ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of Social Media on Elections and Electoral Administration

Melbourne—Tuesday, 17 November 2020

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Mr Lee Tarlamis—Chair
Mrs Bev McArthur—Deputy Chair
Ms Lizzie Blandthorn
Mr Matthew Guy
Ms Katie Hall
Ms Wendy Lovell
Mr Andy Meddick
Mr Cesar Melhem
Mr Tim Quilty
Dr Tim Read

WITNESS

Dr Carlo Kopp, Monash University.

The CHAIR: I declare open the public hearing for the Electoral Matters Committee Inquiry into the Impact of Social Media on Elections and Electoral Administration. I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands each of us is gathered on today and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to our committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I welcome Dr Carlo Kopp. I am Lee Tarlamis, the Chair of the committee and a Member for South Eastern Metropolitan Region. The other members of the committee who are here today are Bev McArthur, the Deputy Chair and a Member for Western Victoria; the Honourable Wendy Lovell, a Member for Northern Victoria; Cesar Melhem, a Member for Western Metropolitan; Tim Quilty, a Member for Northern Victoria; Dr Tim Read, the Member for Brunswick; and there may be some other committee members who will be joining us also. All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action in Australia for what you say here today; however, if you repeat the same things outside this hearing, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible. I now invite you to make a brief statement, which will be followed by questions from the committee.

Dr KOPP: Thank you, Mr Chairman. My opening statement will be indeed brief, and I had hoped to indulge the committee with one slide. A large part of my academic research since the 1990s has been focused on both the mathematical modelling and simulation of deceptions and the application of this work in dealing with problems such as fake news and propaganda, both of which of course are subjects of this hearing. Put simply, this is the science of how deceptions work. My intention with this work is to produce the means of accurately modelling deceptions and exactly how they produce their effects. This is not merely theory for theory's sake. The work has a number of practical applications: automated machine detection of deceptions, which can be used on social media platforms, for instance; analysis and prediction of deception damage effects, and that has been a subject of major debate in its own right—did a particular propaganda or deception campaign in social media or as previous witnesses commented, trolling, actually impact or affect an election outcome; then, definition of strategies and techniques to defeat these types of deceptions; and finally, definition of policy, especially identifying policy approaches that are safe as compared to policy approaches that incur risks, and that is an issue in its own right of course. Now, if legislation and regulation and indeed policy are to be effective, we need effective strategies. If we wish to have effective strategies and effectively counter deceptions, we need a fundamental understanding of how these deceptions work.

A related problem area I have been looking at is the analysis and understanding of the spreading behaviour of deceptions in digital media. What we can say at this time is that there is overwhelming evidence, and this has been collected empirically and supported by quite a bit of modelling and simulation work—not just our own, others—that shows that deceptions in digital media behave very much like biological pathogens in a biological population like the human population. Now, this is by no means a new observation. In fact, famous British evolutionary biologist, Dawkins, writing about memes decades ago in an era predating the internet and social media, in fact suggested this type of behaviour, and certainly since the advent of social media we have seen it pick up a lot more momentum.

Other behaviours that we see basically that are comparable to what we see in biology is that the spreading behaviour does look very much like what we see in biological epidemics or pandemics, but it is much faster—let us say the infection can spread literally in millions rather than numbers that you could count on your hands. One of the other things that we also observe is cryptic transmission, a common problem in biology, where you are not seeing the spread, it's spreading quietly, and we have seen that with the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, COVID-19, asymptomatic patients; okay. We basically see cryptic transmission in social media as well, and that is messaging via email and encrypted messaging tools. Telegram has been in fact quite famous for this, as we are observing currently in Belarus. The epidemiological view of deception and propaganda spreading in digital media suggests that in fact we can borrow established strategies for dealing with biological pathogens and apply them in social media, and I can talk about that in more detail later. The big challenge in developing

any kind of strategies that work will be dealing with a very wide range of legal, jurisdictional and ethical problems, and there is a lot of work involved in working through these. Finally, I would like to indulge the committee with one slide just to provide a very brief overview or summary of some of the ideas that have come out of this science research.

Visual presentation.

Dr KOPP: This is a chart that has been borrowed from a research paper. It provides a kind of high-level overview of how the—let us call it—science modelling approach to deceptions works. At the top we have the deception model, which is essentially the different ways in which deceptions can be done. These in turn, if you look down the chart, basically lead to deception effects, and the deception effects are what we are most interested in when we are looking at politics problems, because different deceivers play different deception games to achieve different effects on their victims. Two types of deceptions, degradation and denial, will mostly produce the effect of increasing uncertainty; essentially it is about confusing the victim. And you will see that that has been a particular feature of a lot of electoral interference effects that we have seen—games that particularly Russia has played in a number of European elections and attempted to play in the US election, certainly in 2016—which aim to spread all sorts of often mutually contradictory stories just to create confusion. The idea there is if you have managed to go and confuse the victim then they might withdraw from the debate or will basically not want to participate.

The other approach involves corruption, degradation and subversion of perceptions. The intent of these deceptions is essentially to implant false beliefs. Now, that is the traditional propaganda model that we are familiar with and that Goebbels used with the Nazi Party and NSDAP propaganda and also the classical Soviet propaganda model that was used until the end of the Cold War. The idea there is to just basically reprogram how the victim thinks, and that can be by implanting false interpretations or false perceptions. So they either see something differently to the way it really is or they interpret things differently, and the common term 'spin' is really all about manipulating how the victim in fact interprets what they are being told. Finally, if you want to do science work with this, you can take deception effects and use them in decision models, game models or hypergame models. But certainly for the purposes of the discussion we are having today in the hearing it is the deception effects that we are most interested in. That concludes my opening statement. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Kopp. I might go straight to questions, and I will invite the Deputy Chair, Bev McArthur, to start.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Dr Kopp, is the spread of misinformation on social media inevitable, considering its global proliferation and scale?

Dr KOPP: I think that is a very good question. I think at this point in time I would argue that probably yes, because partly we have audiences that are highly susceptible. The biggest problem that we have with this spread is essentially the gullibility of social media users. There is very little effort, at least from what we have observed, in actually checking whether something is true. The problem is compounded by the fact that, certainly when it comes to political debates and arguments on social media, a lot of the fact-checking entities are essentially partisan politically, and that presents a major challenge because if a person goes to a particular fact-checker they will get a particular interpretation of what may or may not be true. This appears to be an issue with some social media companies now, and in fact they are subcontracting their fact-checking. As long as we have dysfunctional or absent mechanisms for actually dealing with the spread of this type of disinformation on social media I think we have a problem that is inevitable, and that really takes us back to the need for having workable strategies and in turn constructing policy around that and then, if necessary, regulating.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Doctor. I have got another question. How can regulators effectively combat disinformation being disseminated when the disinformation is perhaps coming from governments and leaders themselves?

Dr KOPP: That is an excellent question. There has been a lot of argument about this, certainly in the United States, and we are currently seen instances with Twitter and Facebook putting flags onto political statements by political leaders saying, 'This is disputed' or 'This is fake'. That in itself I think is a major challenge. Certainly at this stage I see there will be major difficulties in regulation for the very simple reason that this is completely globalised. In other words, if you try to regulate in one jurisdiction, it may be illegal to apply that regulation in a

different jurisdiction. The technology as it is does not allow you to easily segregate or control access. I think earlier witnesses have commented on China being able to exercise control over their internet, but that is being done by applying really sledgehammer-type blocks on access.

A good example here of the difficulty in exercising control is that I mentioned Telegram, which is a messaging app. It has kind of expanded to become a broader social media platform, so people use it for broadcast video, they use it to run effectively blogs. It is all encrypted. The Russian government tried to shut it down—I think it was last year or the year before. They failed because the software was designed basically to run over virtual private networks and to take advantage of a number of facilities that allowed them to bypass access blocks that the government was trying to put into the Russian Internet. Not only that but when the Russian public in fact discovered that the government was trying to shut down Telegram, within the first week—this was quite widely reported—the number of users on the platform in Russia increased by 30 per cent. So we are seeing a situation where very often if you do try to block something, the public will simply look at means of bypassing those blocks. The better approach from a regulatory point of view may be in fact to regulate less and look at other means—

Mrs McARTHUR: Just on that point, Chair, if I may with your indulgence, do you think maintaining and improving public engagement and trust in traditional media and addressing bias in traditional media would ensure people are less susceptible to misinformation? And just further to that, if that is the case, we once thought that the ABC was our independent voice in Australia, but should it adhere to its statutory obligations of impartiality so as not to push people towards unscrupulous media sources if they perceive the ABC to be biased and untrustworthy?

Dr KOPP: The problem of partisanship in media I have certainly seen to be a major issue in the United States, and that extends in fact into fact-checking. Without drilling down into specific cases, I think the principal challenge here is that media in general appear to be stratifying on the basis of what their audiences are. In other words, they will cater to audiences that have particular biases or expectations. There has been in fact quite a lively debate over this in the United States, particularly in relation to the election, because once media go down the track of pursuing particular partisan narratives, you end up basically with the audience splitting and simply watching and observing their own media and taking the view that the other media are in fact biased. Indeed in the United States during the 2016 election we saw the so-called Macedonian fake news industry emerge. There have been quite a few articles and papers about that. These were teenage kids that were collecting news reports and fabricating news reports and putting them up as supposedly conservative right-wing media and raking in large amounts of advertising revenue. So from their point of view it was simply about money and they did not care about the veracity of what they were putting out. But fundamentally where you end up with partisan, narrative-based focus in media, I think ultimately will create that scenario where in fact people will start looking for alternatives. Certainly one of the things I have seen, a propaganda play that the Russians have employed with their propaganda channels like RT and Sputnik, is, 'Oh, here you have an independent alternative; it's not tainted by the biases of your domestic media' in whatever Western nation they are dealing with. In practice what we find with their media is of course it has got their particular propaganda bias and narrative. So I think this is a major problem in its own right.

In the United States, the FCC decades ago had a so-called fairness doctrine that in fact made it mandatory for mass media providers to provide fair and balanced coverage. That got thrown out after it was contested, I believe by the Republican Party, on the basis that it was impairing free speech in some particular fashion. There is a problem with this let us call it 'regulatory approach' to fair and balanced coverage. Media providers will often believe that they have an obligation to give both sides fair coverage even if one of the sides is in fact a malicious propaganda player. And we have seen many, many instances of this over the last five years where, for instance, a dispute had arisen between the Russians and the West, and Western media taking what is patently fabricated Russian propaganda and presenting it as fact in the interests of providing balanced coverage. So this has been a debate in it own right.

One of the problems that we have with all of these matters is that they are the proverbial wicked problems in that there are no simple solutions. All of this arises in turn simply as a result of the fact that many audiences essentially are gullible and basically unquestioningly accept what they get from a particular media platform. That provides incentives for people to pursue let us call it partisan narratives, propaganda distribution, misinformation, whether it is to gain politically or whether it is indeed to simply generate money, as with the Macedonian fake news industry.

The CHAIR: Dr Tim Read?

Dr READ: No questions at the moment, thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: No worries. Tim Quilty.

Mr QUILTY: Thanks. So, on your crypto topic, I think there is a real value in having these things that are out of control of the government, as we can see overseas as well. We have seen in Victoria in the last few months when we had the police bashing down people's doors and arresting them for posting stuff on Facebook, so now the protest movement has moved itself onto Signal and other apps. They are going to be very reluctant to support any movement to limit that. Generally in your submission you seem to be talking about the only real solution would be educating people to apply better filters to what they are getting. Is that even practical? Do you think it is possible? Has it worked anywhere?

Dr KOPP: That is an excellent question. Precedents, there have been. Certainly when I am teaching students to research things on the Internet there are methods for teaching this to people in a systematic way. Certainly you can introduce this into the educational system. If it sinks in, you will end up with a more discriminating audience. Of course your time lag is decades here, to produce effect. In terms of engaging the general public, there were quite a few reports a few years ago. In the Czech Republic they set up a computer game—it was an online game—and encouraged a lot of young people to participate in it, that involved unmasking the troll or the propagandist in some political debate. So they turned it into a game. How much effect that produced I do not really know; I have not seen any academic papers on this that actually did any forensic analysis.

One of the challenges that we have with all of this is in fact even if we conduct an education campaign or introduce things like mandatory training measures to teach people to be more discriminating—and I think there will be opportunities to do that, because the online deception problem is not just confined to politics and social media; it is pretty broad—there are vast amounts of false advertising and misleading advertising that we are really dealing with. I have a colleague that describes this as 'the Western global disease'. So I think the difficulty is, if you have conducted a campaign to train and educate people to be more discriminating, measuring objectively whether you have achieved the effect that you wanted to get—in other words, that people are in fact taking a more discriminating approach—I think it might be possible to measure that by looking at, for instance, the level of traffic going to known deceptive websites and known deceptive platforms. That would tell you whether you are getting any traction. The difficulty that you have is of course that some members of the public simply might not accept this and think, 'Well, look, my opinion is better than anybody else's, and I don't want to be told to be sceptical or to be gullible or otherwise' or 'I just want to be gullible'.

A major challenge is the problem of prior cognitive biases. We see what is often called the confirmation bias, which is one of these biases, where people basically have preconceived notions of what they want to believe and then they will filter facts that they see on the basis of, 'Is it what I want to believe or not?'. Teaching people not to do this—it really often will depend on the personality or the psychology of the individual whether you can in fact unteach these sorts of bad habits. So I think that is a very good question and, as with many of these things, there may not be trivial answers. This gets back to the comments that I made in my submission—there do not appear to be any panacea answers here.

The CHAIR: Okay. Are there any additional questions anyone would like to ask, committee members? No. On that basis, thank you, Dr Kopp, for your contribution today and for coming along and talking to us about these important matters. We appreciate your time.

Dr KOPP: My pleasure.

The CHAIR: And that completes this session of the inquiry.

Dr KOPP: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Witness withdrew.