**How Bakir and McStay’s research into online disinformation fed into Findings & Recommendations of 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)**

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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 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 need for more research into 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 need for consistency in ad rules between social media and traditional media, e.g. by extending 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 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 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 impact of affective content & incivility. 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 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 electoral systems by allowing inaccurate information to spread without credible information to counter it, and by making it harder for voters to become properly informed. |
| 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 need for greater intervention, such as examining legality of microtargeting, and more studies into impact of microtargeting on electorates in terms of direct influence and regarding wider trust in 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).