**Emotional Disinformation on Social Media – Advising Australia’s Parliament of Victoria, Electoral Matters Committee**

In August 2020, Vian Bakir and Andrew McStay were invited to submit evidence to the [Inquiry into the Impact of Social Media on Elections & Electoral Administration](https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/emc/inquiries/inquiry/998), conducted by the Electoral Matters Committee, Parliament of Victoria, Australia. (This followed their submissions across 2017-19 to the globally influential Inquiry into Fake News and Disinformation, conducted by the UK’s Culture, Media and Sport Committee.)

The Electoral Matters Committee wanted to know how online political advertising

was changing elections; and what should be done about any negative impacts in the short-term and long-term in Australia. This year-long Inquiry held 7 days of hearings and attracted 126 submissions from global experts and key actors.

Bakir and McStay drew on their ongoing work for a monograph on Emotional AI and Disinformation (contracted with Springer, due 2022) which seeks to diagnose core economic and political drivers of the global phenomenon of online emotional disinformation, and to evaluate solutions proposed from across the world. Informing [their submission](https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/EMC/21._Vian_Bakir_and_Andrew_McStay_Redacted.pdf) to the Inquiry, Bakir and McStay analyse how social media changes elections for better and for worse. They further observe that online advertising is a key economic driver behind the proliferation of online disinformation as behavioural advertising funds fake news sites through use of adtech to profile and target people; and datafied emotional content is optimised to generate social media shares for internet traffic and advertising income (clickbait audiences) whether for real news, fake news or political campaigning. They also note that dominant digital platforms have taken various actions to disrupt the business models for the production and amplification of microtargeted disinformation. Governments have also acted in different ways across the world, and Australia’s Parliament of Victoria wanted to know what to do.

After three weeks studying the issue in the Australian context and writing [their submission](https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/EMC/21._Vian_Bakir_and_Andrew_McStay_Redacted.pdf), Bakir and McStay recommended the following for Australia:

* Two quick, uncontroversial fixes. a) Increase the transparency of online political ads by ensuring that social media platforms keep accessible, searchable libraries of political ads and political issue ads. b) Ensure that there are digital imprints to hold advertisers accountable for what they say.
* Longer term, close attention should be paid to the legality of microtargeting. Also, more studies are needed into the impact of microtargeting on electorates, both in terms of direct influence and regarding wider trust in the fair conduct of elections.

In September 2021, the Electoral Matters Committee published their 277-page long [Final Report](https://parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/emc/Social_Media_Inquiry/EMC_Final_Report.pdf) from the Inquiry. It concludes that the Australian government needs to take multi-faceted action to preserve the positives arising from social media (such as politicians increasing engagement with citizens on issues that people care about), while reducing the negatives, and fulfilling the community’s duty to safeguard democratic institutions from deceptive microtargeting and abusive comments. Bakir and McStay’s research fed into nine of the Inquiry’s 70 Findings, and two out of the Inquiry’s 33 Recommendations (see Table 1).

**How Bakir and McStay’s research into online disinformation fed into Findings & Recommendations of the Electoral Matters Committee** [Inquiry into the Impact of Social Media on Elections & Electoral Administration](https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/emc/inquiries/inquiry/998), (**Parliament of Victoria, Australia Sep 2021)**

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| **Inquiry Findings/Recommendations** | **Underpinning analysis from Bakir & McStay’s submission** |
| FINDING 15: Concerns have been raised that the structure of some social media platforms may encourage echo chambers and filter bubbles, in which people are not exposed to a variety of viewpoints and information. It is not clear to what extent these phenomena exist or what impact (if any) they are having on elections. Further research in this area would be valuable | Bakir and McStay’s analysis (p.2-3) of the contradictory scholarship on filter bubbles. |
| FINDING 21: There is currently uncertainty about how people are using social media around elections, about how social media platforms are intervening in what people see and about the impacts of these things on the electoral environment. This uncertainty makes it difficult to formulate appropriate and effective government policy in this area.**Recommendation 8:** That the Government provide funding for detailed research into the impact of social media on elections in Victoria and/or Australia. This should include a focus on the effects of advertising, efforts to amplify messages through other means (such as bots, fake accounts and high‑intensity accounts) and the behaviour of users. It should also consider the effects of the way platforms are designed and the impact of platform algorithms and employee decisions influencing what users see. | Bakir and McStay’s analysis (p.16) of interdisciplinary scholarship that indicates the need for more research into the impacts of microtargeting on electorates. |
| FINDING 25: Commonwealth law requires television and radio stations to observe a blackout period for election advertising ahead of an election. However, this does not apply to social media. The Commonwealth Parliament may wish to consider whether this inconsistency is appropriate. | Bakir and McStay’s evaluation (p.14) of the need for consistency in advertising rules between social media and traditional media, e.g. by extending the blackout laws to cover social media |
| FINDING 31: ‘Fake news’ and other sorts of inaccurate information can spread quickly on social media and can be difficult to counteract. Inaccurate information can make it difficult for voters to determine which candidates will best represent their interests and has the potential to lead to disengagement with democratic processes. It can also mislead voters about election processes, potentially depriving people of their vote. | Bakir and McStay’s analysis (p.4) of scholarship on factors contributing to people spreading inaccurate information on social media highlights the role played by affective content, incivility and polarisation. E.g. for some partisan social media users, sharing inaccurate information about their opposition may be a way of expressing their feelings of belonging to a group. |
| FINDING 42: Abuse towards politicians can impact Victorian elections and democracy by discouraging political participation. This includes discouraging people from running for elected office, discouraging political conversation online and direct efforts to silence people. Women and minority groups can be particular targets of abuse and silencing efforts. | Bakir and McStay’s analysis (p.4) of scholarship on factors contributing to people spreading inaccurate information on social media highlights the impact of affective content, incivility and polarisation. E.g online abuse can act as a ‘disincentive to participate’ in politics and elections. |
| FINDING 48: The opaque nature of political microtargeting can lead to poor campaign behaviour such as spreading inaccurate information, inflaming existing societal tensions for political gain and sending contradictory messages to different sets of voters. It also makes it more difficult for the VEC to perform its regulatory work regarding authorisation statements. In addition, it can be hard for voters to properly interpret a message they see without understanding whom a message has been targeted at. | Bakir and McStay’s analysis (p.2) of the promises and threats of microtargeting for citizens, political parties and public opinion. |
| FINDING 49: Microtargeting segments the population by delivering information to specific audiences only. This removes the value gained through the public and political opponents offering rebuttals and differing viewpoints on electoral issues. | Bakir and McStay’s analysis (p.2) of how microtargeting can harm our electoral system by allowing inaccurate information to spread without credible information to counter it, and by making it harder for voters to become properly informed by reducing the ‘public sphere’ for discussion and debate of election issues. |
| FINDING 52: Several submitters to this Inquiry called for expenditure caps to limit the amount of money that candidates can spend on electoral advertising. This could reduce the negative impacts of microtargeting and provide a more level playing field for candidates. Expenditure caps will be considered as part of an independent review of parts of the Electoral Act that will take place after the 2022 election. | Bakir and McStay’s recommendation (p.2) of the need for greater intervention, such as examining the legality of microtargeting, and advocation of more studies into the impact of microtargeting on electorates in terms of direct influence and regarding wider trust in the fair conduct of elections. |
| FINDING 60: Victoria’s current system allows authorisation statements to be too distant from relevant content and become easily decoupled through the content sharing that is intrinsic to social media. Incorporating authorisation statements into media through ‘digital imprints’ which are a permanent part of the content will help users to see the origin of content even if it is copied and reposted by other users. **Recommendation 26**: That the Government introduce legislation to require authorisation statements for relevant electoral matter in the form of digital imprints embedded into the media wherever possible | Bakir and McStay’s support for digital imprints (p.16). |

Sources: [Final Report](https://parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/emc/Social_Media_Inquiry/EMC_Final_Report.pdf) from the [Inquiry into the Impact of Social Media on Elections & Electoral Administration](https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/emc/inquiries/inquiry/998), the Electoral Matters Committee, Parliament of Victoria, Australia (Sep 2021) and Bakir & McStay’s written [submission](https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/EMC/21._Vian_Bakir_and_Andrew_McStay_Redacted.pdf) to the Inquiry (Aug 2020).