SUBMISSION TO PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA

Inquiry into the impact of social media on elections and electoral administration

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1. Professor Stephan Lewandowsky has been researching "fake news" and how people respond to misinformation and its correction for nearly 20 years and has published numerous peer-reviewed articles on this issue. He co-authored a handbook on debunking techniques (at http://sks.to) that has been downloaded more than half a million times. He has previously testified to the U.K. Parliament's inquiry into fake news. Full biographical information at www.cogsciwa.com.

2. Professor Ullrich Ecker is a world-leading researcher on how people respond to corrections of misinformation, and why misinformation sometimes lingers in memory. Full biographical information at www.emc-lab.org.

3. Our expertise and research findings converge on the following conclusions:

Understanding the fundamentals of social media

4. Social media are a driving factor of the "attention economy."[1] Human attention is limited, and it has thus become a commodity online with platforms vying for user engagement. Whenever we venture online, our attention is a precious commodity. We pay for a "free" service online by selling our attention and personal data to advertisers.

5. The attention economy is an inescapable driving-force of online behaviour, and the impact of social media on elections cannot be understood without appreciation of this context.

6. Social media rely on algorithmic customization to present users with content that they find attractive and engaging, in order to extend their time on platform and increase exposure to advertising. Algorithmic customization can be helpful (e.g., recommending a movie that users are likely to enjoy) but it can also be harmful (e.g., presenting manipulative political content).[2]

7. These core attributes of the attention economy create perfect conditions for the spread of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and other low-quality content. Platforms make money from anything that keeps people engaged, and accuracy of information is of no relevance to their bottom line.[3] A recent New York Times article therefore proclaimed that *Facebook Has Been a Disaster for the World*.[4]

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[1] Wu (2017). *The attention merchants*. London, Atlantic Books.
[2] For a detailed review, see Kozyreva, Lewandowsky, & Hertwig (2020, in press). Citizens versus the internet: confronting digital challenges with cognitive tools. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest,* https://psyarxiv.com/ky4x8/.
[3] Lorenz-Spreen, Lewandowsky, Sunstein, & Hertwig (2020). How behavioural sciences can promote truth and autonomy and democratic discourse online. *Nature Human Behaviour,* http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0889-7.
[4] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/18/opinion/facebook-democracy.html.

8. In the following, we explore two adverse consequences of the attention economy and social media on elections: The influence of misinformation, and microtargeted manipulation.

Misinformation on social media and its impact on society

9. As sensationalist and conspiratorial content is particularly engaging and hence promoted by platform algorithms, malicious actors can use social media to influence debate or weaken and destabilize government through social division.[5] The same opportunities are available to political actors themselves to seek votes[6] and policy support.[7]

10. The current COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the dangers of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. There is evidence that endorsement of conspiracies relating to COVID-19 is associated with reduced compliance with public-health measures (e.g., social distancing and mask wearing).[8]

11. There is overwhelming evidence that once people have acquired beliefs, they may continue to rely on them even after they are shown to be false.[9] To illustrate, nearly 1/3 of Americans falsely believed that Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) existed in Iraq around the time of the invasion of 2003 for at least 5 years after their non-existence was officially established and widely publicised.[10]

12. This continued reliance on misinformation and false beliefs can occur even when people acknowledge a correction and *recognize* that they have been misinformed.[11] Human cognition has difficulty processing a correction, especially when a claim is retracted but no alternative factual account is provided.[12]

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[5] Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook (2017). Beyond misinformation: Understanding and coping with the "post-truth" era. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition, 6*, 353-369, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.07.008.

[6] https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/jun/08/it-felt-like-a-big-tide-how-the-death-tax-lie-infected-australias-election-campaign

[7] https://theconversation.com/bushfires-bots-and-arson-claims-australia-flung-in-the-global-disinformation-spotlight-129556

[8] Freeman et al. (2020). Coronavirus conspiracy beliefs, mistrust, and compliance with government guidelines in England. *Psychological Medicine,* http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/s0033291720001890.

[9] Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, & Cook, J. (2012). Misinformation and its correction: continued influence and successful debiasing. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 13,* 106-131, http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1529100612451018 .

[10] Lewandowsky, Stritzke, Oberauer, & Morales (2005). Memory for fact, fiction, and misinformation: The Iraq War 2003. *Psychological Science, 16*, 190-195, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.0956-7976.2005.00802.x; Jacobson (2010). Perception, Memory, and Partisan Polarization on the Iraq War. *Political Science Quarterly, 125*, 31-56.

[11] Lewandowsky, Stritzke, Oberauer, & Morales (2005). Memory for fact, fiction, and misinformation: The Iraq War 2003. *Psychological Science, 16*, 190-195, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.0956-7976.2005.00802.x.

[12] Nyhan & Reifler (2015). Displacing misinformation about events: An experimental test of causal corrections. *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, *2*, 81-93, http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2014.22.

Social media and microtargeted manipulation

13. The "Cambridge Analytica scandal" of 2017 created much public concern about "microtargeting".[13] Microtargeting is an extreme form of customization that exploits intimate knowledge about a consumer to present them with maximally persuasive advertisements. Cambridge Analytica was implicated in using microtargeting during the Brexit referendum campaign.[14]

14. The exact impact of microtargeting is difficult to quantify although experimental evidence suggests it is non-trivial.[15]

15. Microtargeting is particularly problematic when it exploits people's personal vulnerabilities. For example, according to a 2017 report, Facebook (in Australia) had the technology to allow advertisers to target vulnerable teenagers at moments when they feel "worthless" and "insecure." Facebook did not dispute the existence of the technology although it claimed that it was never made available to advertisers and only used in an experimental context.[16] Facebook apologized at length and reassured the public that "Facebook does not offer tools to target people based on their emotional state."[17]

16. Facebook was, however, awarded a patent based on technology that allowed one "to predict one or more personality characteristics for the user. The inferred personality characteristics are stored in connection with the user's profile, and may be used for targeting, ranking, selecting versions of products, and various other purposes." [18]

17. In the political arena, at least 6 harms can arise from microtargeted political advertising:[19]
    - Microtargeting is harmful because it exploits personal data without the user's consent.
    - Microtargeting is harmful because it conceals its intent and true nature.
    - Microtargeting is harmful because claims made in targeted messages cannot be corrected or debated in the free marketplace of ideas.
    - Relatedly, microtargeting is harmful because it permits disinformation to spread without opportunity for correction.
    - Microtargeting is harmful because it potentially allows politicians to make mutually incompatible promises to different segments of the electorate.
    - Microtargeting is harmful because it permits foreign actors to influence domestic political campaigns.

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[13] Heawood (2018). Pseudo-public political speech: Democratic implications of the Cambridge Analytica scandal. *Information Polity, 23,* 429-434, http://dx.doi.org/10.3233/IP-180009 .

[14] https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/07/the-great-british-brexit-robbery-hijacked-democracy.

[15] Matz, Kosinski, Nave, & Stillwell (2017). Psychological targeting as an effective approach to digital mass persuasion. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 48,* 12714-12719, http://dx.doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1710966114 .

[16] https://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2017/05/facebook-helped-advertisers-target-teens-who-feel-worthless/.

[17] https://about.fb.com/news/h/comments-on-research-and-ad-targeting/.

[18] https://patents.google.com/patent/US8825764B2/en.

[19] Heawood (2018). Pseudo-public political speech: Democratic implications of the Cambridge Analytica scandal. *Information Polity, 23, 429-434,* http://dx.doi.org/10.3233/IP-180009; Lorenz-Spreen, Lewandowsky, Sunstein, & Hertwig (2020). How behavioural sciences can promote truth and autonomy and democratic discourse online. *Nature Human Behaviour,* http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0889-7.

Safeguarding elections: Preliminary considerations

18. It is tempting to respond to misinformation and manipulation online with regulation of content. As a general rule, this is inadvisable in all but extreme cases (e.g., incitement to hatred) because of the obvious risk of censorship. A more promising avenue is to redesign platforms to create "friction" that makes engagement with and sharing of low-quality content more difficult, for example by requiring an additional click to view or share content deemed as likely misleading, or by querying people to clarify their intentions.[20] There is evidence that relatively simple prompts can "nudge" people into being more accurate in their sharing behaviour.[21]

19. In the context of elections, however, there would be clear benefits of enhanced regulation, which would not just help address issues arising from disinformation and its potential influence on votes, but would also serve to counteract the erosion of public trust that threatens democratic systems.[22] These could include:

    - An independent body that conducts fact-checking of political ads to avoid misleading and deceptive conduct;

    - covering political ads on social media under the same 48h pre-poll-day ban as those in the traditional media;

    - enhancing transparency around political donations—specifically as they relate to the funding of social-media campaigns but also more generally (e.g. restrictions of donations via associated entities); and

    - considering expenditure limits on political advertising.[23]

20. Several regulatory responses to microtargeting in the context of elections also exist, among them:

    - Permit only official candidate-bought and candidate-approved messages (to reduce interference from third-party actors).

    - Ban microtargeting for political ads. Political actors will be representing and held accountable by broad constituencies. Consequently, their messages should be seen by broad audiences. Audience segmentation is legitimate, but microtargeting based on personal vulnerabilities is not.

    - To ensure accountability, all political ads should be made publicly available together with information about the target audience. As a general rule, enough information must be available for any political ad to permit "counterspeech" by political opponents that addresses the same audience.

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[20] https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jun/11/twitter-aims-to-limit-people-sharing-articles-they-have-not-read.

[21] Fazio (2020). Pausing to consider why a headline is true or false can help reduce the sharing of false news. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*. http://dx.doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-009.

[22] https://www.democracy2025.gov.au/documents/Democracy2025-report1.pdf; Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook (2017). Beyond misinformation: Understanding and coping with the "post-truth" era. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition, 6*, 353-369. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.07.008

[23] https://theconversation.com/after-clive-palmers-60-million-campaign-limits-on-political-advertising-are-more-important-than-ever-117099