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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS

Conduct of the 2016 federal election and matters related thereto

TUESDAY, 20 NOVEMBER 2018

CANBERRA

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Members in attendance: Senators McGrath and Waters and Mr Dick, Mr Giles and Mr Morton.

Terms of Reference for the Inquiry:
To inquire into and report on:
1. All aspects of the 2016 Federal election and matters related thereto, and without limiting the scope of the committee's inquiry, with particular reference to:
   (a) The application of provisions requiring authorisation of electoral material to all forms of communication to voters;
   (b) The potential applicability of 'truth in advertising' provisions to communication to voters including third-party carriage services;
   (c) The options available to Parliament to ensure consistent application of disclosure rules to and the regulation of all entities undertaking campaign activities; and,
   (d) The potential application of new technology to voting, scrutiny and counting, with particular reference to its application to remote voting, ADF personnel on deployment and supporting vision-impaired voters.
2. The extent of donations and contributions from foreign sources, persons, entities and foreign owned subsidiaries to political parties, associated entities and other third parties and entities undertaking campaign activities, and the options available to Parliament to regulate these.
3. The current donations, contributions, expenditure and disclosure regime, its application and timeliness and alternative approaches available to Parliament.
4. The extent to which fundraising and expenditure by third parties is conducted in concert with registered political parties and the applicability and utilisation of tax deductibility by entities involved in campaign activities.
5. Any matters related to the terms outlined above.
WITNESSES

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Committee met at 09:01

CHAIR (Senator McGrath): I declare open this public hearing of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters for the inquiry into the 2016 federal election. Although the committee does not require you to provide evidence under oath, I wish to advise that this is a formal proceeding of the parliament. Giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of parliament. These proceedings are being broadcast and recorded by Hansard. I now invite you to make an opening statement. The committee will then proceed to questions. We have a copy of your submission.

Mr Singleton Norton: I appreciate the opportunity to give evidence. We provided a submission to this inquiry and we've outlined a number of concerns, some risks and a few recommendations that we want to put forward. Ultimately, [inaudible] in the way that political parties and politicians are using communication methods. We're talking predominantly digital media and social media. It's very different from how we originally envisaged that members of parliament and political parties would engage with their constituents. There are a few opportunities there. If we're talking about being able to target directly to constituents, social media and online advertising actually provide a really good opportunity to target communications to constituents in a relevant way. It's very easy to get down to the people in your area and give them information that is relevant to them and engage with them, which lowers the bar for participation in democracy. That's a good thing.

The problem comes when you look at the risks associated with those sorts of behaviours. If we look at one in particular, microtargeting of advertising, that one particular communication channel goes directly to a human being. No other human can actually see that engagement, so we have a huge transparency and accountability problem. When you're targeting communications to one person only, you have huge power over those people. You're able to give them a pitch that may manipulate them; it may push them in a certain way on their political spectrum and, importantly, other people can't see that happening. In the past, we had mechanisms such as broadcast media and town halls, and that was an open forum. We had people who could see that engagement and they could critique it, they could see if others were being manipulated or being targeted with certain messages, and we had a wholesome view of how that was engaging. With the rise of digital media and microtargeting, that transparency doesn't exist anymore, so there's a huge concern there over the power that we have and how we're almost by default manipulating a constituency.

We're also concerned about the power dynamics that play there. Incumbent MPs and larger political parties have greater power than that of microparties, independents and people who want to engage in a political discourse but who don't have that history behind them—not just monetarily but also over time building up huge databases, building up lists of people who you want to send these messages to and being able to feed that system into digital media to be able to target them more directly. There's a discrepancy in the power dynamics there, and we're concerned about where that ends up. If we look at political parties and the databases they have built up over the last couple of years, that's getting more and more powerful now.

Ultimately we see that there are some easy solutions to this, the primary one being to set that tone from the top down—make sure that those accountability, transparency and [inaudible] are actually addressed. At the moment, political parties, contractors and members are all exempt from the Privacy Act whereas corporations, nonprofits and other groups have to be held to a higher standard to ensure that they're actually protecting the privacy and the engagement of the people who they're targeting. A very easy first step to show not just from accountability measure that this is necessary but also that morally and ethically this is an important issue would be to remove that exemption to ensure that people who are in elected positions are held to the same standards that others are.

There has been precedent set in the United Kingdom, which is that the UK Information Commissioner called for an ethical pause of digital targeting and digital media in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal. That would be a hold on all this kind of activity, which would then give the parliament and the people time to develop a code of conduct. There are a few other recommendations we've put in the submission, but I welcome any questions that the committee may have.

Mr GILES: Thank you for your submission and for your evidence today. I found the most useful aspect of your submission was your call for first principles under the heading 'When does the use of social media to influence the political debate become a problem?'. I appreciate the opportunity to give evidence. We provided a submission to this inquiry and we've outlined a number of concerns, some risks and a few recommendations that we want to put forward. Ultimately, [inaudible] in the way that political parties and politicians are using communication methods. We're talking predominantly digital media and social media. It's very different from how we originally envisaged that members of parliament and political parties would engage with their constituents. There are a few opportunities there. If we're talking about being able to target directly to constituents, social media and online advertising actually provide a really good opportunity to target communications to constituents in a relevant way. It's very easy to get down to the people in your area and give them information that is relevant to them and engage with them, which lowers the bar for participation in democracy. That's a good thing.

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**Mr Singleton Norton:** As far as I know, it hasn't been implemented. A lot of that was in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal and so I think the reaction to that was very reactive, essentially. It was very much like: 'This has gone really, really bad. Let's stop everything and go back to first principles and see where we go.' As far as I know, that actually hasn't happened. You might say that they have bigger problems on their hands at the moment in the UK. The main thing there is the focus on a halt of the practices we have found so horrible in the wake of Cambridge Analytica and the evidence that a lot of political parties and political operatives were taking advantage of those systems.

**Mr GILES:** The other issue that I was interested in is you refer to the example of Germany, Austria, Switzerland and apparently other nations in requiring Impressum sections on Facebook pages. Can you explain a little more about that and how it has been the case that Facebook has obviously responded positively in those jurisdictions to the requirement?

**Mr Singleton Norton:** That example there is actually what we've seen in the US with political ads. Facebook made very strong strides in the right direction. They've now required that any political ads within the US jurisdiction require some actions that allow people to quickly and easily discover who placed the ad [inaudible], where they can find more information and what's their right to reply if they have a problem with these ads. All of that is actually embedded within the visible ad as it appears to people. That did not exist in the past. Again, it goes to transparency. At the moment, especially with things like dark ads on Facebook, we don't know who's placing them, who they're targeting and how it's being reacted to by those people when they're being targeted, and no-one else can see that happening.

Facebook did make a step in the right direction and say, 'Even if you're not the person being targeted, here is a place where you can go and find what the Democratic Party is doing in the state of Georgia and here is a list of their ads.' That's a really good step towards that transparency that we're talking about, but it's only happened with pressure from legislators. In the US, that was mostly in reaction to the Facebook Cambridge Analytica scandals. In places like Germany, Austria and Switzerland, that was members of parliament such as yourselves actually pushing Facebook and saying, 'This is what we need to see to have that accountability.'

**Mr GILES:** If I can have the chair's indulgence, I have two follow-up questions on this. What would you see is the gold standard on this issue, and what resourcing or other support would the Australian Electoral Commission require to provide effective regulatory oversight and enforcement?

**Mr Singleton Norton:** In terms of the gold standard, I think it has to be ultimate transparency. If we can see even that level that I spoke about before about the US political ads and making sure that we have a space where we can see who is behind this targeting, behind these advertising campaigns, that's a huge first step to allow the user to engage directly when they see those ads. The other way to go about it is to have a clearinghouse of election material—to have a place where all electoral advertising and electoral materials are archived, cross-referenced and linked back to people so that if you want to know what any political party or operative is doing then you can go there and see everything that is happening. That would be, again, a huge accountability measure to ensure those political parties are operating ethically. It's also a transparency measure to ensure that, if people want to go and find out more, there is a clearinghouse of everything.

In terms of the teeth that you need to give the AEC to do that, you need to be able to give them the power to have that right, to have that ability to collect that information. Ultimately, the AEC needs dedicated capacity to maintain that digital literacy. They should not be taken by surprise when they see something after it's already hit the media, after it's already hit the public's eyes. We're not saying you need to give them the power to stop advertising, because that would be a huge impediment to democracy [inaudible]—

**Mr GILES:** Sorry, could you repeat that last bit please? There was a bit of interference then.

**Mr Singleton Norton:** You don't need to give the AEC the power to stop things before they go to market. I think that would be an impediment to democracy. But you need to give them the ability to witness and see these materials well before it's already gone out, already done the damage, already gone to people in a certain way.

**Mr MORTON:** I'm not so much convinced that the AEC needs to be a clearinghouse of political advertisements before they're made public, because that would create all sorts of issues to freedom of speech and political communication. I want to drill down a little bit more on what you see the AEC's role is here. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I understand that you don't see the AEC's role as fact checking or vetting information; you see the AEC's role as making sure that political material that is designed to influence voters is appropriately transparent in who is funding and producing that material, and you want the AEC to have the power to make sure that the material is authorised correctly in accordance with the Electoral Act. Is that correct? Is that where you see the difference?
Mr Singleton Norton: Yes, definitely. You don't want to have the AEC involved in the content of this material but more in ensuring that it's transparent as to who is manipulating the strings.

Mr MORTON: You mentioned in your recommendations requiring Facebook to respond to AEC inquiries within a set period of time. Again, using this example, this isn't in relation to what the advertisement is saying or claiming; it is in relation to the AEC ensuring there is appropriate transparency through the enforcement of the authorisation provisions in the Electoral Act—making sure that Facebook respond to the AEC inquiries where there may be an ad that isn't suitably authorised in accordance with the Electoral Act. Is that right?

Mr Singleton Norton: That's right, but there are examples where it may also involve the contents. We have used an example in our submission of ads that were placed in the lead-up to the same-sex postal vote. They broke the parliament's own recommendations in terms of content, the style and the way that people were allowed to engage in that debate. They took more than a month to be taken down. That was because the AEC did not have the power to compel Facebook to do so, and it required intervention from the Special Minister of State before it was even taken down. That ad being visible is way too much influence and flouting the rules that were set by the parliament. But we have to review what the mechanisms are and how we can compel social media giants, like Facebook, who own and operate these platforms for it. How can we regulate it if we don't have the power to actually enforce the rules?

Mr MORTON: I feel a little terrible for singling out Facebook; but should organisations, such as Facebook, have particularly responsibilities in this authorisation space for the material that is published on their sites to ensure compliance with the Electoral Act perhaps?

Mr Singleton Norton: No. The emphasis needs to be back on the people who are actually placing these ads. If we're talking about political parties, MPs or political operatives, that's where the code of conduct needs to sit.

Mr MORTON: Sorry, but what you're saying, though, is that if there is an ad that has been placed on Facebook that isn't in accordance with the Electoral Act, from a transparency and authorisation requirement, you're saying that those organisations, like Facebook, shouldn't have any requirements on them to make sure their political ads are in accordance with the Electoral Act?

Mr Singleton Norton: I'm saying, from a practical point of view, we need to ensure that those ads are taken down and that requires going directly to the platform. There needs to be a mechanism to ensure that it stops being published or it stops being sent out to the public. But, ultimately, the accountability has to come with the people who place those. That's where the actual emphasis on responsibility needs to lie.

Mr MORTON: I'm a little bit confused here. You're asking the platform to take responsibility for the taking down of ads that are not compliant with the Electoral Act, but you're not asking the platform to have some responsibility for ads that are published on their platforms that are not compliant with the Electoral Act. Wouldn't these platforms be more likely to take those down—even if it looks more timely, until ads are then compliant with the Electoral Act—if there was some requirement or penalty against them if they didn't?

Mr Singleton Norton: Yes. I see what you're saying. Ultimately, any platform needs to act on the direction of the regulator. It should be the AEC's job to decide whether or not an ad is actually compliant with the regulations that they set. They can then direct any platform, any publisher, to comply with that. We don't want to get to a situation where we give private companies—who are actually responsible for these huge platforms, and have the power to disseminate the information—the power to decide what is right and wrong.

Mr MORTON: I agree entirely.

Mr Singleton Norton: That's why I put the emphasis back on the people who place the ads and on giving the governing body, such as the AEC, the power to direct that.

Mr MORTON: Thank you.

Senator WATERS: Thanks, Mr Singleton Norton, for your evidence today and your submission. Can you tell us some Australian examples of the sort of conduct that you think we should be regulating to prohibit? What are some of the worst domestic examples of why we need some reform?

Mr Singleton Norton: We're actually a bit relieved that there aren't a lot of examples within an Australian context. As I mentioned before, some of the ads that were placed during the same-sex postal vote were a really good example of advertising that was very, very targeted to people, in an emotional way. It was designed to trigger homophobia and to trigger a no vote. It was very targeted to what, emotionally, could be response that is likely to vote no. That's a really good example. There are things we're seeing elsewhere around the world. We're seeing it predominantly in the US, where a lot of that targeting happens in the Midwest. The important thing is...
that there's no accountability of what happens to those ads or what happens to the people who actually are manipulating that system.

We do see political parties engaging in this sort of microtargeting. It's not to the level where it's false news and fake ads, but it is still pushing the boundaries. This is where you don't want to get into a space where you're trying to govern the ethics of what is a credible political message. On the one hand, you want to deliver a message that engages with people, is relevant to their interests and keeps them engaged with your political persuasion, whatever that is. You don't want to be in the place then where you're manipulating people to come around to your point of view. I actually think the debate needs to not happen in the space of what is an ethical act and what is an ethical way of engaging in politics. Ultimately, there needs to be more transparently and more accountability, so that people can see that happening and then they can be their own judge.

I mentioned before the example of open town halls, where everyone is in them room and everyone can hear what is being said. You might be able to turn around and say, 'That was a message for this kind of person. That is going to push them in that certain way, and that makes me feel this about that message.' That's fine. That's a good way to engage in that democracy. When we are talking about microtargeting and dark ads—and no-one can see that—there's none of that transparency and there's none of that watching of what's happening. The concern that we have is that the more we get into this splintered process of targeted messages to people in certain ways, the less accountability we have about how that's actually happening.

Senator WATERS: Do you know any examples of Australian political parties potentially abusing personal data for this sort of targeted political advertising?

Mr Singleton Norton: Again, unfortunately, we get into an ethical dilemma. At the moment, it is perfectly legal, in that political parties and MPs are exempt from the Privacy Act. If we want to talk about abusing data, there's an ethical abuse that's occurring there, in that they are retaining huge datasets of constituent information and then using them to target messages back to them for a political gain, be it re-election or a gain of support for a political issue or a policy. Legally, it's perfectly fine. That's where the parliament needs to actually assess that. The Privacy Act was written in 1988. The internet, in its form—the worldwide web—was not actually launched until about 1993. The point is that these acts were designed for an era in which we could never have envisaged this level of data and control. That is what we need to address here. There needs to be an updating of that and of the way we look at it, and there needs to be a definite updating of why we decided back then that political parties need to be exempt from the rules that they set for others.

Senator WATERS: Indeed. Look, that's all from me at this point, Chair. Thank you.

CHAIR: You talk about transparency with microtargeting. You use the example of town halls as a transparent way of political communication. I suppose a lot of political parties have used direct mail. For example, they send a letter going to a certain person, such as Mr and Mrs Smith who live at 39 Acacia Avenue. Using your analogy, that's also probably not transparent because that's direct, targeted communication to a voter, often with a personalised message. Isn't microtargeting just the evolution of that, in that it is also a private, targeted message to someone, but using a different platform?

Mr Singleton Norton: Yes, it is. But there are two factors that make hugely, incredibly more powerful. The first one is cost. Direct mail still costs. It is still a physical production and a physical engagement with Australia Post or whoever the mail carrier is. That means that you make up a cost-efficiency balance for how much that message can be targeted. You could try, but you can't possibly send a personalised letter to every one of the constituents who you are targeting and make it different for each one of them. That would be a huge amount of money to spend there. You make up the balance by saying, 'People in these areas will get that message, and people in this area will get that message.' With digital microtargeting, that cost barrier is reduced; it is so low that you can actually send out millions of them and spend the same amount of money targeting hugely, massively more amounts of people.

The second one is actually on the data you're using to target that message and whether you're actually getting that. So, again, with mail you're targeting a person based on the information that you have. When you're talking about digital targeting, you can mesh together data sets and build up a much more in-depth profile for the person that you're trying to target. So it is actually microtargeting now, whereas before I think it was, you're right, direct targeting, and you could get directly to people. Now you can find out the individual's information and then give them a message that's personal to them. So it's very different from the direct mail targeting that we've seen in the past, and the power that actually exists in being able to put that out there is hugely increased.

CHAIR: Is that a bad thing? My experience is that people complain they don't think politicians, in particular, understand them; they don't understand their issues. Isn't it a good thing that politicians and political parties are
able to communicate with people in terms of the issues that are of concern to an individual voter and target them in that way so as to bring them into the political process, rather than treating them as some generic subset of the community?

Mr Singleton Norton: Yes, I think there is an opportunity there, and that's why I started my opening statement by saying that the opportunity to engage in democracy is something we want to look at so we're able to use these tools to bring people in. The problem comes—and we're seeing this in countless examples, predominantly in the US—with the concept of information asymmetry. When you create microtargeted messages to a specific subset of people, you create hyper-echo chambers; you create something that just feeds itself. If you assume that a certain person is going to be predisposed to a message and you deliver that message, you're reinforcing that predisposition. You're not allowing that person to grow out of that bubble; you're just targeting them with what they want to hear.

CHAIR: Is that wrong? Aren't humans able to make decisions based on not just what they are getting from, say, someone who's targeting them but in terms of the entire community they live with and their families? Is what you've just said then a bad thing?

Mr Singleton Norton: As long as the transparency exists and they can get out of that bubble and other people can see into that bubble—and that's where we've got a problem. If you garner all your information from a couple of media sources and you never see the world and people don't see what you're reading, you'll never break out of that bubble. It's the same thing with microtargeting. The other thing is the power discrepancy. The people who are engaged in creating political messages are making a mass [inaudible]. They will be well educated, they will be well informed, they will be well read and they will have the opportunity and the privilege to engage outside of those. Not all voters and constituents have that privilege. If they receive a message from someone with a higher authority than them, they will have an assumption that it is true. Whether or not it's true—that's why I said we can put aside the ethics of that—we need to create a system for them to be able to question the truth. If they don't have the privilege and the power to be able to do that, they are being manipulated.

Mr MORTON: Senator Waters was asking you a question about examples of where Australian political parties had done this, and I'm thinking more and more about your evidence. I share the concern about people who are getting their information from echo chambers that are reinforcing their pre-existing prejudice and those individuals not understanding that they're within one of these echo chambers. Are Australian political parties the bigger issue here, or do you see it more as activist organisations who are engaging in this space?

Mr Singleton Norton: No, I think it's an example of where our democracy is flipping into this crevasse. That's why I was trying to find examples within the Australian system, because I actually don't think political parties are doing the wrong thing in this regard; I think they're at strong risk of doing so. On your question around whether activist groups are engaging in this: I don't think so. I think they're no more guilty than anyone else. The important thing is the distinction: you, as legislators, have power to legislate the rules for how you engage with the constituency; activist groups do not. And so—

Mr MORTON: I'll give you an example. Someone contacted me the other day and they said: 'This issue is getting huge; you've just got to look at your social media feed. Everyone's talking about live exports.' That's an example. My social media feed wasn't talking about live exports one bit. That person's social media feed and messages they were receiving were very much alive with that issue. So in that individual's mind this was the only and biggest issue affecting this nation at this point in time—which I think's an absolutely ridiculous suggestion, myself. Could it be that that person is subject to targeting—paid or unpaid—because of that issue and therefore is living in that echo chamber as well?

Mr Singleton Norton: Yes, but we could make the same argument for people who read certain media sources. If you never read anything from a range of different media sources you will receive a skewed view of the world.

Mr MORTON: I agree with you; I'm not disagreeing. But in that particular example—we're talking about social media—is that the case there? That they could be targeted by both paid and unpaid on that particular issue?

Mr Singleton Norton: They could be, yes.

Mr DICK: Following from Mr Morton: I want to ask about the practicalities of oversight. We've identified—or you've identified—some of the issues and some of the problems that we may be facing, particularly going into the next federal election. In one of your suggestions, you said:

Consider potential options to empower the AEC in the social media space.

Do you believe the AEC currently has enough resources? What would increasing resources look like in practical terms? Would it be an army of people waiting to get the complaints, so to speak? Or would it be people monitoring social media feeds? I'm just curious; we've identified—and Senator Waters identified—some practical
examples. Moving forward, how would this work practically? The 'how long is a piece of string' argument comes into this, with new platforms being developed all the time and new ways of reaching out to people through all sorts of new technology as well.

**Mr Singleton Norton:** Yes. I think you're right. There is a problem of resourcing. I think the AEC is definitely underresourced to be able to do this. In terms of what's needed in that area, I'd probably need the benefit of the Parliamentary Budget Office to actually figure out what that is. But I think there are some steps which can be taken in the meantime, and that includes that clearing house of materials which are already being produced—if you had that library—that archive—and that requirement to have it registered. It shouldn't be pre-published; I agree that there's a problem there of getting it as a clearinghouse and getting it as a check and balance before it goes public. It creates some ethical dilemmas. But even having an archive of this information as it's put out would allow the public to see it. It would allow the public to have at its disposal every piece of political material put out by a registered political party, and then we would have the court of public opinion as to whether it were ethical at the time.

That doesn't solve the problem of stopping it as it hits market, but it at least allows us to prosecute it post fact and to reflect on it. We can look back on it and ask: 'Was that okay? Who was it who put that out and how do we hold them accountable in the future?'

**Mr DICK:** I'll just jump in there for a second. I understand what you're saying. I actually think that political parties do have a high level of transparency at the moment through the internal processes we have and through a mass membership based organisation—all of those things. Particularly as the major parties are the parties for government, we're conscious of the fact that the lens is a lot stronger over us—in my opinion. I'm more interested in individuals, Independents and minor coalitions of people coming together. For example, if there were an action group set up in my electorate challenging me and talking about issues—whether those be live export, the environment or money in politics; all sorts of things—how would you keep track of who those groups were? They're not going to be registered political parties; they're not going to be registered at all, probably. They're just a group of citizens. Would it apply to those people as well?

**Mr Singleton Norton:** It raises a good question about who a political operative is, and I know the parliament did debate this just recently in the political interference laws. I think that is a very good question: who are the people behind these practices? You could conceive of an area where you get registered political parties or registered political operatives just getting others to do their work for them to avoid any regulatory oversite, and that's something we want to avoid.

It has to come from a cultural change. It has to come from where you set the bar, as to how we want to engage in political discourse. That will allow the public to say, 'We're not okay with these practices over here, because we've seen how it can work ethically over here.' In terms of whether major political parties need to be held to the same standard I think they definitely do, because of the power dynamics, if a larger political party has more power and more money to throw at these sorts of campaigns. That means they have, ultimately, more influence. I go back to this idea of setting the tone from the top.

**CHAIR:** As there are no other questions, thank you for your appearance here today. I don't think you've been asked to provide any further evidence on notice, but, if you have been, please provide it by 26 November. Thank you very much.
While the majority of Australians are concerned about political misinformation, not many report actually encountering it. Australians also have a poor understanding of the news environment. Importantly, our data shows that people with low media literacy are less able to detect fake news. Though our submission does not include evidence of foreign interference in the 2016 federal election, it does offer contemporary evidence of activity by people with low media literacy. Importantly, our data shows that Australians also have a poor understanding of the news environment. Our survey in 2019 will examine this increasing trend in more depth.
of China are able to avail themselves of often would infringe upon our standards and beliefs about the practices of free speech.

There are two broad manners in which foreign influence campaigns operate. To paraphrase Peter Mattis, they focus either on using agents of influence—that is, using persons or entities to directly influence the attitudes and behaviours of a particular population—or on relying upon what they call 'influential agents', who would indirectly act upon a target population by trying to shape their attitudes and eventually their behaviours to act in a way that's favourable to the foreign country. Russia has generally taken a longer-term perspective in relation to Australia, and its activities should be understood in relation to its strategic interests regarding Australia: it would likely welcome a weakening of the Five Eyes alliance over time and in preparation for carrying out future activities should an occasion arise. In fact, James Clapper, who was the Director of National Intelligence during Obama's administration, noted in a speech he gave last April that in 2012 Russia used that election as a testing ground to develop their hacking techniques which they used so successfully in 2016.

There are four main points that I would like to make regarding Russia. The first is that, in the past, according to tweets that have been released by Twitter—and they have identified these as belonging to an organised influence occupation from the Internet Research Agency—they have advocated strongly on behalf of Julian Assange, asking for Australia's intercession regarding his cause to help free him, a point which perhaps will become more salient in the near future, as reporting last week has indicated that he is currently under sealed indictment in the United States.

Second, I have seen little evidence on concerted efforts on behalf of Russia to influence the outcome of electoral contests in Australia. I base this assessment off of not only looking through the tweets that reference Australia that Twitter itself has released but also looking at activities online and the use of Russia Today, Sputnik and the other so-called 'white propaganda' outlets in the lead-up to the 2018 by-elections. However, they do seem interested nonetheless in amplifying social divisions—in particular, amplifying distinctions between Muslims and the rest of the Australian population. They emphasise links to terrorism extensively. These efforts to reinforce fears and anxieties make it easier to move persons to new political identifications by convincing them that they no longer should be able to trust the institutions and political figures which have kept them safe in the past.

Third, although misinformation and fake news have become particularly problematic in the era of digitally networked communication, the truth or falsity of a statement is often incidental to its utility in influence operations. They use conjectures, highly stylised framings, evaluative criteria which may be deemed inappropriate from a perspective of expertise, selectively leaked materials and other tactics which involve statements which may be true in and of themselves or at least not demonstrably false. For this reason and also because they appeal to fears and anxieties, fact-checking would likely be an inadequate response to dealing with these problems in the future.

Finally, giving the multipronged approach of adversaries in terms of carrying out influence operations, combating foreign influence likely requires a whole-of-government or even a whole-of-society approach. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

**CHAIR:** Thank you. If there are no other opening statements, I will hand to you, Mr Giles, and then to Mr Morton.

**Mr Giles:** Thank you for your submission and your evidence today. I've got lots of questions, but I will only use a couple up. We may have an opportunity to come back. Perhaps I should say that your closing remark, Dr Jensen, is something we are conscious of. I think we across this committee appreciate that our remit is one part of a broader series of governmental responsibilities in this realm. First, I want to understand whether it's a fair reading of your work to say that, to the extent that we've been able to analyse Russian influence or foreign influence on social media manipulation through Twitter at least, the intent, so far as we are able to ascertain it, is not about shaping direct political outcome but undermining trust and confidence in political institutions.

**Dr Jensen:** I think that's fair to say.

**Mr Giles:** If that is the case, obviously it's concerning at a couple of levels. First, it appears to me that a focus narrowly on social media will not address that concern. Second, as you go on to say, simply looking at the accuracy or otherwise of individual statements as matters of fact won't address the purpose. That's fair, isn't it?

**Dr Jensen:** Yes, and I will add one more thing. In my analysis of the Twitter data that's been associated with the Internet Research Agency, the one day in which they were most substantially active—indeed, about one out of 30 of all their tweets over the last six years came this one day—was 8 February 2017, in which they participated in a hashtag game called #MakeTVShowsAustralian. They demonstrated an ability to use Australian slang terms in participating in this, and that's a tactic that is commonly associated with traditional spycraft practices, where
you would see in what ways you can capture an audience based on non-political grounds and then slowly move them to adopt political positions over time. In fact, even within that game I saw experimentation where they would move from that game to then making statements about Muslims being dangerous.

**Mr GILES:** The is one last thing I wouldn't mind drawing out your evidence a little more on. If you could talk at slightly greater length, with the forbearance of the chair and my colleagues, about this notion about fomenting dissent, particularly through using social media to amplify anxieties and create tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians.

**Dr Jensen:** They will seize upon any evidence they can find. One of the common tactics is that they will look for anybody on Twitter who makes these types of statements. They will retweet it. Sometimes they will then use that as a basis for which an article may appear in Russia Today or some other grey media source, so there is a process of information laundering that goes on. Then they retweet that too, so that builds a sense there is a growing body of belief within society that believes that particular statement. By moving across platforms—it's not just limited social media. It's that combination of multiple different platforms that enables them to create the illusion of credibility for certain claims.

**Mr GILES:** So it is this process of information laundering within social media but more broadly that is being used to build division and ferment anxiety in the Australian community?

**Dr Jensen:** Information laundering is one tactic to do that, yes. They can use that with a lot of different topics as well, but, from what I have seen, emphasising this anxiety about the Muslim population seems to be one of the sites in which they are particularly engaged.

**Mr GILES:** It's something that's of great concern to me, but I might give Mr Morton an opportunity.

**Mr MORTON:** You might have heard my questions to the previous witness in relation to an encounter I had with a constituent who shared with me their concern that everyone on social media was talking about the issue of live export, that it was the only thing that was important at this point in time, and that they wanted particular action taken on that issue, yet it wasn't an issue that was appearing hotly on my social media. The last witness gave evidence that the messaging to those individuals could have been highly targeted, both paid and unpaid. Would you share that view?

**Dr Jensen:** Yes.

**Mr MORTON:** What effect do you see these hyper echo chambers having on our democracy?

**Dr Jensen:** There are questions about the extent to which echo chambers persist across society. Actually, my colleagues have done some more targeted work on the question about echo chambers, but, in a localised scale, it can for some people really emphasise a certain outlook and it can radicalise a particular approach to thinking about the world. We talk about this with respect to the process of radicalisation online when it comes to dealing with terrorists and recruitment by terrorist organisations overseas, but these are the same communication practices that can be used by both domestic and foreign agents, state and non-state, to radicalise people's views about any particular topic.

**Mr MORTON:** I'm going to use an example which is not a political one, but it's something that has occurred to me in recent months. Given your expertise, I think that there are probably some political parallels that we can draw. My father is selling a property on the New South Wales Central Coast where I grew up. I therefore have followed sites that talk about property issues over the last few months. I visited realestate.com and Domain. I've paid particular attention to stories that talk about the issue of property prices. As a result of that, every time I open up any website, I am being dealt very negative stories about the issue of property prices. I then wonder: is everybody seeing the same great level of stories about property prices as I am, and how do I work out what everyone else is saying? Do I have to go to an internet cafe to work that out? I will probably find out something completely different, given whatever the last user had a look at. In an economic sense, could we find ourselves dealing with a huge crash of confidence in property prices leading to a downturn in the property market as a result of those people who are showing interest in property being fed more and more stories about property prices? And, because reporting on those issues is negative at the moment, is that therefore a self-fulfilling prophecy?

**Dr Park:** Yes, there are these very high levels of concern regarding filter bubbles or echo chambers, and, obviously, social media platforms or digital platforms can encourage that environment. But, contrary to that, our evidence shows, in terms of news consumption, at least, people's use of social media increases the exposure to a more diverse range of ideas, news and information. But we have to be cautious here in concluding that it's okay, because there are many things involved in news exposure and consumption. One is algorithms, another is the networks you are connected to, like your friends and families on Facebook and social media, and there is the third dimension, which, in traditional media studies, is called selective exposure. People are exposed to many different
ideas, but it's up them to choose what news to actually consume and understand and engage in, and a lot of times it's the political beliefs or values that drive that selective exposure. The fourth dimension that is so important in this environment is social endorsement, which is the interaction with other people and the content while they're online and that has proven—at least in our data—that the more people engage online by commenting, liking or sharing, the more they're likely to be exposed to more diverse opinion. So there are many different factors that come into play. That's why some people find they're in filter bubbles or there are lots of anecdotes of filter bubbles, whereas some studies suggest the opposite. I think it's a much more complex picture than saying that everyone is in echo chambers.

Dr Fisher: Getting back to your specific example about real estate, I think we could jump to the conclusion that there's some campaign or some misinformation campaign—

Mr Morton: I'm not suggesting that it's being driven by any—

Dr Fisher: but I think it's probably the algorithm. They know that you're interested in real estate, so they're showing you lots of real estate stories. Your next-door neighbour is probably not getting those stories. You can't assume that it's a targeted campaign. You can, of course, start a misinformation campaign—which is much more Mathieu's area—using bots and all sorts of things to run campaigns, but, I think you have to assume, in this instance, that your personal news story selection is—

Mr Morton: No, no. I want to be very clear. I'm not suggesting that there's a targeted or a malicious campaign in relation to property prices. What I'm suggesting is that, because an individual's news media is highly targeted now, an individual who is looking at property prices could see a weight of news stories in relation to that issue, which would drive down their confidence on property prices, more because of their previous interest, that a person who has not been showing interest in that area wouldn't be seeing.

Dr Fisher: Given that the bulk of news stories tend to be negative—yes.

Mr Morton: Finally on this issue, I understand that my newsfeed is targeted to suit my interests. I would hope it is anyway, because I can't imagine everyone else being as interested in the stories that I am, but do you have any analysis or research on the understanding of this in the Australian public? Do the majority of Australians understand that their newsfeed, whether it be on news.com or the Sydney Morning Herald or The Age, is targeted to suit their interests or are people blissfully unaware?

Dr Park: We don't have direct evidence of that, but we do have evidence that Australians have very low awareness of how news is delivered to them, in terms of algorithms. We asked questions in the survey to measure media literacy, and one of them was about the Facebook algorithm. A surprisingly low number of Australians actually got that question correct. So, in terms of overall literacy—globally as well—people are not very knowledgeable of algorithms or these platforms that provide information to their Facebook page or their social media page, and that is of concern.

Senator Waters: Thank you to the witnesses; thank you for your excellent submission. Can you tell us what's being done overseas to counter fake news? You've mentioned media literacy in your submission, but I think one of the earlier witnesses was talking about an ethical code of practice. What are your thoughts on that and are there any other sorts of intervention possibly aimed at tech and media companies themselves or at regulators? What do you think is being done overseas and what do you think we could usefully do here in Australia?

Dr O'Neil: There are a range of responses that have been put forward. If you're just talking about legislative solutions, there was legislation passed in France in early July 2018. That was against fake news, but it was quite controversial because it raised the question of what is fake news and how you distinguish fake news from opinion, freedom of speech issues and all that sort of stuff. So it was quite controversial. There have been some other solutions put forward, and you can find a compendium on the Poynter research organisation website. I can give you the information for that if you like.

Senator Waters: Yes, please.

Dr O'Neil: It is poynter.org/news/guide-anti-misinformation-actions-around-world.

Senator Waters: Lovely, thank you.

Dr O'Neil: That looks at all the initiatives that have been passed. Apart from that, there are a number of educational and technological fixes that have been put forward by different organisations. I don't know if you're interested in those. I just mentioned the legislation for reasons of time.

Chair: We're happy to push on for a little bit longer. I think we're all finding this quite interesting.
Senator WATERS: Yes. Please elaborate on which of those you think are the most effective and which could work here in Australia.

Dr O’Neill: There are a number of different actors. There's education, there's journalism and there's technology. I can just give you a few examples. First Draft, led by digital expert Claire Wardle, is a program of the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University. The aim is to use research based methods to fight myths and disinformation online and provide practical and ethical guidelines on how to find, verify and publish content sourced from the social web. A journalist called Steve Brill developed a news-ranking system called NewsGuard which rates the quality of news sources using a traffic light coding. There are a number of fixes overlapping between education and technology. The Center for Complex Networks and Systems Research at Indiana has released Fakey, a mobile news literacy game which simulates a typical social media news feed, with a mix of news articles from mainstream and low-credibility sources. You get more points for sharing news from reliable sources. I think that's quite useful for kids. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation had a Media Literacy Week from 10 September to 16 September, with a range of initiatives. We had a session at the University of Canberra with some high school teachers. We had a Korean delegation who were interested in media literacy, and we had a session there. What was interesting to me was that media literacy by itself is not enough. What people need is historical knowledge of what's true and what's false and what's happened in the past. If you just have little tools about whether this looks credible or not, it's not really enough. It's a concerted effort in the education space.

In terms of journalism, the Mass Communication Research Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison published a comprehensive account of the IRA, the Internet Research Agency: The Twitter exploit: how Russian propaganda infiltrated US news. They searched 33 major media outlets during and after the 2016 election, and they found 32 outlets with at least one story that embedded a tweet from IRA accounts. That's a good example of how Russian propaganda found its way into mainstream news. I'm not sure how much detail you want. I have some other examples of research, including some research about troll farms in the Philippines, from the University of Massachusetts. That's called Architects of networked disinformation: behind the scenes of troll accounts and fake news production in the Philippines. There have been some initiatives by some newspapers. For example, a progressive newspaper in the United States called Mother Jones proposes to recruit audiences in a crowdsourcing effort to spot and denounce fake news.

Finally, in terms of technology, the French newspaper Le Monde launched its Decodex initiative in 2017. This comprises a site offering tips on how to evaluate information reliability, a Firefox or Chrome browser plug-in which is meant to indicate whether a site is trustworthy or not, and a virtual assistant for Facebook Messenger. The Center for Complex Networks and Systems Research at Indiana also has Hoaxy, a system that tracks and visualises the spread of content from low-credibility sources. Facebook has provided its own solution, algorithmically identifying misinformation and reducing its visibility on users' feeds. But, once again, with Facebook the problem is transparency. We don't really know how it works, as opposed to these initiatives from universities, which are more transparent.

In terms of what the government could do, if you're interested, I have some ideas. As my colleague Mike Jensen said, it's not always about directly influencing people's opinions; it's about sowing divisions. Identification of key areas which are likely to be targeted by hostile strategic actors in order to increase social divisions would include zones of interracial or interreligious tension or any other topic where strong, contrasting opinions are held. This is where you have to think a little bit about the psychology of belief—why people believe things. Governments must repeat key facts in ways that make them easy to be processed. The truth should be rendered as fluent and familiar as possible. Because truth is often more complex than falsehood, government must strive for clarity and repetition and must avoid reiterating incorrect assertions. Use credible third-party endorsements to rebut or support claims, not just political players. According to the research in the US, which is much more polarised, obviously, than Australia, it is more effective in the US to have a source with a stake in the information oppose it. For example, misinformation that skews to the Right be better countered by right-wing politicians than by non-partisan organisations.

Senator WATERS: Coming back to the regulatory space, though—I don't want to cut you off because I'm finding these examples very helpful. What is your suggestion for how our Australian parliament could tackle these issues in a fair manner that doesn't silence legitimate political communication but that enables people to be able to rely more on the veracity and the truthfulness of the information they receive?

Dr O’Neill: It could be a signalling system. If an agency identifies incorrect information, it could stamp it as false or a red flag, or something like that. That could be a way to deal with it. Factually incorrect.

Mr MORTON: How do you determine what is factually correct in politics?
Dr O'Neil: I don't know. Let's say, for example, a made-up story that has no basis in fact spreads on social media. I'm not saying this is on the part of politicians. The key problem is that people are not exposed to attitude-challenging content. Nothing challenges their beliefs. If something which is not true fits within their world view, they are more likely to believe it. As I said, the problem is if you repeat it, if you say, 'That's not true', that just reinforces it, really.

Mr Morton: Sorry, Senator.

Senator Waters: No, that was a useful clarification. Carry on. If there are any other regulatory reform suggestions you've got, we would be very grateful to hear them.

Dr O'Neil: I think the great strength of democracy is that you can acknowledge things. Authoritarian countries don't acknowledge tensions; they sweep them under the carpet. If you acknowledge tensions, if you acknowledge history, acknowledge the past, acknowledge racial divisions and say this is what's going on, we can build on that, rather than try to smooth things over, and do it in an honest way. I think that might be better than trying to not deal with things. I think my colleagues might have other suggestions. I've been talking a long time.

Mr Dick: Just one more question before we wrap up, Chair. In the evidence you've given us the impact of the social media where people get their news from, which is great. Can you explain the decline in the use of Facebook for news consumption? Is that as a result of the other platforms that are coming forward? I note you speak about WhatsApp. WhatsApp's not a news source; obviously it's a communication source. Could you comment on those two briefly?

Dr Park: Facebook use has probably plateaued. It's the highest among all social media globally. But after many incidences, like Cambridge Analytica, globally news consumers have been turning away from Facebook. Young people especially are now no longer using Facebook; they are using other platforms because there are new platforms like Snapchat, Messenger and Instagram. So, in general, it's the competition in platforms. But in terms of news, people are turning away from Facebook because of all these scandals, and they're turning to private messaging apps like WhatsApp. Facebook Messenger is still rising even though Facebook is declining. They choose more closed platforms to share and consume news with known people. That's also a global trend. In Australia that is also an increasing trend. In Australia social media use for news in general is very high compared to other countries, especially Messenger apps and even Snapchat are increasingly used for news consumption and sharing.

Mr Dick: So when they are sharing it is more internal rather than external information sources?

Dr Park: No. They could send links and from other sources. It's just that they prefer to share news within a closed environment with friends.

Chair: Dr Jensen, I have a question. You mentioned in your opening statement that, I think, 30 countries have the capability, if I heard correctly, in terms of what I suppose you would call the ability to engage in what Russia is engaging in at the moment. Is it a close fight? Is Russia just in front or is Russia massively in front and there are 29 countries way behind? I read some media, for example in terms of what China is trying to do in this space. Have we seen any evidence of Chinese interference?

Dr Jensen: I have not found any significant evidence of Chinese interference in trying to sway the outcome of an election. One of my colleagues from Taiwan informed me that, for example, there is evidence that within some certain WeChat pages in Australia during the last electoral campaign in 2016 there were pieces that were written by influential members of the Chinese diaspora in Australia advocating very strongly for a vote for Labor. But beyond those sorts of activities that are targeting the diaspora populations, I have seen less of an effort to try to sway Australians outside of those communities to take any particular political positions on domestic Australian politics.

Chair: This is probably not relevant to the inquiry but I will ask it anyway. There's been a lot in the media lately about the influence in the South Pacific and, obviously, I know the social media market there is growing. It's not widespread. In terms of your research have you picked up anything in terms of, say, Russian influence in the South Pacific, especially from the sort of destabilisation aspect of what happens there from their strategy?

Dr Jensen: I haven't seen anything yet with regard to that. That may change. It's something to keep an eye out for. Just to follow-up, one aspect of the Chinese influence is that there are reports that the PRC does have capabilities to engage in a very similar style campaign as we saw in the US in 2016. So this is something that just because we haven't seen it yet doesn't mean it wouldn't happen. I'd hope that the proper authorities, in particular ASD for example, might be involved in monitoring for these sorts of activities across not only social media platforms but other information sources to find evidence of coordinated activities to shape opinions and behaviours.
CHAIR: I think we're all done. Thank you very much for your appearance here today. Dr O'Neil, in terms of the information you did provide, if you think of anything else could you provide that on notice to the secretariat by 26 November? That would be very good. The same to you, Dr Jensen, if there is anything else you think is relevant—all of you actually but those two in particular, please. Thank you.

Proceedings suspended from 10:14 to 11:00
ZAPPONE, Mr Chris, Private capacity

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

ACTING CHAIR (Mr Giles): Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to provide evidence under oath, I wish to advise that this is a formal proceeding of the parliament. Giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of parliament. These proceedings are being broadcast and recorded by Hansard. I now invite you to make an opening statement, and the committee will then proceed to questions. We have copies of your submission.

Mr Zappone: Thank you for the opportunity to testify to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters on the topic of cyberinterference. Australia, as an open, English-speaking society, is vulnerable to social media influence campaigns, both domestic and foreign. Campaigns, arguments and images that work in other Anglophile nations are likely to get traction here, and vice versa. As we've seen, memes containing white nationalist slogans have passed into Australia and found an audience. This information does as well. In this online environment, special care should be taken to ensure high-quality political discourse for the nation. That means ensuring that the content of the political conversation is factual and not simply anecdotal or emotional.

Part of the challenge today is that the internet in general, and social media in particular, has effectively eliminated news cycles. Consequently, the public's ability to contextualise political information is reduced. In the onslaught of information, the human mind continues to seek patterns of meaning, and it finds them. However, this search for patterns of meaning makes the public more susceptible to embracing disinformation and propaganda. If the last two years have shown anything, it's not simply that the challenge of social media interference has blindsided open democracies reliant on the free exchange of ideas; it has also shown that social media companies themselves are woefully unprepared for the challenge. That being the case, governments should perhaps work to shape citizens' expectations and standards about the role of social media in a democracy. They should seek at every point to give the public options outside of social media for serious political discussion and information.

Democracy does not thrive in a perpetual state of emergency, yet on social media there is a perpetual sense of emergency, in which all events and issues demand a near immediate resolution. This can cripple reasoned debate. Interference campaigns can sometimes exploit a sense of emergency or crisis in order to spread viral disinformation. Perhaps the goal for an open democracy in the absence of a true emergency should be to maintain a calm and somewhat reasonable national political debate. Moreover, efforts should be made to ensure that the quality of speech going into legislation should be free of overt disinformation, propaganda and anecdotal thinking, which are the hallmarks of influence campaigns. All of these efforts will help ensure the nation can better avoid succumbing to online influence campaigns waged from near or afar in the years to come. With that, I'm happy to take your questions.

ACTING CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Zappone. You've obviously touched, and this inquiry touches specifically on social media, but I know that you are the foreign news editor of The Age. It seems to me that we can't look in isolation at social media. Have you got any reflections on how mainstream news media can play a role here?

Mr Zappone: A role in preventing the social media campaigns, or just the way that they function together?

ACTING CHAIR: The way that they function together. We heard some interesting evidence from the previous witnesses—I'm not sure whether you were party to that—in which it was suggested to us that, effectively, much of the manipulation that is foreign in nature is not directed at boosting specific electoral outcomes but, rather, at causing social cohesion to fray and building distrust in institutions. Particularly on the second one, the role of traditional media is obviously at least as important as social media.

Mr Zappone: Yes. That is my experience as well. As you know, the traditional role of media is to hold power to account. The issue arises if they are continually asking questions but not with the end goal of reform, but, rather, simply to ask questions. That can feed into the growing distrust between the population—the citizens—and the leaders of that country. The traditional media has a role in that. They have to be able to discern when a story is actually helping to clarify a matter for the public, or it's actually helping to just break down trust between the public and the leaders in the society.

ACTING CHAIR: You encourage us to look at media literacy. Obviously that's specifically focused on some of the issues around how social media is consumed, particularly the concerns about the algorithms through which news feeds are personalised and generated. But, as I understand the breadth of your critique, it isn't just directed at social media in terms of the democratic concerns your submission outlines.

Mr Zappone: Definitely not. Social media is one factor, and it is one of the technological changes that we've seen, but, in order for an interference campaign to work, it's working typically across many different spectrums.
It's working with traditional media, to shape perceptions there and to encourage certain stories. It's happening on a many-to-many basis—that would be social media and that would be the technical means to drive up interest in certain topics among the masses, essentially. But it could also happen at a diplomatic level, where statements are made from one country to another and those are interpreted in a certain way. So, it truly is multidimensional.

**ACTING CHAIR:** This leads me to part of your submission where you talk about the extent to which social media bots may have targeted Australia. Your focus, to pick up on what you were saying, is on the peddling of myths and conspiracy theories. You raise concerns about alt-Right groups being involved. Can you expand on that a bit.

**Mr Zappone:** With the alt-Right, they're a far Right, ethno-nationalist sort of group. It's an informal term and it takes in many different small groups. What they're very good at, and what makes them different to traditional white nationalist groups, is that they are aware of their public image and the perception of them. Overseas, in the United States and Europe, we've seen that they've been able to garner quite a bit of attention and take advantage of it by exploiting and shaping the public perception around issues important to them—for example, immigration. Arguably, they have changed the debate around immigration, by making it something that seems like an emergency, rather than something that can be debated rationally. One of the features, particularly of the alt-Right overseas, is that they have used social media to amplify their voice. Their actual on-the-ground human numbers may not be that great—it's the same here in Australia—but they have a pretty good track record with their ability to launder that message into more mainstream channels. They take something like immigration, where most people have a feeling about it, and they amplify the worst aspects of it. It becomes very emotionalised, and that travels very quickly over social media. That's something that editors and newsrooms are not immune to either. They know that if it's doing very well on social media that it has resonance with the public. It's hard to tell how much resonance it has, but in the daily schedule of a newsroom they have to make a decision and prioritise what they are going to write about. Often that can help nudge it up the scale. In 2016, before the social media companies were aware of how their search terms were being gamed, these alt-Right groups had the ability to basically push around hashtags until they started to trend, and then they would get picked up by the monitors of the trending topics of the social media companies—which, again, raised them on the priority list of news items to cover.

**ACTING CHAIR:** This is the example of the South African genocide conspiracy theory. Is that right?

**Mr Zappone:** That's right. That is a conspiracy theory that's been around for decades, but it's taken on this new life with far-Right ethno-nationalist groups bouncing it around on the internet. We've seen here in Australia how it's gained traction. In some cases Australians are responding to what they believe is happening in South Africa, but then, for example, US President Donald Trump would retweet what he'd seen being published about South Africa. So, it's not an up-down thing, it's not a hierarchy; it's much more lateral, and these memes or these images live across many different subcultures online and then get amplified. Once there's an opportunity to amplify them more, a certain group will take that opportunity and the next thing you know it becomes more of a mainstream topic.

**Mr Morton:** In your submission you say:
Not so long ago, the notion of learning something "on the internet" rather than traditional, fact-checked media, carried a stigma.
You were making the point that that's changed. I'm interested in this notion of traditional fact-checked media. How is that the case? How is traditional media fact checked?

**Mr Zappone:** In a newsroom it's not uncommon for an editor to ask for a particular story or ask a reporter to look into a particular story, and then it's not uncommon for the reporter to come back and say, 'Well, I've checked the facts; I've made calls to my sources, and it's just not happening'—this thing that we think is happening is just not happening. Many years ago I worked in a newsroom in financial news and an editor wanted to find a story on a 40-year mortgage, and he just could not find one. So the reporter spent all day calling around and it just didn't exist; this was something that somebody was talking about but it didn't actually exist. Because it didn't exist, the media outlet could not in good faith write about it. But online, you don't have that filter. Online, if something is written and it becomes popular, it acquires a momentum on its own.

**Mr Morton:** So, you weren't referring to an external fact-checking body—external to the journalist or to the media organisation?

**Mr Zappone:** No.
Mr Morton: Suggestions have been raised that there should be such a body, such as the AEC or other agencies—parliamentary libraries and others—checking facts. The only thing I can think of is something similar to the ABC and RMIT fact-check arrangements. Do you see those arrangements playing a role in our democracy?

Mr Zappone: I do—although I think that in order for them to really work there has to be the desire to have truthful information in the first place. The one problem that I see with them is that online, because everything on social media is opt-in—you choose what sources to follow—if you're not interested in knowing an accurate account of some event then you won't necessarily have the will to go to a fact-checking site to find out what is actually true. That I think is one of the issues—and there might be a role for the government in this—to really develop the importance and the value of truth seeking in public matters. As it stands right now, it's fairly spotty. You have this high-quality area of the media, and then you have a lower-quality area of the media and then the broader social media, and then you get into platforms such as reddit, where it's basically non-stop info conspiracy, essentially. A lot of it is divorced from facts, yet it is incredibly popular, it's very easy to share and it takes on this life of its own.

Mr Morton: But you're not suggesting a fact-checking entity that would preapprove or perhaps work in conjunction with the AEC before political ads were authorised for publication?

Mr Zappone: That could be a possibility. I have not written about that myself, but I have looked into the idea of a fact-checking body within the Parliamentary Library looking at information that's coming into the discussion in parliament to ensure that the discussion there stays at a high quality, basically, so that we don't have a situation where poor information can make its way into parliament and start to distort the decision-making process there. The reason it's limited to one body is that we live in a time now where there's very little scarcity to the published word or to the broadcast word. This is very different from 30 or 40 years ago, and it's because of the internet. Because of this, it might be hard to try to fact-check across very broad areas; rather, it might make more sense to narrow it down to one area where you're going to make a concerted effort to keep the quality of information very high and then look for the results there. If you can ensure that you can have a high-quality conversation about politics going on in a country then you can have a much better outcome. And it can also help parliaments and deliberative bodies avoid responding to things that are essentially sensations that are happening on social media rather than verifiable, evidence-based events that can be measured—

Mr Morton: What's your view of the product provided by the ABC and RMIT as a fact-checking entity or unit? Are you familiar with it?

Mr Zappone: Yes, I am. I've had a good experience with them. I think they do a good job, without a doubt. I think the issue is more: how wide a net are we trying to cast? We're in a situation where basically, because of social media, everyone is a broadcaster; everyone is a publisher themselves. Does it make sense to try to be across everything or does it make sense to narrow that focus to critical areas for democracy? Then, if they have success, that might be something that could be replicated across other institutions or become a standard that's embraced by other institutions, besides just one.

Mr Morton: Casting our minds back to the 2016 federal election, which we're inquiring into, there was a significant issue of fake news from the Australian Labor Party that was repeated a number of times on social media—I've got the attention of my colleagues now—by members and candidates of the Australian Labor Party. It was the 'Mediscare' campaign, a very deliberately misleading campaign which was proven by the ABC—

Acting Chair: Mr Morton.

Mr Morton: Yes, Deputy Chair?

Acting Chair: I think you can put the material to the witness fairly.

Mr Morton: It was proven by the ABC's fact-checker as being misleading. Should there have been some action taken against those members of the Labor Party for repeating and distributing that information that was found to be misleading by the fact-checking organisation that you've commented about? Would you see, in the future, that we should set up a process that would take action in relation to information that has been determined to be misleading by fact-checking organisations?

Mr Zappone: If anybody in an elected position is actively pushing up misinformation or disinformation, I think it's very problematic. But the other side is that, because of our traditions in a liberal democracy, we also worry about having the government policing what people can say, especially when it comes down to matters of opinion. The one thing I would suggest is, if there were disciplinary action taken, is that it be done with a light touch, maybe to establish the precedent and to establish the culture around information rather than trying to police everything. The idea is that we learn that this is the culture that we expect around the political discussion, rather than it becoming an annual event where certain members say X or Y and then they're called up and sanctioned or
whatever. The idea is: we want to keep it fluid. We don't want to make it something that itself goes down a legalistic rabbit hole.

**Mr Morton:** And we've seen even recently, in the last few months, the ABC's and the RMIT University's Fact Check organisation call out a misleading campaign in relation to claims of aged-care funding cuts, which have been proven by the fact-checker not to be correct. But the claim continues to be prosecuted, both in the mainstream media and online, by members of parliament, political candidates and political parties.

**Mr Dick:** Can I just come in there, Chair? I'm always perplexed, particularly, when members of this government attack freedom of speech on one hand and then say that we need more freedom of speech—

**Mr Morton:** I'm not—

**Mr Dick:** Particularly when—

**Mr Morton:** Deputy Chair, I think I might be being misrepresented in relation to freedom of speech.

**Mr Dick:** I didn't mention you by name.

**Mr Morton:** I think you were alluding to me—

**Mr Dick:** Oh no, I said 'members of the government'.

**Acting Chair:** Well, let's hear the question and then we can—

**Mr Dick:** Obviously, whether it be a cut or a funding reallocation—and we saw the debacle last week about the government trying to cut funding for Foodbank and then having to scramble to reinstate that funding, but it wasn't a reinstatement, it was a reallocation, but it was extra funding; anyway, normal dysfunction within the government—where do you draw the line in terms of what freedom of speech is? What is, perhaps, an attack on policy of the day and the language used versus the so-called facts? If we're not going to have a body or institution—like empowering the AEC, for example, with an army full of people monitoring comment or content—is it as simple as going back to education and a cultural change with the way information is taught through university or through curriculum based journalism and all that sort of stuff? Is it as simple as having a curriculum based approach in education when kids are learning about investigative journalism and that in Australia we have high standards? Is that another approach we could look at?

**Mr Zappone:** I think that education, without a doubt, is a crucial, fundamental plank of this effort. The only issue is that we probably don't want to wait 18 years for these students to matriculate into their adult life to be able to bring these guys with them. But the value element is incredibly important because the value element will allow them to make the right decision no matter the technology and no matter the issue. It's the values.

But as far as getting into the freedom of speech debate: in some of my studies I've run across a political philosopher from the 1950s in the US who made this distinction. They were having this issue then with the communist infiltration and communist propaganda at the time. He made this distinction, which I think has a lot of resonance for the world that we find today. His name was Sidney Hook. He said that the difference should be between heresy and conspiracy. We're an open democracy; we're not afraid of ideas. People can say radical things and they can say unpopular things; that is not punishable. That's not within our tradition. It's when there is a conspiracy to put out information that is false and to push it out in a way that is trying to achieve this effect of crippling the system as a whole.

I think that you can possibly narrow that down even to the domestic political context, where if somebody is saying something that is radical, unpopular or heretical that's one thing. That's politics; that's just the nature of the system. But if you find that a certain party or group of politicians are relying on a consistent pattern of misinformation, and if it costs money and it takes coordination then that might be a different matter. That might be a place where the state comes in and there's some sort of sanction or penalty. Or if it's clear that there's an actual coordinated effort to have this effect on the political sphere by using information in this coordinated and conspiratorial fashion, essentially.

**Mr Dick:** Right. I just think we need to be very careful about what freedom of speech is and what content is, whether it be a Medicare issue about the government not lifting the indexation on the freeze and whether that's seen—the language is critical. I wouldn't want us to be in the position where the government of the day would be able to set the criteria for what is allowed and what isn't allowed. In my opinion, freedom of speech could then be under threat. I'll leave it at that, thanks.

**Chair:** I share your concerns.

**Senator Waters:** Thank you very much for your evidence today, Mr Zappone. I just want to take you to your suggestion for a simplified gazette with political parties' views on issues, which you suggested the AEC could be commissioned to produce. I think that's an excellent idea, personally. I want to get your views on
whether or not you think that the ABC's Vote Compass, which is effectively a form of a simplified gazette, as you suggest—do you have any views on how well you think that's been working and whether it could play any role to perform the function that you're suggesting?

Mr Zappone: I'm sorry, what was it? The ABC—was it a particular—

Senator WATERS: Vote Compass. Are you familiar with that tool? It's effectively where political parties submit short versions of their policy platforms and voters can then answer survey questions about what their personal views are on particular issues and are then told which political party's policy platform best represents their values. Are you familiar with Vote Compass?

Mr Zappone: I am, but probably not enough to make a comment on it. I'm happy to take the question on notice and come back with something more formal, or I could just speak generally about it. But I'm not specifically familiar with that one tool.

Senator WATERS: Okay. I'm happy to hear whatever views you might have as to whether you think that's an adequate substitute for your proposal of the AEC producing a gazette, or whether you think there's still a role for that more formalised Electoral Commission presentation of information. While we're on this point, how would you suggest that the AEC disseminate that information? How does that information actually get out there?

Mr Zappone: Well, that is the critical matter. It's one thing to compile this information and to do it in a concise manner; it's another to do this. The really critical element, I think, would be ensuring that everybody had access to it. I don't know if that means approaching people through some interaction they have with the government, something that everybody has access to and that everybody can be exposed to, and so, going into the polls, we know that every Australian has had access to the same information so that they can make a judgement about what parties they are going to vote for. But it's not clear.

I don't have a particular answer for that proposal. I think it would just have to be universal. That would be the thing. You don't want an uneven outcome where people in certain jurisdictions are aware of this information and other ones just don't happen to see it, because it then skews the vote in terms of how informed the public was. So, yes, I think that would be something. But you would think that with such a wired economy there would be a way to establish an official email address that a person or citizen could use with the AEC. They could make sure that email is sent at the same time as a public campaign, to remind the public that that information is there for them to have a look at. There will be some people who maybe wouldn't look at it because they already have their views made up, but every election there are people who are divided. They're not sure how they're going to vote, and this could be valuable information.

I also think it's important that it's in printed form at some level, because you get a clearer idea of people's positions through text, I think, rather than the images that candidates and parties can use in campaigns.

Senator WATERS: Are you suggesting that this is something that should be displayed in polling booths?

Mr Zappone: Or maybe before polling booths, near the sausage sizzle or something. It should be somewhere you know people have access to it and that access can be guaranteed. One of the real issues with the new information environment we live in today is that it's all opt in, so everybody can choose what bubble they want to be in. One of the longstanding challenges for democracy is to ensure that there are some things that aren't opt in, that are universalised for their citizens, and making sure that citizens know what the parties stand for would be one of them. There might be a place for printed material or a specific period when this is disseminated and the public is reminded that it's there for them to look at it.

Senator WATERS: Do you have a view on whether that sort of impartial, factually based information would be subject to the advertising blackout? Would you see that it could play a role in the final days of an election campaign when those televised blackouts come into force?

Mr Zappone: Maybe it would be exempt. If the format was agreed on across the political spectrum—you know, that all stakeholders in the matter could agree on the format—then maybe it could be something that was exempt from the blackout because it was informing the public. One of the issues, again, is that we have to go back to the basics of how a democracy is supposed to function. We have all of these new media possibilities, but we have to go back to the actual mechanics of who needs to know what in order for this whole machine, this whole democracy, to function. This might be a case for that. It might be a case for exemption.

Senator WATERS: It's an interesting concept. You said on the second page of your submission: Australia has politicians and public figures who routinely repost propaganda that has conceptual origins in authoritarian nations.

Can you expand on that for us, please?
Mr Zappone: I can think of a couple of political figures who post—I wouldn't call it Russian propaganda, but it is a liberal line that has been promoted by Russia in recent years and that we see through Europe, in the United States and here as well. It is anti-immigrant, it is ethno-nationalist, it is divisive and it is often misogynistic. The statements are misogynistic, and the effect that they have is that they travel very quickly online. You could almost see, if you strip away the politics, the effectiveness might be the motive for certain people publishing these things. It is effective, because you get that immediate response and, of course, on social media you can see the response immediately too. That's what I was referring to.

Senator Waters: Okay. I think we probably all know to whom you refer, but for perhaps everybody's sake we'll leave it unsaid. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you. I think that draws to an end our questions. Thank you for your appearance today. If you have been asked to provide any further information on notice, please have it to the secretariat by 26 November. Thank you very much.
SEAR, Mr Tom, Private capacity

[11:31]

CHAIR: Welcome. Is there anything you would like to add to the capacity in which you appear today?

Mr Sear: I'm a PhD candidate at UNSW Canberra Cyber at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

CHAIR: Although the committee does not require you to provide evidence under oath, I wish to advise that this is a formal proceeding of the parliament. Giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of parliament. These proceedings are being broadcast and recorded by Hansard. I now invite you to make an opening statement. The committee will then proceed to questions. We have copies of your submission.

Mr Sear: Thank you, Chair, for allowing me to address the committee today. I know you probably have a lot of questions, so I will try to keep my overview brief and to the point. The main overall point I want to emphasise is that digitalisation has changed the way that politics, political participation and mobilisations occur. We have moved to a form of politics which is more turbulent—it might even be called chaotic pluralism—but, on the other side, it might even be able to be measured like a natural system.

I also want to emphasise the geopolitical and the geostrategic context of Australian democracy within this changed form of internet infrastructure and what that means for the location of how Australian democracy functions. By that, I mean the way in which the internet is beginning to break down the borders of what we might call Westphalian sovereignty and that there are multiple internets, if you see what I mean. What's emerging is something we might call Balkanisation: Australia is located in one specific internet, which might incorporate Australia, New Zealand, parts of Oceania, Israel, parts of the Middle East, Europe and the United States; and there are other internets such as a hybrid in the form of Soviet Union Russia. China is an isolated internet.

I raise that because some of my work that wasn't in the submission and is somewhat provisional explores, for example, the way in which Russian Internet Research Agency activity on Twitter in the Australian #auspol environment was particularly responsive to Australian diplomatic and military pushes in relation to MH17. I can provide that on notice if you wish. There is also emerging research with Mike Jensen and Titus Chen and with some colleagues about Chinese language social media in Australia and how that relates to a broader Chinese internet. I raise those particular examples because in cyber our major concern is a cyberstorm—a multivector, multi-agent, overwhelming cyberattack—and the way that information operations would occur on either side of that.

Lastly, I want to emphasise not just the vulnerabilities but that, on the other side of the ledger, there are examples in Australia of resilient participation and a universal culture of understanding about what civil society is. In my thesis I argue that Anzac is an example of a tradition which has easily transferred into the digital and by which Australians are able to understand what a civic culture is. I'd be happy to take any questions. Thank you.

Mr GILES: Thanks, Mr Sear, for coming along today and for your submission, which I found really interesting. I might just take you up on that invitation to provide that information on notice, because I think it is a matter that we've heard good evidence on today and I imagine will be of ongoing interest to members of the committee. Were you present or did you hear any of the evidence that Dr Jensen gave this morning?

Mr Sear: Yes, I did.

Mr GILES: Would you concur with the broad thrust of his evidence and the points that he made on foreign manipulation?

Mr Sear: Yes, I would.

Mr GILES: Thank you very much for that. The key point I take it from your submission is to not get caught up with technology per se—is that a fair read?—

Mr Sear: Yes.

Mr GILES: but to think about how differences in technology are changing culture.

Mr Sear: Yes.

Mr GILES: You encourage us to look at the opportunities as well as the challenges. I think we've been more focused on the challenges, it'd be fair to see. Hopefully, your thesis will provide us with some cultural guidance in the other direction. But, in the meantime, how do you think we could put in place stronger institutional arrangements to resist the manipulation of social media, particularly by foreign state-based actors?

Mr Sear: This may be out of the ambit of the committee, and perhaps my ambit as well, but, as I mentioned, the concern is that the internet has fundamentally changed the way that participation mobilisations happen. So it's
more than just a response to an election; it's likely that information operations are continual and ongoing and will continue and will be ongoing from state actors. I would suggest that the government might want to put in place some measures to ensure effective situational awareness, and that might constitute a whole-of-government arrangement, which might include agencies as diverse as—and excuse the acronyms—ASD, AFP, Home Affairs, Finance, AEC, ASIO, ACSC, with some oversight from the IGIS and, likely, advice from the ADF in a civil military capacity. That's so the government can be well informed about what is happening and the nature of a political—

Mr GILES: This is what you mean when you talk in your submission about a whole-of-government response?

Mr Sear: Ostensibly, yes. There may be other ways which the committee might consider more appropriate, but, in considering agencies informing each other and the government as to what might be occurring, yes.

Mr DICK: Thank you very much for your submission. It is very useful, as is the research and evidence that you've been working on not just in this inquiry. I've asked a few witnesses this morning about the cultural and educational shift. Identifying the problem and then trying to manage that, whether it be through a central government bureaucracy or the AEC or independent watchdogs—all that sort of stuff—is one thing, but how important is getting the teachings right at an early level, through primary school curriculum, right through to university or tertiary education, in terms of the cultural shift, given that, in the last five years, the reliance on the way that Australians are getting their media or news sources has exploded, as have the types of news sources they are getting through those channels?

Obviously we don't have control over the globe and international news sources, but we do have some influences here in Australia. Could you expand on that a little bit, in terms of how, in a practical sense, that would be delivered.

Mr Sear: I differ slightly from some of my colleagues in this area in that I think education is valuable, but I can't see much evidence that it's likely to be truly effective. That's partly because a lot of the ways that these misinformation campaigns function are associated with heuristic psychological biases, cognitive biases, emotional innumeracy and also perception biases, and, if they're inherent to the way that humans operate, it might be a challenge. We might feel more comfortable rolling out education campaigns, but what would the measure of the effectiveness of those campaigns be? How would we know what we were exploring and what we were changing? I guess that is why I tend to emphasise traditional cultural understandings of how people frame their participation in democracy might be.

Mr DICK: So it's not the panacea to deal with this issue, basically.

Mr Sear: That's not my understanding from the research I've read. In some cases, education has the opposite effect. It'll more likely cement people in their particular position or encourage them to be less attuned to what might be an alternative position.

Mr DICK: Do you think the growing influence of foreign information, for want of a better term—I don't want to use the word 'interference'—is on the rise, or is it just bubbling along? Are we seeing it around each election cycle, with more platforms available and more opportunities for people to influence, maybe not in a negative sense but certainly in a policy sense?

Mr Sear: Do you mean, in terms of 'interference', information we would regularly receive, or misinformation?

Mr DICK: Misinformation from perhaps foreign sources or foreign companies—foreign information. From your research, is that on the rise? Is it increasing or stabilising?

Mr Sear: Certainly since the internet and social media have matured, around 2012, it seems to be consistently evident in social media and persistent even in some elements of the Australian social media. Whether it's on the rise or not is an interesting question. It's rather mutable. It may be consistent but consistently changing in the way that it might choose to operate, so that might be something to look out for. The vectors within which it operates are consistently changing, and that's probably one of our biggest challenges, more so than it's volume, if you see what I mean.

Mr DICK: Yes. Once upon a time it could have been the occasional news story being retweeted, and then someone commenting on that. Now it's more direct targeting or advertising or strategic placement.

Mr Sear: Yes.

Mr DICK: Okay, I understand what you're saying.

Senator WATERS: Could I just seek some clarity. You mention in your submission that you think the best way of stopping the pernicious effects of social media manipulation is:
… a clear, coherent and resilient sense of consciousness within the body politic of how a social fabric is maintained. This may take the form of values and/or culture.

Could you put that another way and then could you outline to us how you think we can encourage such a culture.

Mr Sear: That's certainly the challenge that we face. In terms of the research, my focus has been upon how Anzac functions, so how it fairly easily transferred into a digital culture and managed to freight understandings from the past through memory structures into the present. One of the challenges that we have is that, as the MH17 data might reflect, this is a highly temporal event. That is hard to explain, but events happen, their effects are very quick and escalate very fast, and they don't follow what we might call in social science an S-curve anymore. They're much more a reverse exponential label and escalate extremely quickly. What is present in the society at the time is the most effective way to inoculate yourselves against any particular change, if someone were to try to target an area. During the period of the centenary, there have been several social media controversies around the concept of Anzac. While there have been many controversies about what that means politically, most of those debates have been about discussing what it means to participate in Australian society or what a particular tradition in Australian society means as a reflection of our civic and political values, based upon a tradition of commemoration and civil participation that goes back 100 years. So, instead of debating a political issue, people might be debating, for example, what Anzac should represent, when you can use the words and the phrases and the images from that appropriately, and when they should be appropriately used in a civil society. That is a roundabout way of coming back to your question to say: how do people perceive themselves in relation to democracy or the legislator, and how do they perceive themselves culturally in relation to that? Sorry, that probably isn't a very good answer for you. I'm sorry.

Senator WATERS: No, I take your point. What do you think we should do with that information, though? How do you think we, as the body public and as the representatives of the Australian people, should take that forward?

Mr Sear: I would be exploring areas of connectivity. Politics is no longer managed collectively anymore; it's managed through connectivity, and it's rather leaderless in that sense. So you want to look at the networks and patterns by which people form connective relationships, as opposed to the way in which they scale up into collective groups of organisations, which traditionally are leader focused. So you could explore the ways in which people come together in democracies in connective ways, as opposed to groups which are issues focused and trying to resolve a particular problem.

Senator WATERS: So do we need to make the truth go organically viral?

Mr Sear: Sorry, I didn't hear that.

Senator WATERS: I was just drawing an analogy: do you think we need to make the truth go organically viral?

Mr Sear: It's an interesting idea. I'm not quite sure how that might be engineered.

Senator WATERS: Perhaps I can ask you more specifically. Sorry, I didn't mean to cut you off, so by all means finish your last point. The previous witness was suggesting that we have some kind of independent summary, if you like, of political parties' positions that would then be made available to voters at some point prior to the election, and that might be a way of cutting through the so called fake news. Do you think that's connectivity? What's your view on that proposition?

Mr Sear: I thought that was an interesting example. However, if we're talking about the ABC programming—I don't recall its name—my concern about that is that that's also an algorithmic response. I don't know how it functions, and I'll have to take on notice how it actually works, but my presumption is that people respond to it and it provides an algorithmic form of response back to that person. So, in a sense, that would be reflecting the wider algorithmic structure of governance and society that the internet has created, and it might just duplicate that rather than provide an alternative.

Senator WATERS: Yes. It's a website. It's not pushed on anyone's feed; it's something that someone has to proactively seek out. I think you're saying that the users would self-select, and I agree with you. The next question is: how do we make sure that everyone has the opportunity to participate in this? The previous witness was suggesting the need for a base level of information for all voters prior to them casting their vote. Have you got anything to add to that?

Mr Sear: I would just reaffirm my point. I don't know the system, but it is my understanding that you would enter your views and then the system would provide a response: 'This is the relevant political party that would be associated with those views.' I imagine the system mechanism that produces that would be algorithmic. While it might not be available to everyone, it's similar to the way in which a Google search, from tracking, finds you on
the internet and may push you other political things—advertisements, for example. That would be my concern about that.

**Senator Waters:** I don’t have the technical expertise to meet those concerns. My understanding is that political parties submit the information, which is simply a survey, and, depending on your responses, you get plotted on a chart as to which party best represents your values. I’m not sure if it has the implications that you’re concerned about, but I’m by no means an expert.

**Mr Sear:** It’s also a guess estimate on my part as to how it functions. My apologies. I’m happy to take that on notice if needed.

**Senator Waters:** Thanks very much for your time.

**Chair:** When you drive around Queensland you see signs that tell you about the bushfire threat, which goes from ‘unlikely’ to ‘extreme danger’. In terms of how fake news threatens Australian democracy, how would you classify it? Is it ‘unlikely’, ‘extreme’? If you were a headline writer for a tabloid newspaper, what’s the word you’d be using?

**Mr Sear:** That’s an interesting analogy. Those famous Australian fire-risk dials would need to take into account the various factors which might be present at any time. They are based upon fuel load, temperature, and so on and so forth. It’s possible that there are technological solutions that could provide a measure of that type of danger; however, it’s possible that they are misleading in terms of how humans become aware of any particular threat. It’s then likely—and this is with my rather cynical cyberhat on—that any such system would itself be the subject of an attempt to undermine or influence it in order to create a scenario of chaos. It might provide some measure of guidance, but it also might be a risk.

**Chair:** What about now? How would you describe the threat level now? We’ve looked into the 2016 election. We’ve heard evidence in relation to that. In terms of the election that will be held sometime in the next seven or eight months, what would you say to those who are listening in today, and what do you think we should put in our report? What is the level of threat from fake news?

**Mr Sear:** The level of threat of the potential for misinformation, or of the capacity to disturb an internet based political culture, is high.

**Chair:** All right. Are there any other questions from members? No? Thank you for your appearance today. I think you have been asked to provide some additional information on notice. If you could get that to the secretariat by 26 November, that would be great. Thank you to the secretariat and to everybody else—Hansard; the people who turn the lights on and off. We will now adjourn.

**Committee adjourned at 11:54**