERSITY OF  
CANBERRA**



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## NEWS & MEDIA RESEARCH CENTRE

The N&MRC advances understanding of the changing media environment. Our research focuses on digital news consumption and the impacts of digital technology on journalism, politics, and society. Research occurs in three hubs: the Critical Conversations Lab; the Digital News+ Lab; and the Media Cultures Lab. The Centre conducts both critical and applied research projects with partners and institutions in Australia and internationally.

More information at [www.canberra.edu.au/nmrc](http://www.canberra.edu.au/nmrc)

## CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS LAB

Associate Professor Mathieu O'Neil leads the Critical Conversation Research Lab, which investigates how issues of social and political concern emerge through media networks to enable public participation and influence political agendas. The CCL studies our hybrid media system at the local, national, and global levels. We conduct qualitative and mixed-methods research into citizen engagement, inclusion and exclusion, the trajectories of causes and controversies, and their influence on political systems and media institutions. Our research promotes informed public debate on the role and performance of news and media in contemporary society.

Key areas of focus:

- Public discourse studies
- Media and public inquiries
- Diffusion of online controversies
- Digital commons and peer production
- Indigenous media and policymaking
- Participatory media, activism and campaigns
- Misinformation and health communication
- Digital literacy and inclusion

# FOREWORD

The production and distribution of misleading information connects individual news consumers, media outlets, online platforms, extremist groups, and foreign governments in a tangled web. Such a complex phenomenon can only be approached by bringing together a range of diverse perspectives. *Australian Perspectives on Misinformation*, the Critical Conversations Lab's inaugural report, showcases just such a wide array of points of view, highlighting the Lab's networked approach to the research process.



In addition to survey data gathered as part of the *Digital News Report: Australia*, the News and Media Research Centre's flagship project, the *Australian Perspectives on Misinformation* report features excerpts from a submission to a Senate Select Committee on foreign interference through social media. This was produced by Critical Conversations Lab researchers in partnership with the ANU's Virtual Observatory for the Study of Online Networks, one of the world's leading e-social science hubs.

The report also showcases unique perspectives on the spread of misinformation online by Queensland University of Technology digital media researchers as well as testimonies from journalists working in leading Australian news outlets *The Age* and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation about how misinformation impacts their work practices.

Ultimately, the report shows that the use of misleading information for political purposes is not new: 20th Century totalitarian regimes regularly used the manipulation of facts and images to maintain their grip on power. But in the time of Covid-19, when anyone can produce and spread misinformation online, it is particularly important to get the facts *right*, and the *Australian Perspectives on Misinformation* report proposes common-sense media literacy techniques to help prevent the spread of misinformation, as well as a series of experimental steps to reach out to conspiracy believers.

I hope you will find this report useful and informative.

## **Professor Jason Bainbridge**

Executive Dean, Faculty of Arts and Design, University of Canberra

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# AUTHORS



**Mathieu O'Neil** is Associate Professor at the News & Media Research Centre and Honorary Associate Professor of Sociology at the Australian National University. He conducts network and content analyses of environmental and health controversies in the online environment and also researches commons-based peer production, most recently thanks to a Sloan and Ford Foundations Critical Digital Infrastructure grant. He is the lead editor of the *Handbook of Peer Production* (Wiley Handbooks in Communication and Media, in press).



**Michael J. Jensen** is Associate Professor at the Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis and a core member of the New & Media Research Centre.. He has a background in political communication and has published books with Cambridge University Press and Palgrave on online political behaviour. His work concerns the use of digital communication technologies in the development of new forms of political organization within political campaigning and protest movements.

# DATA ANALYST



**Jee Young Lee** is the *Digital News Report* Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the News & Media Research Centre and Lecturer in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra. Her research focuses on digital inclusion practices and policies, particularly for emerging digitally excluded social groups and the growing digital media consumption in emerging markets.

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Robert Ackland, Caroline Fisher, Kerry McCallum, Kieran McGuinness and Sora Park for their help in creating this report.

# CONTRIBUTORS



**Robert Ackland** leads the Virtual Observatory for the Study of Online Networks (VOSON) Lab within the School of Sociology at the Australian National University, where he is a Professor. His research and teaching are in the areas of computational social science, social network analysis, and the social science of the Internet.



**Axel Bruns** is a Professor in the Digital Media Research Centre at the Queensland University of Technology and a Chief Investigator in the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society. His most recent book is *Are Filter Bubbles Real?* (2019). His current work focusses on the study of user participation in social media spaces, and its implications for our understanding of the contemporary public sphere, drawing especially on innovative new methods for analysing “big social data.”



**Timothy Graham** is Senior Lecturer in Digital Media at the Queensland University of Technology. His research combines computational methods with social theory to study online networks and platform architectures, with a particular interest in social bots and trolls, mis- and disinformation, and how ratings and rankings devices co-shape individual and group activity. He is a Chief Investigator of an ARC Discovery Project that utilises large-scale hyperlink network analysis and online experiments to comparatively assess the web presence of 10 countries.



**Kelsie Iorio** is a digital journalist at the ABC. She graduated with a Bachelor of Journalism from Griffith University in 2016 and commenced her print media career working at newspapers in regional North Queensland. She covers a variety of topics in her work and also assists with news distribution in short mobile formats.



**Chris Zappone** is Digital Foreign Editor at *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*, where he was among the first in the media to report on the Kremlin’s efforts to interfere in the 2016 US election. He is a fellow at the ANU National Security College’s Futures Council.



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Concerns about the health of democracy and the public sphere are increasing due to the ease with which foreign and domestic malign actors can spread misleading and manipulative claims. Misinformation, or misleading information spread unwittingly, is often distinguished from disinformation, which is misleading information spread with the intent to cause harm. Yet many successful disinformation campaigns contain true information, covertly disseminated to embarrass political targets: the quality of the information matters less than the nature of the operation it is part of. Although the content of messages need not be false to deceive, the ability to identify and protect true claims remains critically important. Misinformation and disinformation and their effects are complex and interwoven with countless socio-political and psychological issues. The *Australian Perspectives on Misinformation* report brings together several sources of data. The background to the report is the results from two existing N&MRC reports: *Digital News Report: Australia 2020* and *Covid-19: Australian news and misinformation* report, both of which tracked perceptions of misinformation in the Australian news consumers in 2020. The report next profiles two case studies: an analysis of campaigns by Russian Internet Research Agency “troll” accounts in the Australian Twittersphere in the leadup to the 2016 Australian Federal election, and an interview with a young ABC Digital journalist about how misinformation affects her work practice. The fourth chapter replaces misinformation in a historical context and reviews psychology and networked communication approaches to understanding it. The report also features expert comments by three leading Australian journalists and researchers. Finally, the report relays a set of practical messages to help teachers and politicians communicate about information literacy, and outlines a series of experimental steps for how people might establish a fact-based common understanding with a conspiracy believer.

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# KEY FINDINGS

## CONCERN FOR MISINFORMATION IS HIGH IN AUSTRALIA (CHAPTER 1)

According to data compiled from the *Digital News Report: Australia 2020*, 64% of Australians are concerned about possible misinformation online, 25% said they were uncertain and only 11% declared they were not concerned. More than one-third (35%) indicated they were most concerned about misinformation produced by the Australian government, politicians or political parties. One-fifth said that they were concerned about misinformation from activists and activist groups. Foreign government and political sources were of least concern (11%). Online platforms are often portrayed as vectors of misinformation, and Australian people are most concerned about misleading information on Facebook (36%).

## AGE, CLASS, GEOGRAPHICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL DIVISIONS IN AUSTRALIA (CHAPTER 1)

Younger Australians who are keen social media users have radically different perceptions of what type of threat misinformation represents than their older counterparts. “Baby Boomers” are most worried about misinformation: 69% are concerned about fake news and they identify the most likely source of fake news as local politicians and governments (41%). Gen Z are also the most attuned to the threat of foreign agents (19%), which may reflect their cosmopolitan awareness of intelligence operations overseas. In contrast, only 8% of Boomers are concerned about foreign intelligence operations. Concern for misinformation is also linked to education and income levels. People with higher education and income are more concerned about misinformation issuing from foreign sources and news organisations than people with low education and income, who are more concerned about activist groups. People in regional areas are much more concerned about misinformation originating from activist groups than urban dwellers. People who identify as “left-wing” are significantly more likely to say that they are concerned about government and political sources of misinformation (45%), compared to 26% of “right-wing” news consumers; people who identify as “right-wing” are more likely to be concerned about misinformation from activists or activist groups (38%) compared to only 12% of “left-wing” news consumers.

## AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY TARGETED BY FOREIGN INTERFERENCE OPERATIONS (CHAPTER 2)

Domestic or foreign disinformation can erode trust in authoritative sources of information, whether political authorities, experts, or professional news outlets. Hostile foreign agents can then recursively seek to exploit declining rates of trust in liberal democratic institutions to worsen divisions in society as well as to depress morale. We present evidence of Russian Internet Agency activities on Australian Twitter in the leadup to the 2016 Australian federal election. This evidence was submitted to the Australian Senate Select Committee on foreign interference through social media by a joint Australian National University and University of Canberra team of researchers in March 2020. The fact that it is difficult to evaluate whether IRA interventions played a role in swaying Australians’ opinions and beliefs does not mean these attempts should not be taken seriously.

## MISINFORMATION IMPACTS AUSTRALIAN JOURNALISTS (CHAPTER 3 & INVITED COMMENTARIES)

The spread of controversy theories means journalists know that some topics are bound to capture the attention of fervently misinformed members of the public. Our interview with Kelsie Iorio, a young ABC Digital journalist shows this may cause some journalists to hesitate when it comes to addressing these sorts of issues. In our invited commentaries, experts offer contrasting perceptions of the impact of “elites”: for journalist Chris Zappone (*The Age*), news is but a membrane among many other layers of networked information generated by social media, entertainment, business and communities. In contrast for QUT researchers Axel Bruns and Timothy Graham “elites” (news media, politicians and celebrities) play a key connecting role between social media-born conspiracies and broader publics.

# RECOMMENDATIONS: POLICY

## SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS SHOULD BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE (CHAPTER 1)

Australians are rightly concerned about the role social media platforms, particularly Facebook, play in spreading misinformation. In the context of the current pandemic, enabling the spread of health misinformation is an egregious activity. Social media platforms must work collaboratively with governments, the research community and information technology companies in order to accelerate the monitoring and removal of user accounts which repeatedly spread baseless conspiracy theories. Codes of conduct for digital platforms such as that proposed by the Australian Communications and Media Authority can also inform policy responses to the spread of misinformation.<sup>1</sup>

## MEDIA LITERACY PROGRAMS NEED TO INCREASE (CHAPTERS 1 AND 2)

Foreign entities are attempting to manipulate Australian public discourse and there is little awareness of these efforts in the Australian population. In particular, our report shows that older generations would benefit from public campaigns articulating a core set of common-sense messages. The need for a significant increase in media information literacy programs in schools is also clear: other studies have shown that Australian schoolchildren are not getting nearly enough media literacy education.<sup>2</sup> We propose an example of sensible media literacy messaging at the conclusion of our first chapter. Such common-sense precepts (for example: do not share content of whose origin you have no idea; pause before sharing attacks on people) should be a compulsory part of every school curriculum in Australia and could also inform public media literacy campaigns.

## BETTER TROLL-IDENTIFYING TOOLS ARE REQUIRED (CHAPTER 2)

It is difficult to evaluate whether the multi-pronged engagement strategy pursued in 2016 by Twitter “troll” accounts controlled by the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) played a role in swaying Australians’ opinions and beliefs, and to what extent. Yet this should not detract from the fact that these attempts occurred and are still occurring. New research in this space is needed to develop stronger troll-identifying, troll-exposing, and troll-debunking tools. Central to this is a requirement for further development of open source software to enable the analysis of the behaviour of actors in online social spaces using computational approaches such as network and text analysis.

## THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF ACADEMIC EXPERTISE MUST CHANGE (CHAPTER 4)

Australian public life is characterized by a strong emphasis on equality and directness of speech. This means that precise or sophisticated language can appear suspect as people who talk in this way may be “elitist,” may think that “they are better than us.” It is time to confront this prejudice, to make scientific research better known, and to demonstrate its relevance to people’s lives. Scientists, including social scientists and humanities scholars, speak based on facts and they can show how these facts are produced. Promoting the value of the scientific peer review process is necessary if we are to avoid what is happening in other parts of the world where there is diminishing consensus over facts, over reality. Without a shared reality, there cannot be a functioning democracy.

<sup>1</sup> *Misinformation and news quality on digital platforms in Australia. A position paper to guide code development*, June 2020. See [acma.gov.au](http://acma.gov.au)

<sup>2</sup> “Just one in five young Australians said they had a lesson during the past year to help them decide whether news stories are true and can be trusted. This result was the same for both children and teens. While this figure increased by 3% for children, there was a 4% drop for teens when compared with 2017. (...) We believe young people should be receiving specific education about the role of news media in our society, bias in the news, disinformation and misinformation, the inclusion of different groups, news media ownership and technology.” T. Notley and M. Dezuanni, *We live in an age of fake news. But Australian children are not learning enough about media literacy*, *The Conversation*, July 6, 2020.

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# RECOMMENDATIONS: PUBLIC

## PROFESSIONAL CODES OF CONDUCT MUST ADDRESS MISINFORMATION (CHAPTERS 1 AND 3)

People in positions of public trust, such as health professionals and journalists, or of public authority, such as elected officials, need to adhere to minimum standards when it comes to public discourse. If the codes of conduct of professional associations and political parties do not encompass clear guidelines regulating and sanctioning the endangering of public health through the diffusion of baseless conspiracies, they should be updated.

## DEALING WITH A MISINFORMED FAMILY MEMBER OR FRIEND (CHAPTERS 1 AND 4)

If you are concerned about online misinformation, please refer to the common-sense media literacy messages at the end of chapter 1 (for example: do not share content you have not actually read; do not share content of whose origin you have no idea). For people seeking to engage with conspiracy believers, we present in chapter 4 an experimental method for finding ideological common ground with a conspiracy believer, based on the critique of corporate media. This allows conspiracy debunkers to define a common way of defining knowledge and facts. This common epistemology opens the possibility of finding a chink in the conspiratorial armour to challenge illusory pattern perception, the detection of meaningful connections in random events.

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# 1 DIVIDED THEY PERCEIVE: AUSTRALIANS AND MISINFORMATION

Mathieu O'Neil, Michael J. Jensen and Jee Young Lee

- Older people are more concerned about misinformation than younger people
- Australian news consumers are less concerned about the risk of manipulation through misinformation by foreign agents
- Concern for misinformation is linked to education and income levels, with low-income people more concerned about activist groups being the source of misinformation than government.
- Concern for misinformation also relates to political orientation: people who identify as “left-leaning” are concerned about government misinformation whereas “right-leaning” news consumers are concerned about activists’ misinformation
- Trust in news about Covid-19 is higher than Australians’ trust in news generally

In this chapter, we explore what factors affect Australians' concerns about misinformation by drawing on findings from the *Digital News Report: Australia 2020* (Park et al. 2020a) as well as on findings from the *Covid-19: Australian News and Misinformation* report (Park et al. 2020b). The chapter also includes figures generated from DNR survey data which were not included in the 2020 edition of the *Digital News Report: Australia*.

The *Digital News Report: Australia* is part of a long-running international survey coordinated by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. The survey was conducted by YouGov using an online questionnaire between 17 January and 8 February 2020. The sample is drawn from an online panel of 89,850 Australians. To be included in the final sample of N=2,131, respondents had to have consumed news in the past month.

The N&MRC's report *Covid-19: Australian news and misinformation* is based on data from an online survey of N=2,196 Australians aged 18 and older was conducted by McNair yellowSquares Pty Ltd between 18-22 April 2020. The final sample is reflective of the population that has access to the Internet. A quota for gender, age and education was used, reflecting the Australian Bureau of Statistics Census 2016 for adults aged 18 and older.

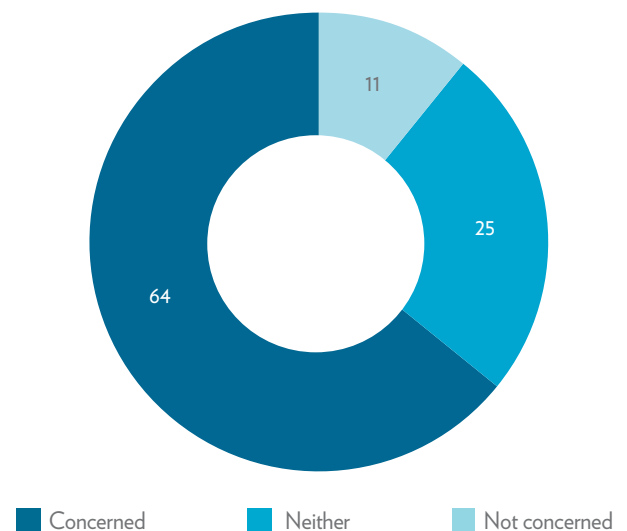
## CONCERN ABOUT MISINFORMATION IS HIGH

The number of people who trust the news has been declining in recent years and less than half of all *Digital News Report: Australia 2020* survey respondents reported that they trust most news most of the time. In an age where there is an abundance of information and news sources, it is key to understand how members of the Australian public perceive misinformation. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show that they are clearly concerned about misinformation, particularly in relation to online news, and figure 1.3 shows that they are especially concerned about the potential of Facebook being used to spread misleading information.

In contrast, when it comes to the source of misinformation, there are wide differences between Australians. The awareness of misinformation is connected to news consumption, and in particular to social media usage. Our survey shows that this points to a stark generational divide between generations such as "Gen Z" and "Baby-Boomers".

DNR survey participants were asked whether they were concerned about what was true or false on the Internet. Among all participants 64% said they were concerned about possible misinformation online, 25% said they were uncertain and only 11% declared they were not concerned. These figures have not changed from previous years' findings (see Fisher et al., 2019).

Figure 1.1. Concern about misinformation (%)



Source: Park et al. (2020a), p.77.  
 [Q\_FAKE\_NEWS\_1] Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement.  
 Thinking about online news, I am concerned about what is real and what is fake on the internet.

### MISINFORMATION IS PERCEIVED TO COME FROM ELITE SOURCES

The *DNR: Australia 2020* survey asked participants to tell us which potential sources of false and misleading information they were concerned about online (see figure 1.2). Elite sources of communication were prominent: more than one-third (35%) of respondents indicated they were most concerned about misinformation produced by the Australian government, politicians, or political parties. When it comes to activists and activist groups, 20% of respondents said that they were concerned, whilst 14% said they were concerned about journalists and news organisations as sources of misinformation. Foreign government and political sources were of least concern (11%).

### FACEBOOK IS THE MAIN CONCERN AMONG NEWS CONSUMERS

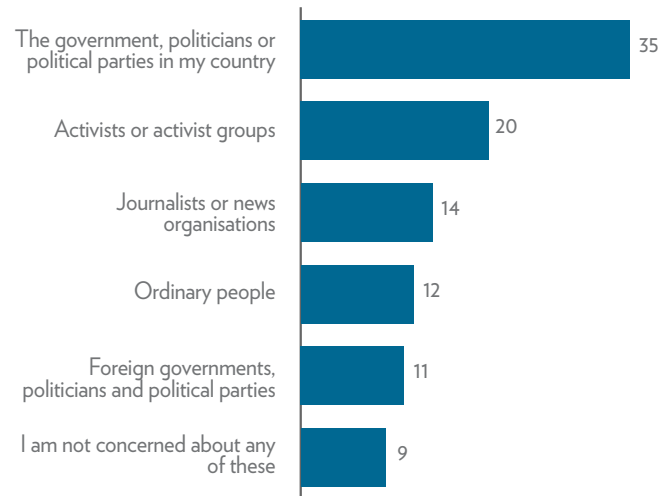
Figure 1.3 shows that compared to news sites, search engines and other social media platforms, people are most concerned about misinformation on Facebook (36%). Less than one-fifth said they are concerned about misinformation on news websites and apps (19%), with similarly low numbers for Twitter (7%), YouTube (5%) and search engines such as Google (9%).

### TRUST IN THE NEWS HAS DECLINED SINCE LAST YEAR

When examining the level of trust Australian consumers place in news we differentiate between the news as a whole within a person’s country (“news”), the news that person chooses to consume (“my news”) and “news on social media” (figure 1.4). The number of people who said they trust the news generally, decreased from 44% in 2019 to 38% at the end of January 2020. Trust in the news people use fell from 51% to 46%, trust in social media news declined from 18% to 17%, and trust in news found using search engines fell from 32% to 30%. As we will see, trust in news did subsequently increase as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

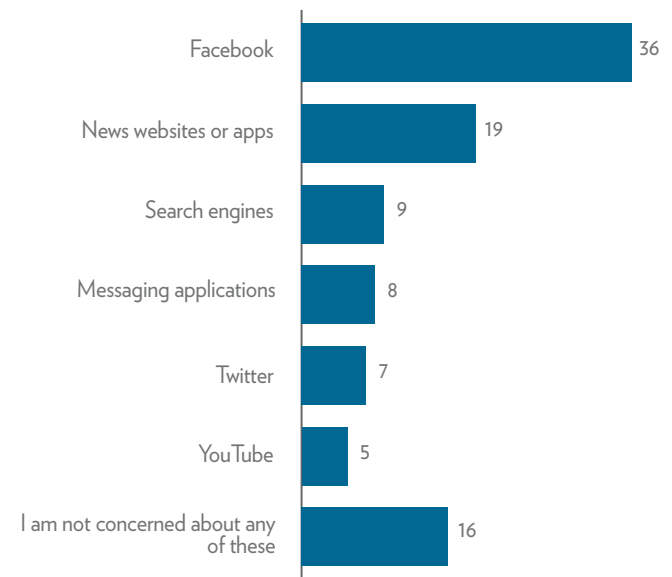
Trust in news generally is falling for consumers across all platforms (see figure 1.4). Trust among those who mainly use print newspapers and magazines has fallen the most, dropping by nearly 20% since 2018 to a low of 39% in this year’s survey (see figure 1.5). Traditional offline news platforms and well-established news brands continue to attract higher levels of trust from news consumers.

Figure 1.2. Concern about origins of misinformation (%)



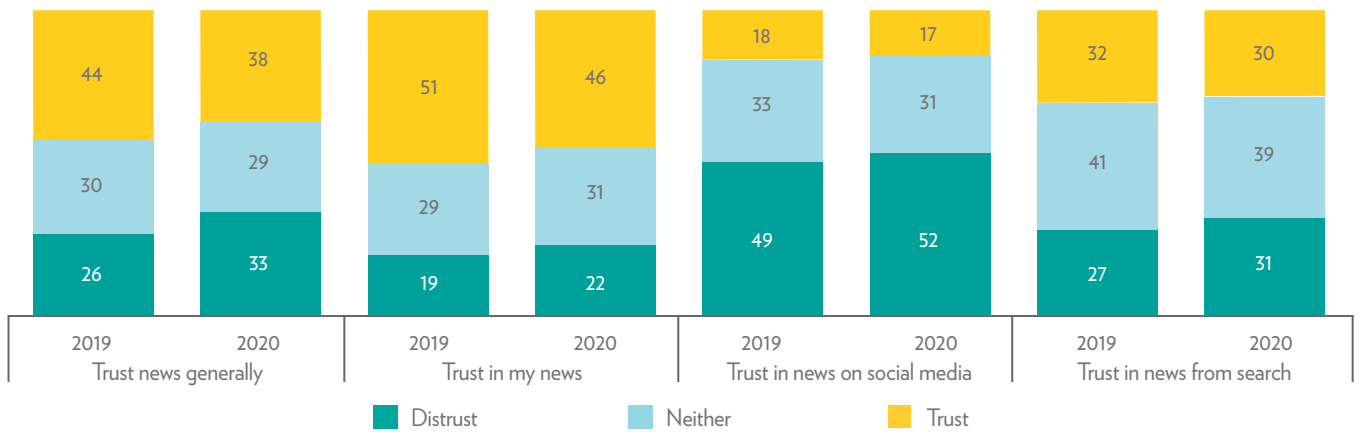
Source: Park et al. (2020a), p.79. [Q\_FAKE\_NEWS\_2020b] Which of the following, if any, are you \_most\_ concerned about online? Please select one. False or misleading information\_ from...The government, politicians or political parties in my country; Foreign governments, politicians or political parties; Ordinary people; Activists or activist groups; Journalists or news organizations; I am not concerned about any of these.

Figure 1.3. Concern about source of misinformation by platform (%)



Source: Park et al. (2020a), p.79. [Q\_FAKE\_NEWS\_2020b] Which of the following, if any, are you \_most\_ concerned about online? Please select one. False or misleading information\_ from...The government, politicians or political parties in my country; Foreign governments, politicians or political parties; Ordinary people; Activists or activist groups; Journalists or news organizations; I am not concerned about any of these.

Figure 1.4. Trust in news, my news, news on social media and news from search (%)



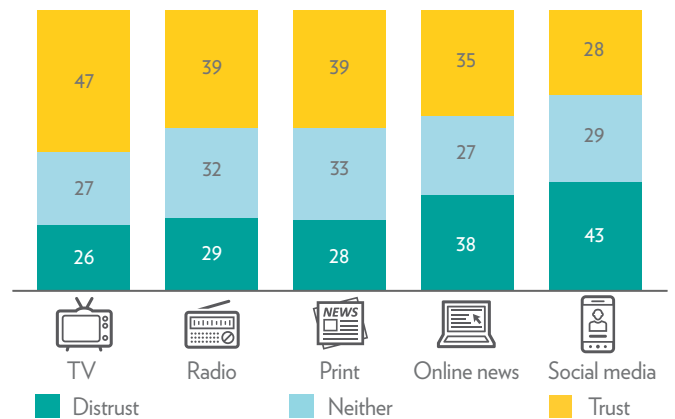
Source: Park et al. (2020a), p.73.

[Q6\_2016] We are now going to ask you about trust in the news. First we will ask you about how much you trust the news as a whole within your country. Then we will ask you about how much you trust the news. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. that you choose to consume. [Q6\_2016\_1] I think you can trust most news most of the time. [Q6\_2016\_6] I think I can trust most of the news I consume most of the time. [Q6\_2018\_2] I think I can trust news in \_social media\_ most of the time. [Q6\_2018\_3] I think I can trust news in \_search engines\_ most of the time. Strongly disagree; Tend to disagree; Neither agree nor disagree; Tend to agree; Strongly agree.

### THOSE WHO USE SOCIAL MEDIA FOR NEWS HAVE THE LOWEST TRUST IN NEWS

Figure 1.5 also shows there are clear differences in terms of the impact of preferred news sources and trust in the news: Those who access TV, radio and print as their main source of news report relatively low levels of distrust, with the news being trusted by 47% of TV news consumers for example. In contrast online news consumers experience high levels of distrust, with 38% declaring they distrusted the news, whilst social media news consumers have the highest levels of distrust in the news, 43%.

Figure 1.5. Trust in news by main source of news (%)



Source: Park et al. (2020a), p.73.

[Q4] You say you've used these sources of news in the last week, which would you say is your MAIN source of news?

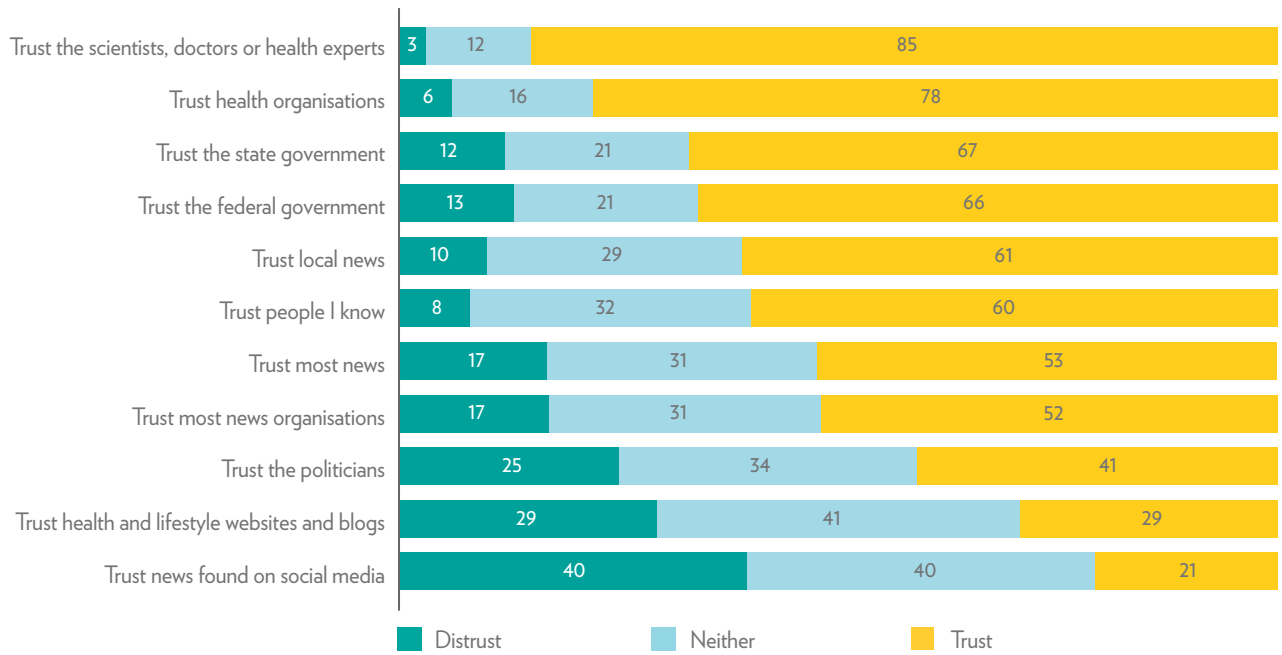
### COVID-19 INCREASED TRUST IN NEWS

We now consider findings from the *Covid-19: Australian news and misinformation report* (Park et al., 2020b), some of which were also included in the *Digital News Report: Australia 2020* (Park et al., 2020a). Trust in news can vary according to a range of external factors such as political events, global crises and specific topics. As figure 2.4 shows, trust in news about the coronavirus after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic was significantly higher than trust in news generally (see figure 1.4). We asked respondents

how much they trusted news and information about the coronavirus from a range of different sources. Respondents said they trusted scientists, doctors, or health experts the most (85%), followed by health organisations (78%). However, only half said they trusted most news (53%) and news organisations (52%) on this issue. Local news was perceived to be more trustworthy in its reporting about the pandemic (61%) (see figure 1.6).



Figure 1.6. Trust in Covid-19 news after the outbreak of the pandemic (%)



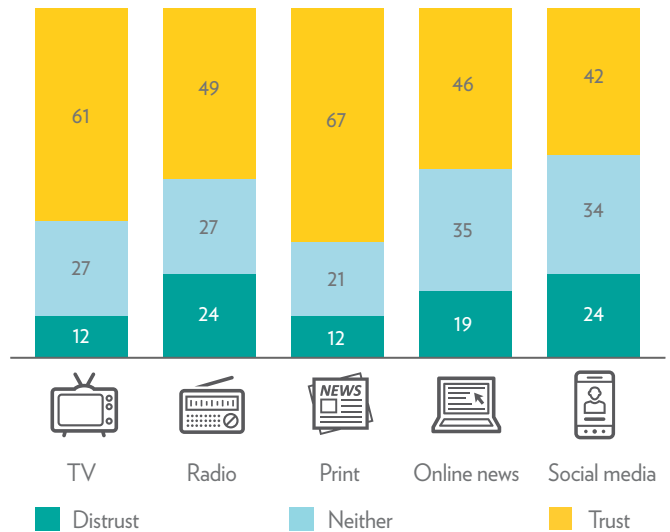
Source: Park et al (2020a), p. 74.  
 [Q10.] To what extent do you agree with the following statements about news and information provided about the coronavirus? [Strongly disagree; Tend to disagree; Neither agree nor disagree; Tend to agree; Strongly agree]

Distrust in news about Covid-19 on social media was lower than distrust in news on social media generally. Even though more than half of Australians access news via social media, only 17% of respondents said they trust news they find on social media (figure 1.4). This increased slightly in relation to stories about the coronavirus after the start of the pandemic, to 21% (figure 1.6). Similarly, after the start of the pandemic, distrust in news about the coronavirus found on social media was 40% (compared to 52% who said they did not trust news on social media generally, as seen in figure 2.4).

The contrast between levels of trust in science, doctors, and medical experts on the one hand, and news media on the other should be treated with caution: news is the vehicle through which people encounter medical experts, and we may conjecture that contrasting news and medical experts may lead respondents to assume there is editorialising on the part of news media.

Figure 1.7 shows that respondents who mainly use newspapers and magazines as their main source of news were the most trusting in news coverage about the pandemic (67%), with social media users the least trusting (42%). This is consistent with the findings regarding general trust in news.

Figure 1.7. Trust in Covid-19 news by main source of news after the outbreak of the pandemic (%)



Source: Park et al (2020a), p. 74.  
 [Q5.] Which of the following would you say is your main source of news?

## NEWS USE AND TRUST VARIES ACROSS GENERATIONS

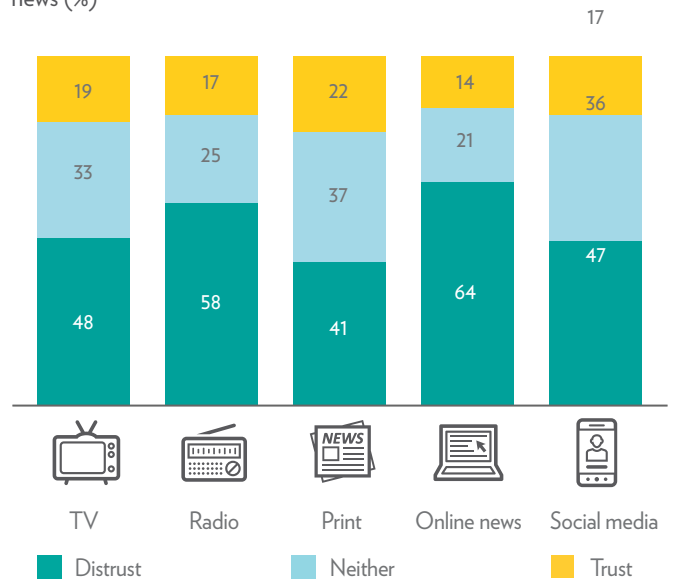
We now investigate more closely perceptions of news on social media, and how these perceptions relate to misinformation. We begin by considering the question of how trust in news on social media relates to main sources of news.

Much like trust in the news generally (figure 1.4), people who mainly consume TV and print news have a far greater faith in social media, with only 48% and 41% distrusting it, than people who mainly consume news online: heavy online news consumers distrust news on social media the most (64% of respondents) and only 14% trust it (see figure 1.8). TV and print news are mainly consumed by older generations, whilst online news are the province of the young (and middle-aged), so these results point to a generational divide.

Today young people are known as Generation Z (born on or after 1997), which we differentiate from Generation Y (1981-1996), from Generation X (1965-1980), from Baby Boomers (1946-1964) and from those aged 74 and over.

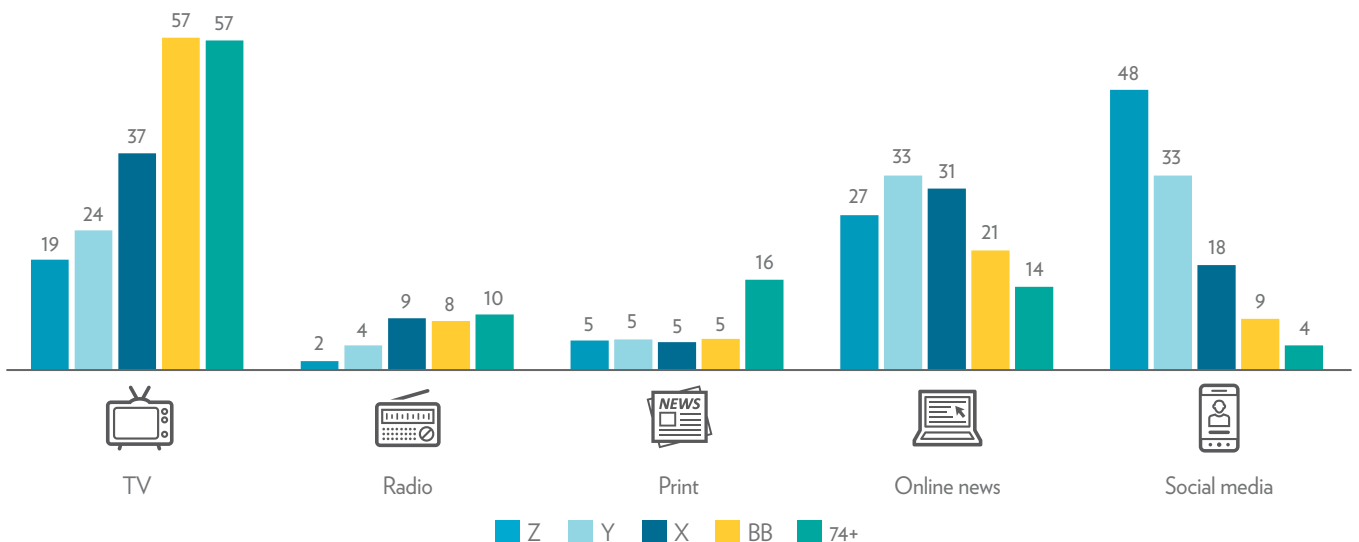
The sources of news different generations favour are indeed a relevant factor. Figure 1.9 shows that older generations predominantly access traditional news sources while younger generations are more likely to choose online and social media as their primary news source.

Figure 1.8. Trust in news found on social media by main source of news (%)



[Q6\_2018\_2] I think I can trust news in \_social media\_ most of the time.

Figure 1.9. Main source of news by generation (%)



Source: Park et al. (2020a), p.50.  
[Q4] You say you've used these sources of news in the last week, which would you say is your MAIN source of news?

The link between trust and age is made clear in figure 1.10. Generations Y and Z have higher levels of distrust in news generally (approximately 40%) and Gen Z has the lowest trust in news (24%). In contrast members of older generations have high levels of trust and low levels of distrust. Overall, those who are 74 and over are the most trusting of news (45%).

**CONCERN ABOUT MISINFORMATION: DIFFERENCES ACROSS GENERATIONS**

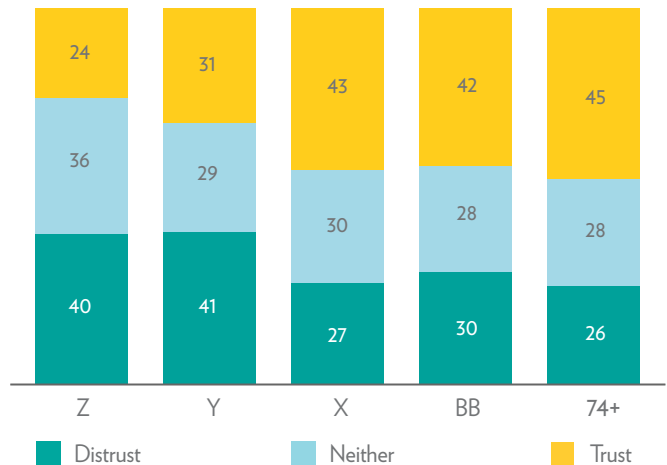
Figures 1.9, 1.10 and 1.11 illustrate the generational divide which pits Boomers against Gen Z when it comes to misinformation.

Gen Z are the least concerned about misinformation (55%, the lowest level in figure 1.9) and the most attuned to the threat of foreign agents (19%), which might reflect their cosmopolitan awareness of intelligence operations overseas, in the US for example. In contrast, only 8% of Boomers are concerned about foreign intelligence operations, with only the 74+ cohort less concerned (6%).

Boomers are very concerned about misinformation: 69% are concerned about fake news (the highest level in figure 1.11) and they identify the most likely source of fake news as local politicians and governments (41%, figure 1.12) whereas for Gen Z this figure is 30%. Figure 1.12 reveals that Boomers are also very concerned about misinformation emanating from activists or activist groups (25%) though not as much as the 74+ (42% of who are apprehensive about activist propaganda). In contrast younger generations are much less concerned about this threat (14% for Gen Z, and 11% for Gen Y), perhaps stemming from their more sympathetic attitude towards activism.

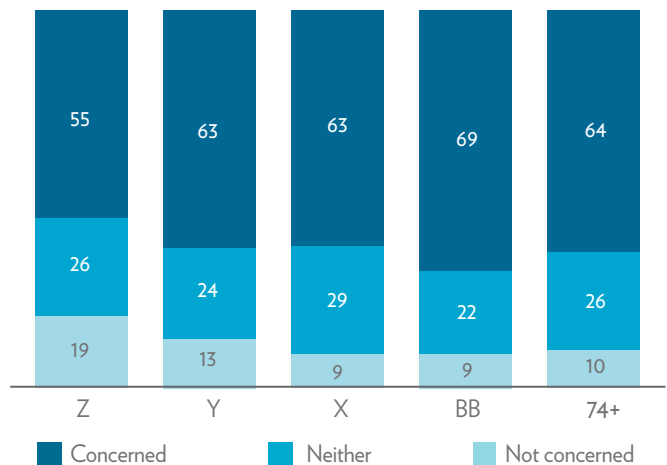
We may be witnessing a differentiated set of concerns across generations that reflect both distinct periods of socialization as well as media consumption habits: younger generations are some of the heaviest consumers of social media and have been using this media for a greater proportion of their lives than older generations. It seems fair to say that this generation is not naïve about the risks of encountering misinformation on social media, tending to demonstrate a healthy scepticism regarding the information they encounter. However, they are also the least trusting in “the news” (see figure 1.4) and also the most likely to share content they believe to be misinformed.

**Figure 1.10. Trust in news by generation (%)**



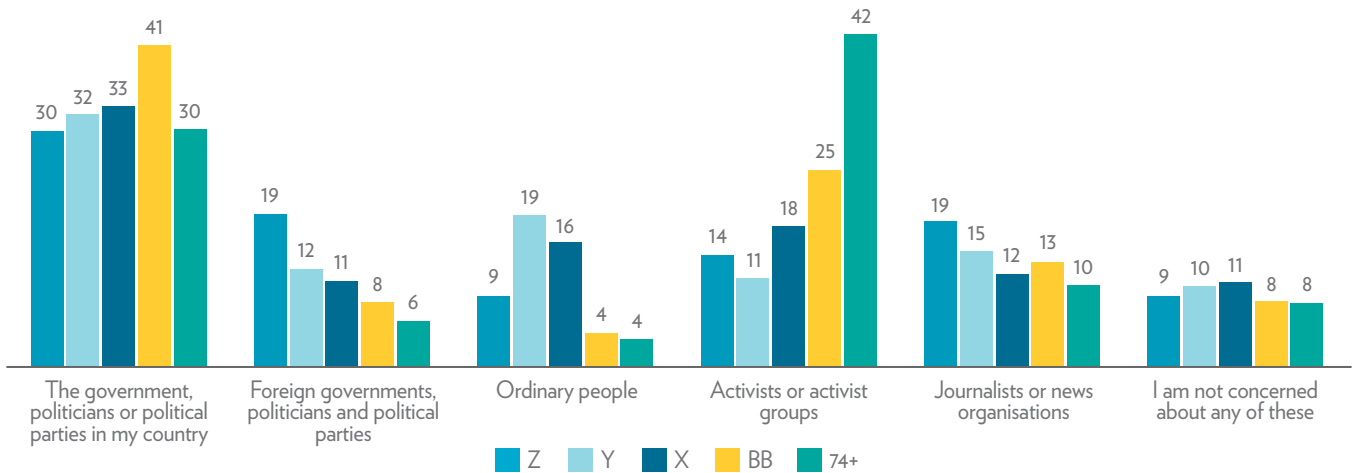
Source: Park et al. (2020a), p.75. [Q6\_2016\_1] I think you can trust most news most of the time.

**Figure 1.11. Concern about misinformation by generation (%)**



Source: Park et al. (2020a), p.78. [Q\_FAKE\_NEWS\_1] Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement. “Thinking about online news, I am concerned about what is real and what is fake on the internet.”

Figure 1.12. Concern about source of misinformation source by generation

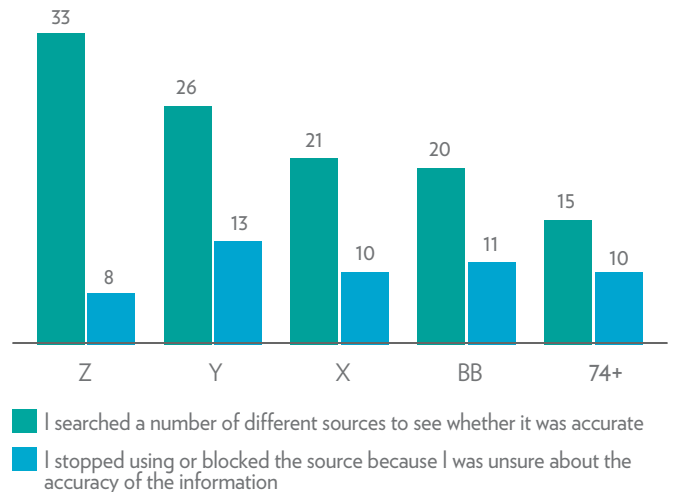


[Q\_FAKE\_NEWS\_1] Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement. "Thinking about online news, I am concerned about what is real and what is fake on the internet."

### GEN Z FACTCHECK THE MOST

Confirming that Gen Z were more Internet-literate than older generations, Gen Z are the most likely to verify news about Covid-19. One-third say they had searched a number of different sources to check the accuracy of information, which is more than double the number of people aged 74+ (see figure 1.13). However, Gen Z were less likely than older groups to stop using or block sources that spread false information.

Figure 1.13. Verification by generation (%)



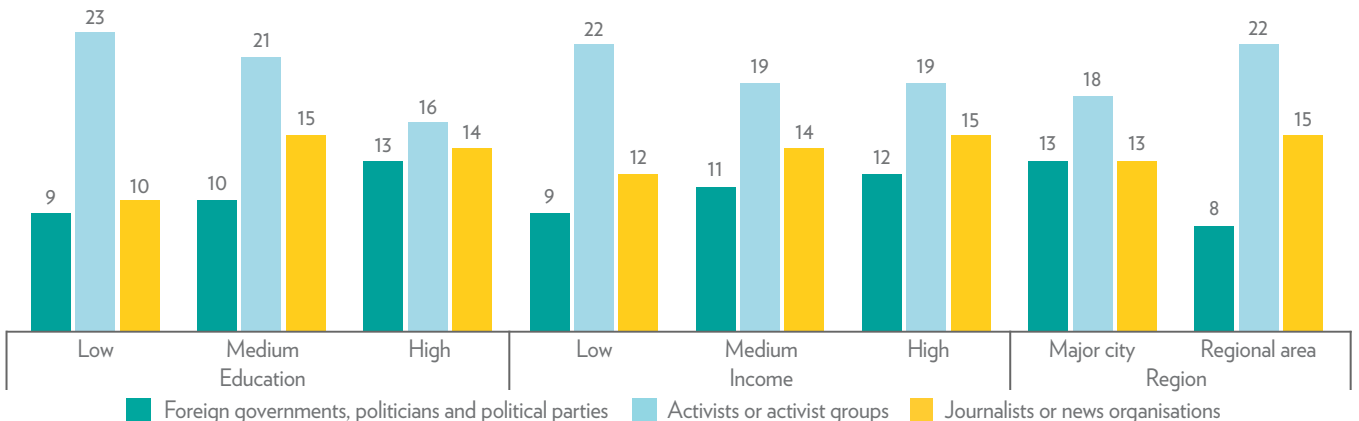
Source: Park et al. (2020b), p.28.  
[Q14.] When you came across false or misleading information, what (if anything) did you do after seeing it? Check all that apply.

### CONCERN ABOUT MISINFORMATION IS LINKED TO EDUCATION, INCOME LEVELS AND LOCATION

People with higher education and income are more concerned about misinformation issuing from foreign sources and news organisations than people with low education and income. In contrast, people with low education and income are more concerned about misinformation from activist groups. Similarly, people

in regional areas are much more concerned about misinformation originating from activist groups than urban dwellers (see figure 1.14).

Figure 1.14. Concern about sources of misinformation by education, income and region (%)

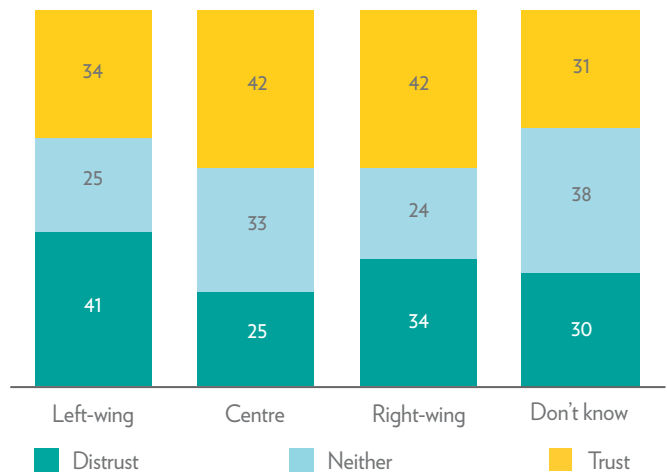


[Q\_FAKE\_NEWS\_2020b] Which of the following, if any, are you most concerned about online? Please select one. False or misleading information from...

### POLITICAL PREFERENCES AND TRUST IN NEWS

Political preferences also play a role in perceptions of trust in news. Figure 1.15 shows that respondents who identify as “left-wing” tend to have a higher level of distrust in news (41%), particularly when compared to those who identify as “centrist” (25%). People who identify as “right-wing” or “centrist” are more trusting of news (42%) than “left-wingers” (34%). This may reflect the “left-wing” critical tradition which defines news as conveying corporate or state propaganda (see chapter 4, “Addressing conspiratorial beliefs”), but political preferences may also overlap and intersect with other factors. Generational differences could be at play here, as figure 1.8 showed that older generations tend to trust “news” most of the time more than younger generations, who tend to be more “left-wing”. Another factor may be that Australia has been governed by the centre-right Liberal/National Coalition during the 2016-2020 period, so news may be perceived by “left-wing” people as reflecting the government’s agenda more than the Labor and Green opposition parties.

Figure 1.15. Trust in news by political orientation (%)



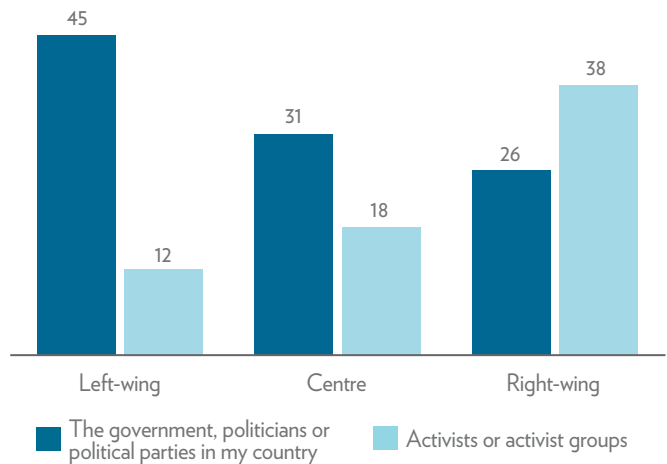
Source: Park et al (2020a), p. 77.  
 [Q1F] Some people talk about ‘left’, ‘right’ and ‘centre’ to describe parties and politicians. (Generally, socialist parties would be considered ‘left wing’ whilst conservative parties would be considered ‘right wing’). With this in mind, where would you place yourself on the following scale? Very left-wing; Fairly left-wing; Slightly left-of-centre; Centre; Slightly right-of-centre; Fairly right-wing; Very right-wing; Don’t know

### POLITICAL PREFERENCES AND PERCEPTION OF MISINFORMATION

People who identify as “left-wing” are significantly more likely to say that they are concerned about government and political sources of misinformation (45%) compared to 26% of “right-wing” news consumers. In contrast, people who identify as “right-wing” are more likely to be concerned about misinformation from activists or activist groups (38%) compared to only 12% of “left-wing” news consumers (see figure 1.16).

Covid-19 exemplifies the importance of news media. In the absence of a vaccine or an effective therapeutic, nonpharmaceutical interventions are critical, and these involve receiving information and adapting one’s behaviour accordingly. This suggests why trust in news is so crucial. Declining rates in trust in news sources could potentially lead to increased reliance on alternative sources that do not professionally vet information. This means such sources are potentially at risk of being more easily manipulated by foreign and domestic malign interests.

Figure 1.16. Concern about source of misinformation by political orientation (%)



Source: Park et al (2020a), p. 80.  
 [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? Very left-wing; Fairly left-wing; Slightly left-of-centre; Centre; Slightly right-of-centre; Fairly right-wing; Very right-wing; Don’t know

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## SIX EASY MEDIA LITERACY STEPS

*Benjamin Wittes, a Senior Fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution, published the following suggestions on Twitter in June 2019. In our view, these common-sense prescriptions could be used as part of effective media literacy education programs and campaigns.*

Here are six easy steps you can take to help control the problem of political disinformation:

- (1) Pause a moment--just a moment--before you share something on social media to ask whether you are being someone's dupe and whether you mind.
- (2) Don't share content you haven't actually read. The headline is not the article. Know **WHAT** you are sharing. This isn't asking a lot, people.
- (3) Don't share content of whose origin you have no idea. You wouldn't go on TV and broadcast something you heard from any old rando. That's exactly what you're doing when you retweet material from people you don't know and have no reason to trust.
- (4) Pause before sharing attacks on people. A huge amount of disinformation involves mindless *ad hominem*.<sup>\*</sup> When you share such material, you're generally just amplifying the cacophony--often about a specific person. Ask yourself whether you're adding signal or noise. Ask yourself why this person is being attacked, and ask yourself whose interests you are serving by turning up the amplifiers on the attack.
- (5) Edited video is dangerous stuff. Even before you get to deep fakes, every time there's a cut, someone has removed something. Ask yourself whether you have enough context to evaluate the shared material and whether you know and trust the entity or person that made the cuts.
- (6) All of this boils down to something we might call the "finding candy on the street" rule. If you found candy on the street, you wouldn't eat it. If someone gave you candy on the street, you might eat it depending on what it was and who gave it to you.

Information is like candy obtained in public. Ask yourself this question: if this were candy and I were walking down the street, would I eat this? And would I give it to my kids and friends?

That's all I got. @benjaminwittes, 16.06.2019

Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/benjaminwittes/status/1140238934074675202>

<sup>\*</sup> *Ad hominem* (Latin for "to the person", short for *argumentum ad hominem*, is a fallacious argumentative strategy whereby genuine discussion of the topic at hand is avoided by instead attacking the character, motive, or other attribute of the person making the argument, or persons associated with the argument, rather than attacking the substance of the argument itself. (Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ad\\_hominem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ad_hominem))

## COMMENTARY:

### A FEW WORDS ON MISINFORMATION AND MEDIA

Chris Zappone

The problem with the topic of misinformation in newsrooms is that some of the most insidious types are also some of the hardest to detect or refute. Even when facts can be agreed upon, it's the interpretation of the facts flowing from opinion to conspiracy to alternative reality that evade the oversight by editors and reporters. In a busy newsroom, often that line is the hardest one to hold. In this digital-social reality, the perceived meaning of a news event starts to shape what's reported. Social media gives the public the power to essentially vote facts up or down. For example, the perception of the facts surrounding the death of convicted sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein can be influenced and even altered by the audience's interest. On August 10, 2019, the news media reported that Epstein died by his own hand in jail. But for more conspiratorial-minded segments of the public, who are also reading traditional news, the suspicion that Epstein was killed to hide a deeper conspiracy affects the perception of the facts. What is by vetted accounts a suicide, becomes a "suspicious death" or "murder." The implication of such a counterfactual claim opens up a backstory of innuendo and conspiracy that encourages the generation of volumes of specious information on the internet. The availability of this information shapes the environment we work in. Our traditionally vetted journalism competes with the information on alternative news sites through social media ranking, search ranking, SEO and trending terms on social media. If a large segment of readers want to read mistruths about Epstein, those incorrect facts will continually surface, not just on social media, but in conversation both in public and in the newsroom, in readers' comments, in emails to the office. The facts can prompt the media to write stories to debunk notions, but which, thanks to the attention they generate, help keep interest in the misinformation high. This leaves the news sector in a space where it is speaking truth in a sea of untruths. In this way, over the past forty years, the evolution of the internet has transformed the news business from so-called "mass media" to "media among the masses."

We can report and highlight facts, and help shape conversations. But we cannot set the public agenda to the degree we once could. In that way, we produce news for those who care to know it. That's not to say the news isn't valuable or powerful. The news still fulfils the role of exposing crime and corruption, covering new events and revealing new topics to the public. Yet in a cybernetic world of networks, the media is not so much a gatekeeper

sitting atop society but a membrane among many other layers of networked information generated by social media, entertainment, business and communities.

As for malign disinformation campaigns, one way they are effective is by contesting facts in real time as they are first reported. When Syrian government and Russian air forces bombed civilians in 2013-2015, the news was reported by correspondents, wire agencies and news outlets. Almost immediately, these accounts were contested online by networks of murky "anti-imperialist" activists through the West. This was done in a way that was particularly seductive to the Western open mind. Discussions of Western intervention in Syria for humanitarian reasons drew false parallels to the US invasion of Iraq which was based on false intelligence and much harder to justify morally. Westerners arguing against the regime of Bashar al-Assad were forced to defend the reviled US unilateral action against Iraq. From a networked perspective, propagandists defending Assad only had to spread their message widely and across groupings of alternative news sites and murky troll accounts on social media for it to be effective.

Contrast this with the way news was treated in the era of centralised publishing and broadcasting. A broadly shared consensus formed the parameters of the discussion. Sometimes, the aperture was constrained and limited, yes, but what was covered in news was much more conducive to a productive public debate, if only thanks to a somewhat centralised and shared place for information exchange.

The band of shared reality which forms the parameter of workable, productive political discussion is eroding. Without some structural intervention, I don't see it being reaffirmed.

While there is a natural temptation to fight back against untruths with advocacy, few are converted through online debate. If anything, the immersive-nature of the internet allows people to reaffirm existing beliefs by looking at factual reporting on controversial issues they disagree with -- no matter its editorial intension.

Worse, as politicians, activists and stakeholders are rewarded for speaking in more extreme language by the social media platforms, they are being trained by the platforms to express themselves in this way. In November 2019, as the bush fires grew, Deputy PM Michael McCormack's comments criticising "enlightened and woke

capital city greenies” essentially dominated the networks both for the outrage they generated and the dog whistle to Coalition voters. Speaking in radical ways stimulates interest on social media platforms, sending more attention toward the speaker, reaffirming, in their mind, the salience of their own words. This lesson need not even be learned consciously. A person’s sensation of their words “going viral” builds an association between types of speech and the positive reaction it receives. Over the long term this is corrosive for a balanced, centred debate.

To counterbalance this, news media should seek to support a baseline of shared facts as a mutual good for open democracy. Newsrooms then must see themselves on a mission through the chaotic information environment, with the shared goal: a reasonable, sober public debate on the news, despite the radicalising bias of social media.





## 2 INTERNET RESEARCH AGENCY CAMPAIGNS IN THE AUSTRALIAN TWITTERSPHERE

Robert Ackland, Michael J. Jensen and Mathieu O'Neil

- Russian Internet Research Agency “troll” accounts were active on Australian Twitter in the leadup to the 2016 Australian federal election
- These accounts sought to increase ethnic and religious divisions in Australian society as well as to depress morale
- There is a need to develop stronger troll-identifying, troll-exposing, and troll-debunking tools

This chapter presents excerpts from a March 2020 joint Australian National University / University of Canberra submission to the Australian Senate Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media. Team members were subsequently invited to appear in front of the Committee on two occasions, in June and September 2020. The Committee was established in December 2019 and is to present its final report before May 2022. The full submission can be found on the Senate Committee's webpage (submission 8): [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign\\_Interference\\_through\\_Social\\_Media/ForeignInterference/Submissions](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Interference_through_Social_Media/ForeignInterference/Submissions)

This research used Twitter data identified with the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA), released by Twitter as part of its investigation into state-backed influence operations during the 2016 US presidential election. The second data source was a database of all tweets authored by Australian federal politicians, and those tweets where the politicians were retweeted, replied to, or mentioned. These data were collected over a year (September 2015 to October 2016) by the Virtual Observatory for the Study of Online Networks (VOSON) Lab at the Australian National University as part of Australian Research Council-funded research projects led by Robert Ackland and Darren Halpin (from the School of Politics and International Relations, ANU). They were analysed using computational methods (network and text analysis).

## USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR FOREIGN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS

The threat of foreign influence through social media is uniquely pressing at the present for three reasons. First, digital networks play a central role in political communication. In contrast to conventional threats to national security, against which vast distances across the oceans have protected the nation, online foreign influence negates the security provided by geography. Attackers can carry out foreign influence operations from outside the country and hide their origins and activity. The centrality of digital networks to domestic political communication reduces entry barriers and likelihood of discovery for foreign adversaries and increases the risks for Australia's democracy. Second, the speed of social media renders information attacks hard to counter. Digital networks facilitate cost-effective access to communities, reducing the resources and time required to execute a sustained influence operation. Digital networks enable foreign influence operations to scale-up much quicker than in the analogue age of communication. Finally, digital influence operations have low implementation costs, and

in contrast to other sophisticated weapons systems, the technological thresholds for influence campaigns are quite low. Unlike the technical hurdles involved in missile defence or nuclear weapons, influence operations can be carried out using a computer screen and an Internet connection.

Social media and other online communications are normally only one part of an influence campaign. Influence campaigns tend to be sustained, with an eye to impacting the course of a country's politics beyond the next election cycle. Information operations support other activities (Armistead 2004) which often include financing (which may be covert and illicit) and direct contacts with candidates and other party officials. It is therefore important that political parties, even at the local levels, receive training on how to handle approaches by persons acting on behalf of a foreign principal. Beyond political parties themselves, interest groups and other activist groups may be targeted through both online and offline outreach.

## IRA TROLL ACTIVITY IN THE AUSTRALIAN TWITTERSPHERE, 2015-2016

As part of Twitter's investigation into use of social media by state-backed influence operations during the 2016 US presidential election, Twitter publicly released datasets containing tweets identified with organisations such as the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA). While researchers have analysed IRA-authored tweets that relate to Australian politics (Jensen 2019a; Jensen and Sear 2018) we present here a new approach involving computational methods (network and text analysis) and data visualisation.

In addition to the Twitter-released IRA troll tweet dataset, we used a large-scale Twitter dataset collected over a year (September 2015 to October 2016) that includes all the tweets authored by Australian federal politicians, and those tweets where the politicians were retweeted, replied to or mentioned. The Australian federal politics dataset was collected by the Virtual Observatory for the Study of Online Networks (VOSON) Lab at the Australian National University. We then identified a set of

issue hashtags pertaining to topics (events, issues, places) that were being tweeted by active political tweeters in the Australian federal politics dataset. For each month, we produced a minimum spanning tree (MST) semantic network visualisation of the issue hashtags that allows us to see how the hashtags connect to each other semantically and cluster into key areas of public and policy interest, such as refugees and asylum seekers, the economy, health etc. Hashtags located close to one another on a branch of the tree map tend to be semantically related to one another, in that they were frequently co-located in tweets authored by the active political tweeters.

We then identified IRA-authored tweets that were: (1) created during the period covered by our Australian federal politics dataset; (2) contained the word “australia” or at least one of a set of hashtags that are clearly related to

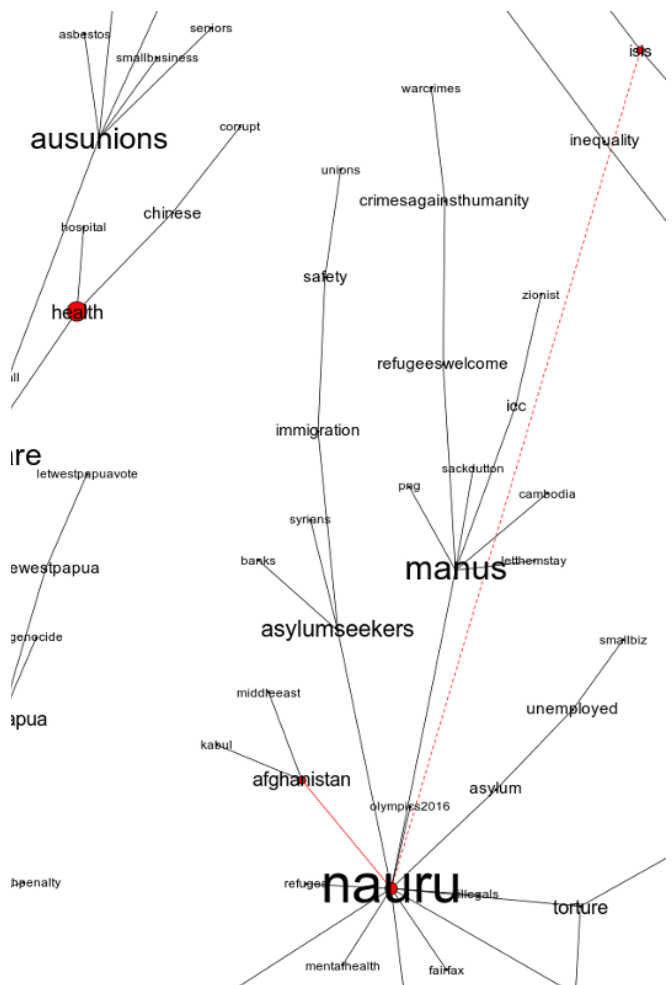
Australian politics (e.g. #auspol, #ausvotes, #qt, #qanda, #insiders) and (3) contained at least one of the issue hashtags identified above. The final step was to map the troll data (what hashtags were used by troll accounts, and how these hashtags were co-located in their tweets) onto the MST semantic networks.

As with previous authors (Jensen 2019a; Jensen and Sear 2018), we found that IRA troll account activity in the Australian political Twittersphere was not extensive. However, our approach allowed us to identify three specific types of IRA troll account activity in the Australian political Twittersphere that match particular influence operation *modus operandi*. We now briefly summarise two of the IRA troll activity types (the third, which we refer to as “audience building for future influence payoff” is discussed in our Senate submission).

### ISSUE PAYLOAD INJECTION: THE EXAMPLE OF “REFUGEES”

This example of troll behaviour related to engagement with the issue of refugees and asylum seekers. Earlier in the period covered by our data collection, both troll and non-troll accounts were engaging with this topic in a similar manner. However, during July to September 2016 the IRA troll accounts made a connection (via tweets) between #manus and #isis; this connection was not being made by non-trolls and further, the non-troll tweeting activity was such that these two hashtags were semantically distant in this period (figure 2.1). We point to this as evidence of “issue payload injection”: troll accounts attempted to influence the direction of discourse around the issue of refugees and asylum seekers by inferring that refugees being housed on Manus Island are potentially connected to Islamic State (and thus a security threat to Australia). This also serves to divide Australian society internally along “us vs them” lines.

Figure 2.1. MST semantic network showing IRA troll accounts are connecting (via tweets) #nauru and #isis, a connection that is not being made by non-troll accounts



## SPREADING BAD VIBES: A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF TROLL ACCOUNT 2951506251

Another type of troll behaviour that we identified was that of highly active troll tweeters who regularly authored tweets about news events. Account 2951506251 was by far the most prolific troll in our dataset, with the number of tweets produced by this account (260) equal to that of all other troll accounts combined. This account produced more than five times as many tweets as the second most prolific account. All of these were original tweets, not retweets, with each tweet being a news item and including a single hashtag. The number of 2951506251's tweets per month steadily increased until reaching a peak in June 2016, just before the July 2 federal election. Tweet activity then dropped off after the election, before slowly building back up again (but never again reaching the levels immediately preceding the election).

The account did not adorn its tweets with the type of hashtags favoured by other IRA troll accounts active in the Australian Twittersphere, such as US-oriented hashtags (e.g. #blacklivesmatter, #blacktwitter, #guncontrol, #hillaryclinton, and #usa). These hashtags were part of an operation to reach potential voters on the political left in the US, moving them to either vote for the Green Party candidate, Jill Stein, rather than Hillary Clinton, or to not vote at all. Other troll accounts in the Australian Twittersphere favoured divisive posts such as "Anti-#Islam rally is going on in Australia. People protest against islamisation of the country #ReclaimAustralia."

In contrast, 2951506251 used the hashtags #health, #tech, #environment in posts that contained content without overt political or emotional value judgments. Under this "neutral" cover, 2951506251 provided links to news stories or headlines. We reproduce below a few representative examples.

A selection of 2951506251's #tech posts:

- News Corp's Australian Netflix challenger shuts up shop
- Australia government cyber attack came from foreign intelligence service: report
- IBM apologises for Australian e-census bungle, setting off blame game

A selection of 2951506251's #health posts:

- Cancer overtakes heart disease as Australia's biggest killer
- Australian authorities spray Queensland hotel over Zika scare

A selection of 2951506251's #environment posts:

- Australia's bushfires leave trail of death and destruction
- Australia's wheat crop threatened as La Nina climate indicator rises: analysts
- Australia scientists alarmed at new Great Barrier Reef coral bleaching
- Sinkhole swallows car in South Australia

Aggregating these posts creates the impression that Australia is a dreary place, where mostly bad things happen, or things don't work, and where people are perpetually arguing about something or another. In the midst of all these bad news a minority of items were positive ("Australia sees agriculture output boost as El Nino fades #environment," "Solar powered car racers set off in Australian challenge #science"). Such items served to legitimate the account as providing a balanced view. News organisations do tend to favour dramatic events and headlines over non-dramatic events. However it is undeniable that the overall picture created by the majority of 2951506251's posts, under the cover of "neutral" hashtags, consistently leaned towards the highly negative side of the news spectrum.

## CONCLUSION: MORE TROLL-EXPOSING TOOLS ARE NEEDED

From our analysis of the dataset, it is apparent that Twitter “troll” accounts controlled by the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) pursued a multi-pronged engagement strategy in Australian social media. These tactics included developing relationships with users to enable future propaganda dissemination; injecting divisive content into existing debates; and attempting to colour online discussions of “#Australia” with negative content. The fact that it is difficult to evaluate whether these interventions played a role in swaying Australians’ opinions and beliefs, and to what extent, should not detract from the fact that these attempts occurred and are still occurring.

New research in this space includes developing stronger troll-identifying, troll-exposing, and troll-debunking tools. Central to this is a requirement for further development of open source software to enable the analysis of the behaviour of actors in online social spaces using computational approaches such as network and text analysis. While there has been a lot of research into the influence of social bots on Twitter during the 2016 US presidential election, most of this research conceptualised influence as contribution to information diffusion via Twitter retweet cascades (see, for example, RizoIU, Graham, Zhang, Zhang, Ackland and Xie 2018). Our research has highlighted the usefulness of other computational approaches for conceptualising and measuring the potential societal impacts of foreign influence operations on social media.

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## COMMENTARY:

### THE SOCIAL MEDIA INFODEMIC AND THE “FILTER BUBBLE” FALLACY

Axel Bruns

The Covid-19 pandemic has clearly highlighted the role of social media as vectors of mis- and disinformation, to the point that the World Health Organisation has identified an “infodemic” accompanying the pandemic itself (UN, 2020). Participants in the *Report* survey are clearly aware of this infodemic, and concerned about its impact on society; they single out Facebook in particular as a source of misinformation, though this may also simply indicate from Facebook’s continuing market dominance in Australia.

Although in public debate this mis- and disinformation crisis is often conflated with the supposed existence of “filter bubbles” or “echo chambers” that are said to facilitate the transmission of false information without fear of correction (Bruns, 2019), it is important to note that the infodemic is in fact exploiting the *very absence* of such filter bubbles. If contrarian and conspiracist communities from anti-vaxxers to anti-5G activists were indeed hermetically sealed into their own filter bubbles (as a result of their own networking and communication choices or due to the operation of platform algorithms that filter for specific topics and interests), then mis- and disinformation about the Covid-19 crisis would not be able to travel widely or affect the general public’s understanding of the crisis: amongst themselves, anti-vaxxers would share stories that reinforce their opposition to vaccines, and anti-5G activists would endlessly debate the scientific “evidence” for the technology’s negative health effects, but their enclosure in filter bubbles would prevent such material from leaking out into the mainstream.

Instead, however, outlandish claims about the supposed links between vaccines, 5G, and other popular conspiracy tropes and the coronavirus outbreak have circulated on social media well beyond their groups of origin, and indeed there is increasing evidence that some such claims have been actively promoted by coordinated disinformation campaigns spanning multiple social media platforms (Graham *et al.*, 2020). Such campaigns clearly exploit the interconnectedness of social media users across diverse interests and identities: they draw on the fact that, rather

than being communicatively isolated into groups of true believers, even the adherents of obscure conspiracy theories remain well connected through family, friendship, workplace, and other social ties and can therefore serve as vectors of information contagion. In this sense, the Covid-19 mantra of “social distancing” is an utter misnomer: while many of us have engaged in physical distancing, simultaneously we have been distantly socialising more than ever before, and these heightened social (and social media) connections during pandemic lockdowns have provided a fertile environment for the infodemic to spread.

Further, if ordinary users are to blame for contributing to the infodemic by spreading unproven and potentially dangerous mis- and disinformation through their social networks, then the evidence emerging from early studies of this phenomenon during the pandemic also shows that less ordinary social media actors – from celebrities through politicians to journalists and media outlets – are acting as veritable superspreaders (Bruns *et al.*, 2020). During 2020, several celebrities have shared mis- and disinformation content; various politicians have supported damaging health measures from hydroxychloroquine to herd immunity; and many media outlets have covered conspiracy theories in ways that amplified rather than debunked their dangerous messages – and in each case, such problematic information has reached millions of social media users directly or through further on-sharing. This substantial driver of the infodemic cannot be blamed on social media alone: it results from a celebrity and media culture that ranks audience reach and engagement over corporate social responsibility.

Rather than blithely blaming social media and the communicative structures they enable for the emergence and effects of this infodemic, then, it is incumbent on every one of us, and especially on those of us who have attracted a substantial audience of social media followers through our personal or professional activities, to act with particular care as we engage with topics that we are ill qualified to comment on.

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### 3 HOW MISINFORMATION AFFECTS AN AUSTRALIAN JOURNALIST'S WORK

Interview with Kelsie Iorio, ABC Digital by Mathieu O'Neil

The interview showed that journalists:

- Are conscious of the significance of their role as purveyors of accurate and engaging information at this particular moment in history
- Have to deal with negative pressure from misinformed members of the public, which may lead them to fear for their safety and modify their work practices
- When they work for the public broadcaster, feel a stronger sense of responsibility to the public good than when they work for commercial sector

In May 2020, one of the authors of this report was interviewed by Kelsie Iorio, an ABC Digital<sup>3</sup> journalist, on the subject of the viral “Plandemic” video, which alleges that Covid-19 is a hoax aimed at increasing the profits of pharmaceutical companies. The resulting piece was published online anonymously: Kelsie was not identified as the author.<sup>4</sup>

This absence evoked the question of how journalists deal with misinformed stories and audiences, so we contacted Kelsie and asked if she would be prepared to discuss this issue. Kelsie agreed to be interviewed, and after reviewing the text and sharing it with her manager, to be identified. The interview was conducted by Mathieu O’Neil on 18 September 2020 by videoconference. It was edited for purposes of brevity and clarity.

## PERCEPTIONS OF JOURNALISM TODAY

MON: How do you see your role as a journalist? Do you reflect about your role within society?

KI: I do, particularly having worked in a couple of different styles of journalism in different areas now. I think that the roles do vary depending on where you are and who your audience is. Ultimately my role is to give information to people as responsibly as I possibly can, particularly at the moment. In my lifetime, there’s been no greater importance in getting news to people accurately and simply, and in a way that they want to engage with. In a way that they want to read and in a way that they want to watch. I reflect on it a lot. Many people like to tell me what my role is, who might not necessarily be in the field.

MON: Okay. Like what, for example?

KI: I think some people have a... What’s the word I’m looking for here? Have their idea about what journalists are and what we do and what kind of people we are. It’s an interesting time to tell people what you do because I think people have a lot of

thoughts about the industry at the moment, and where those have come from is anyone’s guess.

MON: Do you notice any differences between older people and younger people, at work or in the public, when you talk to them about how they understand what you do, any generational differences?

KI: I do, and this is generalizing here, but the older generation shall we say, don’t really have... don’t necessarily have a strong understanding of digital journalism and what I actually do. I’m not chasing people around the courthouse with a microphone, I’m trying to communicate through this new medium, to a national audience. I do completely different things and speak to completely different people in different ways every day. And so I think that they have a much more traditional idea in their head of what a journalist might do and how they might conduct themselves. For younger people, particularly for people who really don’t engage with the news very often, there might be an element of their perception of what a journalist does coming from movies or from pop culture or something like that.

## WHAT IS A DIGITAL JOURNALIST?

MON: You describe yourself as a “digital journalist.” So could you elaborate a bit on that? What do you do, what kind of work?

KI: I have a couple of roles depending on the day and depending on the time of day that I’m working. One of those is to write stories, specifically, I often look at “explainer” style stories, which is how I first came across you. Basically we’re just trying to make

the key news of the day, or of the week, really easily digestible on a digital platform, on your phone or on your computer. Breaking things down in a way that hopefully is going to be more approachable for more people to read, rather than your traditional long articles on really complex topics that sometimes have some assumed knowledge behind them. The other half of my job is working on all of the ABC’s digital alerts. With our app, we can

<sup>3</sup> ABC Digital covers the whole of Australia but is based in Brisbane.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-13/who-is-judy-mikovits-what-is-plandemic-movie/12233412>



send notifications, and I am the person writing and sending the notifications. We also have a Facebook messenger chat bot. My team is the bot, we write the bot. We do that several times a day and it shoots out news via Facebook messenger.

MON: All right. So now moving onto how misinformation has affected your work practice. Is this something that you talk about with your colleagues?

KI: I think there is an expectation that we would find out information from reputable sources. I think there is an expectation that we would make an effort to verify those with some cross source or through independent fact checking. As we said, right at the start, there's a stack of misinformation out there. I think that we are equipped with a lot of tools to pick up on what is very clearly wrong and fake. And then sometimes we do take that information and analyse it and come up with explanations... Like the pandemic video that we talked about in May. The aim of talking about that was to highlight that that is a misinformed piece of media and why this person

is not necessarily a reputable source. And why, maybe you should not base all your views about the pandemic on this one thing.

I'm speaking for myself here. I don't think that there's necessarily a shying away from acknowledging misinformation. I think that it can be more important to explain what the misinformation is, and why it's misinformation and explain what is a more reputable set of details that people should also consider when they're looking at all of these things. It is tough because some misinformation items are easier to spot than others. And some of it can even be put there unintentionally. I can use an example from literally half an hour ago when Scott Morrison made an announcement that more international arrivals will be allowed to return to Australia from Monday, the 27th of September. Monday is the 28th of September. Did we put out misinformation? Kind of, because the date was wrong. Sometimes it can be an accidental thing that you just have to work as quickly and as efficiently as you can to correct. But other things are a little bit more obvious.

## “PEOPLE WILL COME FOR YOU”

MON: I'm now going to bring up the reason that we are having this conversation: the fact that you didn't sign that article on the “Plandemic” video. Have you had any experiences with people with crazy ideas, or disordered ideas, or anything like that? Is that something that's come up at all?

KI: Yes. So I personally chose to leave my byline off that particular piece. I chose to do it because I knew the type of people that this story would attract. And I was absolutely terrified that they would come after me. Not come after me physically, I wasn't scared for my safety, [but] my byline links to my email address. I'm pretty easy to find on social media. There's only one of me with my name. And there have been people who have not liked the content that I've written in stories before and just spammed my email, telling me that I'm useless. I have also seen the treatment of my own colleagues and other journalists, Australian journalists, particularly female journalists when they address certain issues or even give their opinions on something that people don't like. And it is just abhorrent. I knew that there were people who were very fiercely in support of that particular video. I knew that they probably would not like me saying that it is not the most reliable of sources, even though I had experts to back that up, and other information about how she was

discredited in her own work and so on and so forth. But people don't really care about that, they will just come for you.

MON: If you get a claim from a member of the public that's not rude or inappropriate, but is incorrect. How do you deal with that?

KI: People can contact me in direct response to a story that I've written. If for example, they say, “You've got a typo in the fourth paragraph that looks really silly.” I would fix the typo and I will email back and say, “Yep, obviously, I have missed that. Thank you. That's now been fixed.” If it's someone who is refuting a claim that I'm really confident I can back up, I will email them back and I'll direct them to the sources that I've used and say, “Look, this is where I've got my information from. This is how I viewed it. This is how I came to this conclusion and this is why it is written in the article.” Thankfully, in my case, I haven't had that problem a lot. And when I have, and explained it, there have not really been any further issues. If I was to get a complaint or a message for something that is legit, for example if someone had said something that doesn't add up or whatever the case may be, that's when I would go to an editor or a higher-up and talk to them and say, “Maybe this isn't quite right.” Show them how I

got to that conclusion and so on. And they will help me make the decision as to how it would need to be changed or corrected, whatever the case may be.

MON: I assume if somebody is rude or inappropriate you just don't respond, right?

KI: Yeah. If it's really bad, I'll usually forward it to an editor, just so they know. But when you are in a role like this and you have a responsibility like this, you can't cut yourself off from feedback. A lot of people have made really great points. People have

come to me with more information that I perhaps did not find in my research because it's their area of expertise. It has been really helpful. You find out stories from it and if you've stuffed something up, you need to fix it. I try so hard not to stuff anything up because I don't want that on myself and I don't want it on my organization. I feel a lot of responsibility here, representing the ABC, to just be so careful and make sure that if you're going to put something out there that you stand by it and that you know what you are talking about.

## THE CHILLING EFFECT OF NEGATIVE REACTIONS

MON: It's so easy now for the members of the public to provide feedback, including negative feedback, do you think there's a risk there might be a chilling effect? Journalists might get worried that somebody's going to tweet something about an article, or there's going to be negative reactions... That it might subconsciously lead to forms of self-censorship or to lead journalists to steer away from issues where there's going to be a lot of heat and controversy?

KI: Well, look, I'll answer this question very personally, because I can't speak for anyone else, but yes, absolutely. I have steered away from more controversial, or sensitive topics and really tried to avoid getting assigned to them lately. Well, probably always, but I think I have taken a lot more notice of it lately because I know the type of reaction it's going to get. And you can go into these issues so sensitively and you can craft something that delicately details a complex or emotional issue. And someone is still going to tell you that you're a vulture and that this is trash reporting and blah, blah, blah, and worse probably. But I work with a lot of reporters and I have seen a lot of reporters that certainly are not as affected by that as I personally am.

There are definitely people who are going to address the topics that need to be addressed no matter how controversial or sensitive they may be. And realistically, I think that there is a great need to address those things whether they be delicate subjects, whether they be widespread misinformation that a lot of people believe. And I will do it. I will continue to do it for as long as I am doing what I do, but there's definitely a knot in your stomach moment when you realize what you're going to have to do and what people might say about it.

MON: Okay. Final question, do you feel differently about your work now that you're working for the ABC, which is a public service media, than if you were working for a privately owned commercial media or would you see it the same?

KI: From the first moment I walked into a newsroom, I always was committed to doing things ethically, responsibly, accurately and efficiently. I feel that even more fiercely now working here at the ABC, I see the reach that my content can have. A lot of people are so reliant on the ABC for their information. And I want to deliver that to them in the way that they would expect it to be delivered to them. A lot of people are on the other side of the fence, they think it is all rubbish, and I want to prove them wrong. Working for the public broadcaster I feel a stronger sense of responsibility to my audience because that's what they would expect from their public broadcaster. Working for a different organization, where there's things like subscriptions involved, I noticed a tendency to do things a little bit differently, and in a way that I personally didn't really agree with, in terms of trying to coax people into spending their money.

I'm really glad that I'm not doing that anymore because now I don't have to balance trying to make people buy, with what I would say is the best way to present information. I can just present information in the way that I want to present it, in the way that I would expect to receive it and in the way that Australia deserves to get it.

MON: Thank you.

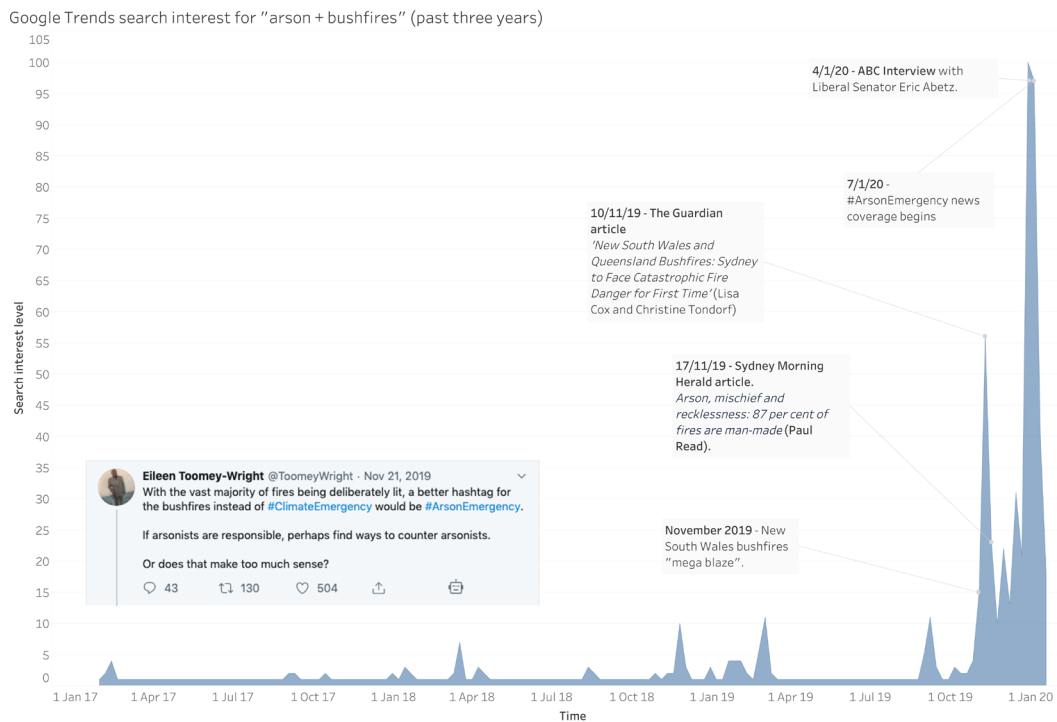
## COMMENTARY:

### ELITE ACTORS, MISINFORMATION AND HASHTAG CAMPAIGNS: #ARSONEMERGENCY AND #DANLIEDPEOPLEDIED

Timothy Graham

Misinformation is conventionally defined as false information spread unknowingly, which is often distinguished from disinformation, or false information spread with the intent to cause harm and/or deceive. In my research, the prevailing definition of misinformation does not capture the spectrum and messiness of what has been broadly called ‘information disorder’ by leading scholars. My approach to analysing misinformation involves a combination of computational and large-scale data analysis, particularly using social network analysis, along with qualitative digital forensics that primarily involves close reading and content analysis. Most recently in the Australian context, there are two instructive case studies that have impacted my work practice.

During the 2019/20 Australian bushfires there was a deluge of mis- and disinformation about the spread, magnitude and cause of the fires. A dominant narrative was that the bushfires were caused by arson, rather than climate change, a claim that is not supported by current scientific consensus. One particular hashtag, #ArsonEmergency, attracted a substantial amount of activity on Twitter from fringe, hyper-partisan accounts and suspicious bot-like accounts. I wrote about this in an article for *The Conversation* which gained significant international media coverage.<sup>5</sup>



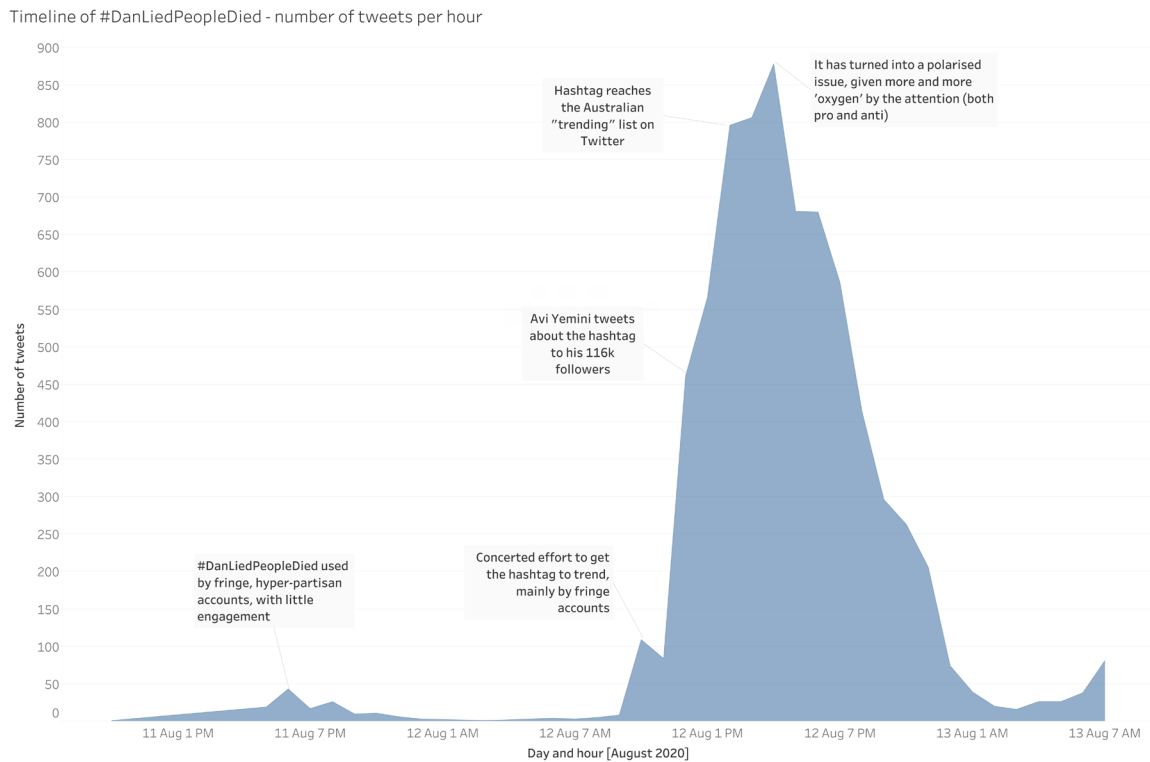
However, much of the #ArsonEmergency activity emerged from, and was fuelled by mainstream media. One of the initial news stories that was highly quoted on Twitter using #ArsonEmergency, was an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* by Paul Read entitled "Arson, mischief and recklessness: 87 per cent of fires are man-made," which was published in November 2019.<sup>6</sup>

However, the author felt compelled to clarify the numbers and misleading framing of his article in a later article by Caitlin Welsh, "The 'arson emergency' trending amid Australia's bushfire crisis is actually not a thing" published

on *Mashable* in January 2020, which gained almost no attention. According to CrowdTangle, as of writing the *Mashable* article received a total of only 334 interactions (reactions, comments, and shares) across all public and private posts on Facebook, whereas the original *SMH* article received a total of 113,738 interactions. The author of the original article declared he "was 'angered' to see commentators 'twist' reported research into ignition statistics, or to use them to gloss over the environmental factors affecting the spread and intensity of fires, no matter how they're lit." But it was to no avail. Once the misinformation cat is out of the bag, it's too late to stop

the spread. I learned a great deal from the bushfire case study, particularly how the “mis” part of misinformation is often highly politicised and contested. Moreover, I gained a much greater appreciation of the critical role of mainstream media and elites in propelling and magnifying misinformation, perhaps in contrast to the usual focus on misinformed social media users.

During the Covid-19 Stage 2 Lockdown in Melbourne, I again observed how misinformation is highly contested and politicised, and is greatly amplified by a combination of biased mainstream media and fringe, hyper-partisan accounts loosely coordinating together. I wrote about this in another *Conversation* article.<sup>7</sup>



Newly created, mostly anonymous Twitter accounts pick up on one-sided narratives in mainstream media and try to get certain hashtags to trend (in this case successfully, with the “superspreading” assistance of controversial far-right influencer Avi Yemini). These accounts often tweet about mistrust of mainstream media and selectively “cherry pick” their evidence from News Corp media sources. To be sure, the issue in this case is contested and acutely political – people have a right to hold the Victorian Premier to account for Stage 2 outbreak – but at this point in time (second week of August) without evidence from the inquiry, to assert that Dan Andrews is a liar is misleading. In this way, the misleading “Dan lied” narrative was amplified by a vicious feedback loop between biased mainstream media and fringe, hyper-partisan and in some cases outright inauthentic accounts. Indeed, of the top 10

accounts pushing the hashtag #DanLiedPeopleDied back in mid-August 2020, the #1 and #9 most prolific accounts have been deleted, and the #6 has been suspended.<sup>8</sup>

Misinformation is a “whole of society” problem and we need to address it from multiple angles and scales: technologically we need greater access to social media data and transparency about algorithms that shape human behaviour and opinion; we need greater regulatory responses to misinformation in order to develop codes of practice that “have teeth” and are enforceable by the law; and we need greater education and information literacy programs to “pre-bunk” misinformation and better equip people with the tools and skills they need to identify and counter problematic content in their everyday life.

<sup>5</sup> <https://theconversation.com/bushfires-bots-and-arson-claims-australia-flung-in-the-global-disinformation-spotlight-129556>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/national/arson-mischief-and-recklessness-87-per-cent-of-fires-are-man-made-20191117-p53bcl.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://theconversation.com/the-story-of-danliedpeopledied-how-a-hashtag-reveals-australias-information-disorder-problem-144403>

<sup>8</sup> <https://twitter.com/Timothyjgraham/status/1310779988208017419>



## 4 ADDRESSING CONSPIRATORIAL BELIEFS: A CRITICAL HISTORY OF MISINFORMATION

Mathieu O'Neil and Michael J. Jensen

- Social media platforms have knowingly facilitated the diffusion of misinformation
- Psychological explanations for conspiratorial thinking include the need for uniqueness and “illusory pattern perception”
- Clarifying online self-propaganda: a distinction needs to be made between “filter bubbles” and “echo chambers”
- The historical critique of the mainstream media’s role in “manufacturing consent” can help to find common ideological ground with conspiracy believers, and possibly lead to identifying a chink in their conspiratorial armour

In this final chapter, we review the research literature on misinformation and on the genesis of conspiracy theories. Though we have tried to make this chapter accessible to a broad audience, it does contain a higher number of references to academic works than the other sections of the *Australian Perspectives on Misinformation* report. We first review the aims of disinformation campaigns and historical antecedents in totalitarian societies. We suggest that contemporary conspiracies in liberal democracies revolve around a critique of mainstream media, and reflect on correspondences with earlier critiques of corporate media. We examine the impact of the Internet and conclude that the cult-like mentality of online echo chamber participants means presenting correct facts to them is likely to result in rejection. We suggest that a way around this hurdle is to find ideological common ground, allowing conspiracy debunkers to define a common way of defining knowledge and facts, and thus – hopefully – a chink in the conspiratorial armour.

In fact, disinformation resides in all existing information and as its principal characteristic. (...) Where disinformation is *named* it does not exist. Where it exists, it is not named.

Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, 1988

## THE RISE OF CONSPIRACIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The spread of the ludicrous and potentially violent QAnon conspiracy theory in the first half of 2020, whilst people were quarantined in their homes because of the Covid-19 pandemic, exemplifies the role social media platforms play in facilitating the production and diffusion of misleading information.<sup>9</sup> The means of creating deceptive information have become democratised, dissemination occurs at lightning speed, and in the case of QAnon diffusion has been boosted by elite “superspreader” celebrities such as Roseanne Barr and Pete Evans (Crowley 2020). As has been thoroughly documented in the case of Myanmar

(Mozur 2018), the United States (Horwitz & Seetharaman 2020), as well as Azerbaijan, Honduras, India, Ukraine, Spain, Brazil, Bolivia, and Ecuador (Silverman et al. 2020), Facebook has an appalling track record when it comes to policing hate speech and misinformation. On October 7, 2020, QAnon was banned from the platform, though related groups remain. On October 12, Facebook announced it would ban holocaust deniers. And on October 13, Facebook declared that it would launch a new global policy that bans ads “that discourage people from getting vaccines” (Graham & Rodriguez, 2020).

## WITH DISINFORMATION, THE TRUTH OR FALSITY OF INFORMATION MATTERS LESS THAN THE OPERATION IT IS PART OF

The damage had already been done. When discussing misleading information circulating in the Australian public sphere, it is customary to distinguish people or organisations who misinform (they are accidentally circulating incorrect claims) from people or organisations who disinform (they are actively spreading false or misleading information to harm a person, social group, organisation or country). There can be economic motives for spreading misleading information, such as driving web traffic and advertising revenue, as well as domestic political and even international security dimensions: disinformation can be weaponised as a form of information warfare by foreign agents.

Claire Wardle of the First Draft fact-checking organisation adds another category, malinformation: “accurate information inappropriately spread by bad-faith actors

with the intent to cause harm, particularly to the operation of democratic processes” (Wardle 2019). The usefulness of the concept of malinformation is debatable. It overlaps with disinformation to some extent, and seems to be a normative rather than empirical definition: who defines “bad faith” and “inappropriate”? In the simplest terms, the aim of a propaganda operation is to influence a public to adopt attitudes and take actions that are favourable to an entity. There is often a mix of many elements in such communications. In a submission to a Senate Inquiry on foreign interference through social media (Ackland, Jensen & O’Neil, this report), we showed that the most active IRA troll account on #auspol in the leadup to the 2016 Australian federal election was retweeting a selection of carefully curated stories from the mainstream media. Censorship, flooding, repetitions, and repetitive associations are also common tactics to shift attention,

<sup>9</sup> Gallagher et al. (2020) found the volume of QAnon posts on Facebook had increased by 174.9% between March and June 2020. In comparison, between November 2019 and February 2020, the increase was 1.83%.

in which truth or falsity has no bearing on the content promoted or censored. Truth has long been critical to successful propaganda exercises: the most successful

Soviet “active measures” or “Maskirovska” campaigns circulated truthful but embarrassing information deceptively (Bagge 2019, Rid 2020).

**Figure 4.1.** 1908. Lenin in exile plays chess with Bogdanov in front of their host Gorki in Capri. Vladimir Bazarov (standing left) was purged in 1930, Zenovi Sverdlov (between Gorki and Bogdanova) left Russia and joined the French army. Source: Jaubert (1986), p. 16.



Today far-right groups and hostile governments still seek to undermine the political institutions of liberal democracy. Far-right groups who rail against the “globalist media” propagate antisemitic myths, and some aspects of QAnon echo the “Protocols of the Sages of Zion,” a late-19th Century Russian Tsarist forgery which held that Jewish interests were attempting to subvert the world. Here it is necessary to be clear-eyed and rational. The fact that legitimate questions, such as the State of Israel’s treatment

of Palestinians can be dismissed (Alpert et al. 2020) or even prosecuted (Pilkington, 2009) as “anti-Semitic” has become commingled with the perceived prominent role of Jewish-Americans in the entertainment and media industries. As a result, the class domination of diversified globalised elites is framed in ethno-racist terms, focusing on one subcategory amongst these elites (Jewish people) and leading to the development of absurd beliefs about supposed secret organisations.

## MANUFACTURING CONCERN: FOREIGN AGENTS

The survey findings we have presented in the first chapter of this report show that trust in the news media is declining. This is a worrying trend in the time of Covid-19 when access to reliable information can be a life and death issue. An aggravating factor are active misinformation campaigns by “chaos actors”: see for example the Russian Internet Russian Agency during the 2016 US election (Golochevski et al, 2020; Jensen, 2018) or during the 2016 Australian election (Ackland, Jensen & O’Neil, this report). The aims are to sow divisions in society and depress turnout in elections. People’s Republic of China tactics have evolved

from flooding pro-regime defences to confrontational trolling and disinformation tactics designed to undermine authoritative sources of communication (experts, political authorities in a target population, etc.). From a political warfare standpoint, false information should not be considered alone; it is information that is designed to produce political effects and works in combination with other levers of statecraft, such as approaches to political parties. It works as a force multiplier, amplifying diplomatic, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and lawfare operations.

## TOTALITARIAN PROPAGANDA AND THE FALSIFICATION OF IMAGES

Past examples of propaganda and the manipulation of information and images include Stalinist and Maoist photographs where purged apparatchiks were airbrushed out of existence. The photos we reproduce in this chapter and in other parts of this report show examples of such manipulated images. They are taken from a 1986 French book by Alain Jaubert, *Le Commissariat aux archives. Les photos qui falsifient l'histoire*, which documented such practices, as well as from a similar volume published in 1997 by David King, *The Commissar Vanishes*. Hannah Arendt wrote of these Orwellian regimes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951): “The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that, under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism; instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness.” (p. 382).

### THE PSYCHOLOGY OF BELIEF

Did people living in the totalitarian societies analysed by Hannah Arendt or depicted by George Orwell in 1984 believe the lies they were told? In non-totalitarian societies cognitive psychology tells us that when people are confronted to a fact that they were until then unaware of,

they make up their mind about whether to believe it based on several factors, summarised in table 1. More often than not, intuitive evaluations and cognitive fluency are decisive: what matters is how information *feels*, not the content of the message.

**Table 1.** Criteria for judging truth

CRITERIA	ANALYTIC EVALUATION	INTUITIVE EVALUATION
Social consensus: Do others believe it?	Search databases, look for supporting statistics, or poll a group or audience.	Does it feel familiar?
Compatibility: Is it compatible with what I believe? Is it compatible with what I feel?	Recall one's own general knowledge and assess the match or mismatch with new information.	Does it make me stumble? Is it difficult to process, or does it feel right?
Coherence: Does it tell a good story?	Do the elements of the story logically fit together?	Does the story flow smoothly?
Credibility: Does it come from a credible source?	Is the source an expert? Does the source have a competing interest?	Does this source seem familiar and trustworthy?

Source: Schwartz & Newman, 2017.

As table 1 shows, the credibility of new information stems from diverse factors. Studies have shown that a familiar accent plays a significant role in making a statement seem credible. Agreement with one's worldview, narrative coherence, and trust in the source also play a role in the acceptability of information items. Repeating an incredible assertion over and over can overcome barriers such as unfamiliarity.



**Figure 4.2.** 1919. Kamenev, Lenin and Trotsky in the Red Square. Trotsky is crudely smudged out and the picture is subsequently reframed, excluding Kamenev. Kamenev was judged and executed in 1936, Trotsky assassinated in Mexico in 1940. Source: King (1997), p. 33.



Conspiracy theories have been described in many guises. They can be understood as forms of collective hallucinations people use to deal with disruptive or distressing events. The desire to make sense of the world is particularly important for people who lack control or are uncertain. But why do conspiracies feature specific ideas, themes and figures? Their attraction and power stems from the fact that at their heart lies a grain of truth. For

example, the influence and business practices of some pharmaceutical firms *is* a source of serious concern; some powerful people *do* abuse children and get away with it; there *was* an alliance between political, military and criminal forces known as the “deep state” (*derin devlet*) in Turkey. But how do people progress from these facts to the wild imaginings of anti-vaxxers and QAnon worshippers?

## ILLUSORY PATTERN PERCEPTION

It is natural for people to want to make sense of the world by identifying meaningful relationships between stimuli. For some psychologists, conspiratorial thinking is a form of mental disorder: distortions lead people to connect dots that are in fact unrelated, leading to “illusory pattern perception,” when people detect meaningful patterns in random stimuli and hence as diagnostic for what future stimuli to expect. Psychology researchers have conducted

experiments to isolate factors which contribute to conspiratorial thinking, and van Prooijen and colleagues (2017) found links between belief in the supernatural, conspiracies, and illusory pattern perception. Another perspective on conspiracies as a type of disordered thinking is provided by Cichocka and colleagues (2016), who found that individual narcissism or grandiose ideas of the self are connected to belief in conspiracies.

## NEED FOR UNIQUENESS

Another factor at play might be the all too human need to stand out from the crowd, to embody a variation of what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called “Distinction” (distinctive taste serves to reproduce social hierarchies). Some people are interested in what they perceive to be unique, original, or scarce products. If we accept the premise that beliefs can be like possessions, it follows that believing in a conspiracy theory means

the believer possesses unconventional and potentially scarce information. Lantian and colleagues (2017) found a correlation between the “need for uniqueness” and belief in conspiracies, which provide access to what Billig (1987) described as “hidden, important and immediate knowledge so that the believer can become an expert, possessed of knowledge not held by the so-called experts.”

## CRITIQUES OF CORPORATE MEDIA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

A central component of QAnon and other conspiratorial belief systems such as anti-vaxxers is the rejection of scientific expertise but also of the “mainstream media” and its biased “fake news”: corporate media serves concealed powerful, hidden interests and agendas. This distrust of corporate media has a long history. Long before self-propaganda in online networks, critics debated whether attempts to influence public debate in pluralistic societies via the mass media were justified or not. Examples in the United States include Walter Lippman who depicted a “bewildered herd” led by a specialised class, and Edward Bernays who declared that the “engineering of consent” was necessary in times of war for the efficient functioning of society.

An Australian take on this perspective was provided by Alex Carey (1955) who wrote in *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy*: “The twentieth century has been characterized by three developments of great political importance: the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy.” Carey can be situated within a critical tradition which does not see the news media as a “public sphere” or a “marketplace of ideas,” but instead defined news media as state and corporate propaganda for the manufacturing of consent to the social order.

## ENGINEERING CONSENT: THE “PROPAGANDA MODEL”

The original formulation of this argument was made by Karl Marx, who wrote in *The German Ideology* that “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.” In the 1930s the Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci rephrased this argument with his concept of “hegemony” (elites rule by enrolling the masses into adopting ideologies through social institutions) and Frankfurt School exiles to the United States such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer popularised the concept of the “cultural industries,” also in the service of dominant corporate interests.

In the 1980s this critical view of the news media was re-formulated by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman when they questioned whether the reporting of events in liberal democracies matches reality. Journalists believe that news mirror events accurately, but Chomsky and Herman proposed instead a stylised “Propaganda model” in which news items had to pass through five “filters” – ownership, advertising, source, flak, and monstrous other – before appearing in the corporate mass media.<sup>10</sup> The Propaganda Model has been criticised for failing to address how people actually consume and perceive news. Interestingly studies show that “right-wing” people often think the press is leftist whereas “left-wing” people think it is right-wing propaganda.

<sup>10</sup> “Source” refers to the advantage enjoyed by state or corporate bureaucracies who are seen as more legitimate than others; “Flak” to the fear of critiques from pro-government and pro-corporate advocates; and “Monstrous other” to Cold War-inspired anti-communism.

**Figure 4.3.** 1936. Four leaders of the Chinese revolution: Chin Pang-hsien aka Po Ku (left), Chu Teh, Zhou Enlai and Mao (right). Po Ku's plane crashes in 1946. Source: Jaubert (1986), p. 109.



**Figure 4.4.** 1970. Edgar Snow visits Mao and Lin Biao is present, holding a little red book. Lin Biao also died in a plane crash, in 1971. Source: Jaubert (1986), p. 119.



## CLIMATE CHANGE FANTASY THEMES

It is undeniable that some sectors of the news media have played a role in discrediting science. In Australia the Institute for Public Affairs, a think tank funded by the North American and Australian oil and mining industry (Hamilton, 2012; Readfearn, 2018), was shown to have manufactured and disseminated, via conservative Murdoch-owned newspapers, climate change “fantasy themes” that sought to discredit the science of global warming, such as “Climate scientists as rent-seeking frauds”, “Climate scientists as dissent-stifling elite”, “Climate science as religion” and “Green as the new Red” (McKewon, 2012; see also Oreskes & Conway, 2010). More recently, the main story issuing from the *Digital New Report: Australia 2020* was that the

proportion of “climate deniers” in Australia is among the highest across the 40 countries surveyed (Park et al., 2020). Specifically, 49% of skynews.com.au readers view climate change as a “not at all serious,” “not very serious,” or “somewhat serious” issue. These figures are also high for readers of Murdoch-owned tabloids such as Melbourne’s *Herald Sun* (39%) or Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph* (34%) and of Murdoch’s “quality” daily newspaper *The Australian* (31%). By way of comparison, the figures are 18% for readers of Fairfax’s Melbourne-based *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and 14% for *Guardian* readers (Jericho, 2020).

## ONLINE GATEKEEPING

Another argument against Chomsky and Herman's "Propaganda model" and other critics of corporate control over the news media such as Robert McChesney is that online communication has removed professional gatekeepers, so there is no more filtering of any kind. In our view, the issue of corporate control of the news media is still relevant today for three main reasons: (1) the facts outlined in the previous paragraph speak for themselves; (2) corporate mega-platforms such as Google and Facebook orient the information news consumers access online via their search and feed algorithms (there have been reports that, while some politically "left-wing" outlets have been downplayed in Facebook's algorithm, affirmative steps were taken to make far-right outlets more accessible - see Rosza, 2020), and (3) the critique of corporate media now forms

an integral part of "right-wing" conspiracies such as QAnon.

Most experts agree that online media facilitates the propagation of unverifiable information. When it comes to explaining how this works exactly, there is much less agreement. For example, recent reporting shows that one of the main vectors of the spread of QAnon on Facebook was that people became radicalised via recommendations suggested by the platform's algorithm (Sen & Zadrozny, 2020). In contrast a systematic study of YouTube's recommendation algorithm found that it promoted more moderate content and discouraged extremism (Ledwich & Zaitsev, 2019).

## NETWORK STRUCTURE AND SELECTIVE EXPOSURE

There is even less consensus when it comes to selective exposure: are people being segregated by their own actions, and by social media platforms, into partisan silos? The argument that the Internet allow news consumers to select their own information was first made by Cass Sunstein (2008) when he suggested that online news consumers can build their "Daily Me." Are algorithmically driven "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers" leading to increased polarisation? Studies relying on survey data suggest the heaviest consumers of digital news have the most diverse news diets (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017), whereas

network-based studies tend to show that engagement with news sources is ideologically balkanised (Benkler et al., 2017). A typical (North American) network-based approach argues that balkanisation is real as "copying our friends and unfollowing those with different opinions give us echo chambers so polarized that researchers can tell with high accuracy whether you are liberal or conservative by just looking at your friends. The network structure is so dense that any misinformation spreads almost instantaneously within one group, and so segregated that it does not reach the other" (Menczer, 2016).

## CLARIFYING THE DISTINCTION

In contrast Axel Bruns, who published in 2019 a book entitled *Are Filter Bubbles Real?*, argues in an invited commentary in this Report (p. 29) that if conspiracist communities were hermetically sealed into their own filter bubbles then mis- and disinformation about the Covid-19 crisis would not be able to travel widely or affect the general public's understanding of issues.

From there, we can make two key points. In terms of the diffusion of information across populations, the role of elite actors who connect social media conspiracies to other publics and media is a key factor requiring further investigation. In terms of individual beliefs, a central distinction is that it is not exposure to attitude-challenging information, but rather the *willingness to accept* this

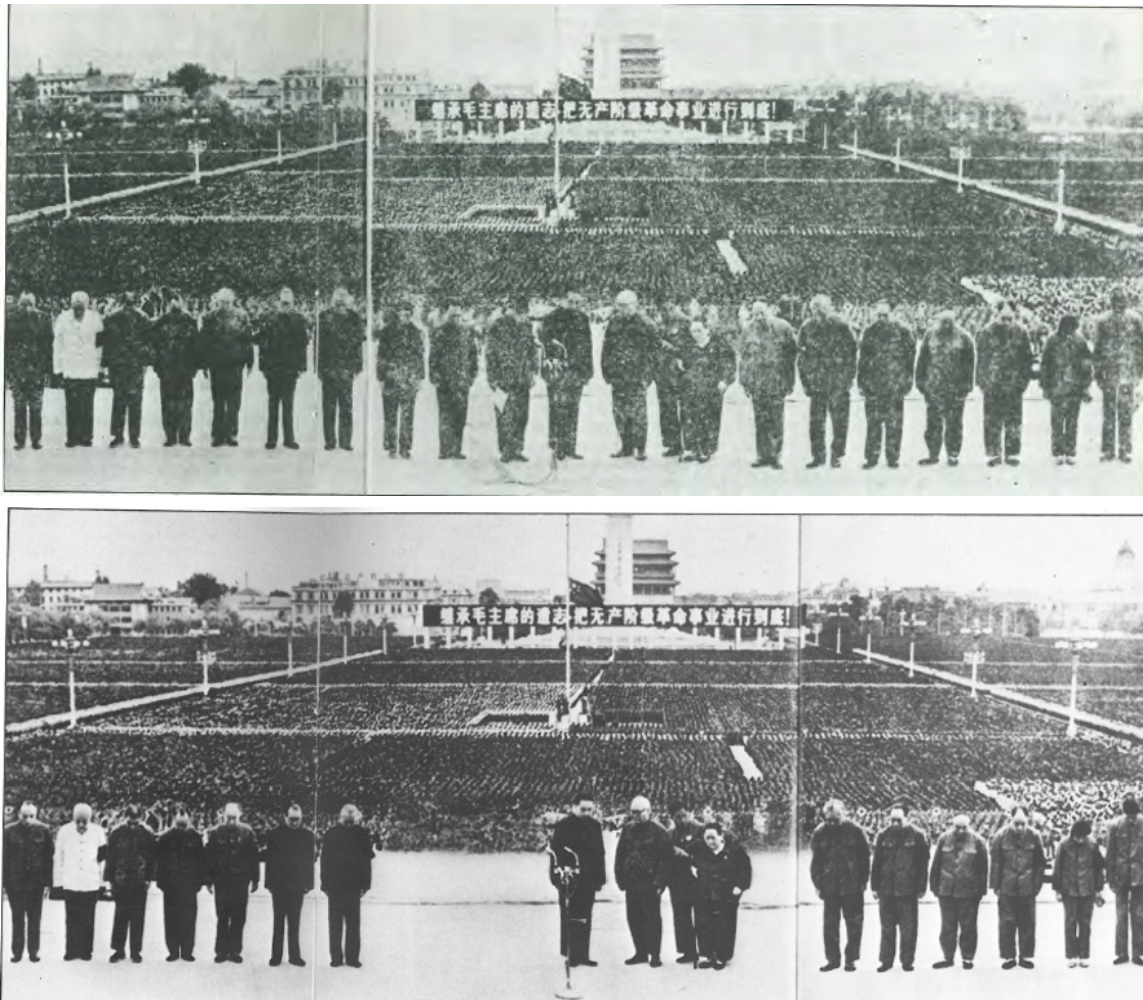
attitude-challenging information, which matters. People who believe in a conspiracy may have a varied news diet; they may be exposed to media sources which contradict their misled beliefs; but this will not change their opinion.

It is therefore necessary to clarify the difference between "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles." A useful definition is provided by Nguyen (2017, see box) which can be summarised as follows: in *filter bubbles* the information people access is curated by algorithms, but they can re-assess their beliefs if presented with contradictory evidence. In contrast in *echo chambers* people place absolute trust in an authority and dismiss anything which contradicts this authority as "fake news."

## ECHO CHAMBERS AND FILTER BUBBLES ARE NOT THE SAME THING

“Current usage has blurred this crucial distinction, so let me introduce a somewhat artificial taxonomy. An ‘epistemic bubble’ is an informational network from which relevant voices have been excluded by omission. That omission might be purposeful: we might be selectively avoiding contact with contrary views because, say, they make us uncomfortable. As social scientists tell us, we like to engage in selective exposure, seeking out information that confirms our own worldview. But that omission can also be entirely inadvertent. Even if we’re not actively trying to avoid disagreement, our Facebook friends tend to share our views and interests. When we take networks built for social reasons and start using them as our information feeds, we tend to miss out on contrary views and run into exaggerated degrees of agreement. An ‘echo chamber’ is a social structure from which other relevant voices have been actively discredited. Where an epistemic bubble merely omits contrary views, an echo chamber brings its members to actively distrust outsiders. In their book *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (2010), Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Frank Cappella offer a groundbreaking analysis of the phenomenon. For them, an echo chamber is something like a cult. A cult isolates its members by actively alienating them from any outside sources. Those outside are actively labelled as malignant and untrustworthy. A cult member’s trust is narrowed, aimed with laser-like focus on certain insider voices. In epistemic bubbles, other voices are not heard; in echo chambers, other voices are actively undermined. The way to break an echo chamber is not to wave ‘the facts’ in the faces of its members. It is to attack the echo chamber at its root and repair that broken trust.” (Nguyen, 2017)

Figure 4.5. 1976. Death of Mao. The “Gang of Four” is purged. Source: Jaubert (1986), pp. 120-121.



## A PROPOSAL TO ENGAGE WITH CONSPIRACY BELIEVERS

Presenting contradicting information to people who believe in a conspiracy may simply be dismissed out of hand as “fake news.” Conspiracy theories are sustained within communities of believers; how can such a community of belief be disrupted? One-on-one dialogue with a trusted person is a promising avenue, and we propose a series of concrete practical steps for such a dialogue.

We define persons espousing conspiratorial beliefs as “conspiracy believers” and persons seeking to contradict these beliefs as “conspiracy debunkers.” This is an inchoate proposal which requires revision or rebuttal. It should also be informed by resources such as the *Debunking Handbook*.<sup>11</sup>

**Step one** – Need for an authentic relationship.

For a productive exchange to occur, the conspiracy believer must trust that the conspiracy debunker has their best interests at heart. This trust may take a long time to build and so only apply in the case of friends and relatives. If such a relationship exists, move to step 2.

**Step two** – Establish ideological common ground.

Some conspiracies contain a grain of truth. It is key to be able to genuinely agree with conspiracy believers that (for example) mainstream media may not always report critically enough the actions of powerful actors such as corporations or governments.

**Step three** – Seek epistemological common ground.

Identify a legitimate connection pattern in which there is a scientific, measurable connection between elements. Explore the incontrovertible nature of peer-reviewed claims. Find examples of other such legitimate connections. If successful, move to step 4.

**Step four** – Question illusory pattern perception.

Contrast the lack of peer-reviewed evidence for connections between elements in conspiracy theories to the scientific, measurable, peer-reviewed connections discussed previously. Repeat.

Once again, these steps are limited and contingent. Social psychologists propose that unfounded beliefs are so widespread partly because of factors linked to general cognitive ability. Scepticism mandates both sufficient analytic skills, and the motivation to form beliefs on rational grounds (Ståhl & van Prooijen, 2018).

To put it differently: some people may be immune to reason.

Our four steps are therefore not simply an engagement technique, but also a form of commentary on why conspiracy theories persist and are difficult to address. They also serve to remind us that conceiving misinformation as being aimed at news media from the “outside” reinforces the stereotypical opposition between “real” news and a fantastic “other,” whereas misinformation can also originate from inside the news media, in the form of missing, incomplete or biased framing.

## CONCLUSION: RESTORING TRUST IN “THE NEWS”

News plays a central role in the operation of any political system. This recognition underlies a central reason for the existence of public broadcasters in many countries, including the requirement that the Australian Broadcasting Corporation can transmit across the entire country. In non-democratic contexts, the news often serves a propagandistic function, serving to legitimate the actions of political authorities and the operation of the political regime.

Spreading conspiracies on social media platforms objectively helps the cause of entities seeking to undermine liberal democratic societies: if people reject science and reason, this undermines credible sources and erodes trust

among citizens. But was there ever a time when news outlets in liberal democracies were seen as neutral arbiters of political information? If there was, this may have been because of a limited set of broadcast media outlets: trust in news media has declined as the range of options expanded (Daniller et al. 2017).

A major concern about declining levels of trust in “the news” is that members of a polity will stop believing in a common set of facts, retreating to trust in “my news,” which potentially includes news presented from a distinct partisan or ideological perspective. In the United States the fragmentation of news, enabled by cable television and digital networks, has facilitated the creation of distinctly

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.climatechangecommunication.org/debunking-handbook-2020/>

partisan views with incommensurable sets of beliefs about matters of fact (Sunstein 2017). Research has linked these differences in beliefs about matters of fact to media consumption patterns that reinforce political identities, which in turn lead people to accept or reject certain factual claims (Anson 2016; Gaines et al. 2007; McCright and Dunlap 2011). The rejection of facts that challenge one's identity may be a way for people to manage the complexity and insecurities of an ever-changing world by seeking out familiar voices.

This epistemic decoupling undermines the ability of members of a political system to define common goals, seek common destinies, and work together in a process of self-governance (Sunstein 2017). In addition to investigating the psychological factors outlined in this chapter, more empirical research is therefore needed to unpack the relationship between the acceptance of misinformation and trust in "my news." Finally, continuing support for independent and objective journalism is needed to increase trust "the news."

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