



UNIVERSITY OF
CANBERRA

NEWS AND MEDIA
RESEARCH CENTRE

COUNTERING EPISTEMIC POLLUTION WITH CIVIC INFORMATION SKILLS

Professor Mathieu O'Neil
Social Cyber Institute Webinar: Is Australia prepared to defeat information warfare?
25 July 2024



NEWS & MEDIA
RESEARCH CENTRE



BUILDING RESILIENCE WITH INFORMATION LITERACY AND INFORMATION HEALTH

News and Media Research Centre Submission
to Australian Senate Select Committee on
Foreign Interference through Social Media

17 February 2023



Options Paper

What does it look like for Australia to...
**Use All Tools of Statecraft in
the Information Environment**

SUPPORTED BY



Australian Government
Australian Civil-Military Centre

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Civic Information Literacy Tools

News and Media Research Centre submission to the Australian Parliament's
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' inquiry into civics education,
engagement, and participation in Australia

21 May 2024

Submission authors:

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Dr Andrew Ross, Faculty of Education, University of Canberra

For information regarding the submission or for further enquiries please contact:

[Redacted contact information]

AUSTRALIA'S INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT HAS BEEN COMPROMISED

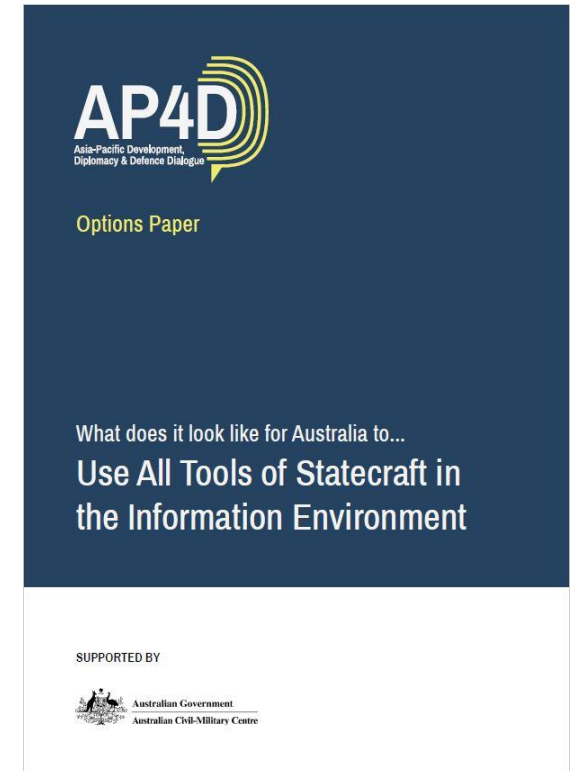
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The “information environment” or “information ecosystem” is a socio-political space in which information is created, stored and exchanged (including in the form of data/knowledge/intelligence) between individuals, organisations and governments (including information exchanged between humans, humans and non-humans, machines-and-humans and machine-to-machine). A democratic information environment needs to privilege accurate information and to encourage shared understanding.

Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue (AP4D)

Available for download from AP4D:

<https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/information-environment/>



- threats to public health via the spread of disinformation around COVID-19 vaccination
- targeting of Australian public servants, e.g. AEC during elections / Voice ref.
- well-funded disinformation campaigns against action to mitigate carbon emissions
- attempts to worsen religious/ethnic divisions in society
- attempts to increase distrust in institutions

Erosion of Australia's multicultural identity and social cohesion?

ARE THE RESPONSES TO EPISTEMIC POLLUTION ADEQUATE?

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- 1. Low levels of public information literacy**
- 2. Low level of policy-maker awareness**
 - Disorder in the information environment is a “social media issue” not a structural crisis?
 - Feeling of powerlessness on the part of lawmakers in the face of globally powerful digital media platforms?
- 3. Siloed way of thinking about threats in the information environment**
 - E.g., cybersecurity; disinformation; social cohesion; foreign interference; data; privacy and criminal exploitation
 - Agencies do not naturally share information
 - Analysis in a truly integrated way: best current practice is often to coordinate through interdepartmental taskforces or similar mechanisms: usually built around single issue and non-enduring.

- **Low levels of public information literacy:** citizens must be empowered
 - NATO Centre for Media Literacy Report (Jolls 2022): “citizens are the first line of defence”
 - AP4D: “Establish a national body for the information environment to coordinate work across government and engage in dialogue with non-government actors such as industry, civil society, non-governmental organisations and academics”

What key skills (not messages) should this entity impart to Australian citizens?

BACKGROUND:
CIVIC TOOLS AND RESOURCES

Media Literacy

Featured



Media uses representations to engage us, and students can benefit from learning how

Representations in media influence our beliefs and behaviours. We're usually not so interested in thinking about how and why representations are constructed, but analysing our own readings of them can help us learn more about ourselves and others.



News reporting vs investigative journalism

What's the difference between news reporting and investigative journalism? What are the characteristics of different reporting styles and when might you see them used in a news story?



When kids can navigate the news, they better understand the world around them

News for children is a fantastic way into fostering curiosity and critical thinking and preparing them to better understand the world as they grow towards independence.



Interactive: Real, LOLZ, oops or fake 2

Can you spot a fake? Some news stories aren't always what they seem. A sequel to our popular interactive that tests your hoax detecting skills.

Explaining News



Interactive Lesson: Fact vs opinion vs analysis

This all in one interactive resource for teachers is an engaging introduction to the topic that works seamlessly in the classroom on laptops, tablets and projectors.



How news gets to you on social media

ABC social media producer Cory Zanoni explains how news makes its way through social media platforms.



Interactive: Source checker

Do you know what news sources are? Can you spot a reliable one in a news story? Test your re-source-fulness in our source checker quiz.



Media Ethics

It's not unusual to see journalists portrayed as heroically fighting for truth and justice. However, there is a clear code of ethics, that helps them navigate some tricky territory.

[More Explaining News →](#)

Civics and Citizenship

All Years Years F–2 Years 3–4 Years 5–6 Years 7–8 Years 9–10

All Years



How parents can safely introduce their children to news and current affairs

Most children will eventually consume news and current affairs programs, but is there a way for parents to minimise the impacts of distressing media?



Preparing kids for the future means listening to them now

Schools aim to prepare the next generation, but more young people feel like it's not for them. Here's what we can do to turn things around.



Big Deal

Investigate the role of money in Australia's democracy. Learn how lobbyists, political donations, community participation and political advertising impact our democracy.



The House In Session

Your host Annabel Crabb shows you her favourite bits of Parliament House in Canberra. Come and see why!



Learning a language helps students better understand others in an increasingly diverse Australia

Studying a language allows one to see deeper cultural patterns that aren't necessarily accessible through learning about different foods, festivals and cultural traditions.



Exploring Australia's Democracy at Old Parliament House

Welcome to Old Parliament House! Step inside this important heritage building and join the Museum of Australian Democracy's education manager Dr Steph Smith on a tour of some special historic spaces.



Educational resources about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures

This collection of websites and resources is not only valuable for teachers, students and schools, but also all Australians looking to better understand and celebrate Australia's First Peoples and rich indigenous history.



Classroom resources about important Indigenous topics

ABC Education has hundreds of free resources about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. These have been arranged into Collections covering specific topics, for seamless use in classrooms (Foundation to Year 10).

the DEBUNKING handbook



John Cook
Stephan Lewandowsky

97 out of 100 climate experts agree humans are causing global warming.

Several independent surveys find 97% of climate scientists who are actively publishing peer-reviewed climate research agree that humans are causing global warming.



On top of this overwhelming consensus, National Academies of Science from all over the world also endorse the consensus view of human caused global warming, as expressed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

However, movements that deny a scientific consensus have always sought to cast doubt on the fact that a consensus exists. One technique is the use of fake experts, citing scientists who have little to no expertise in the particular field of science.

For example, the OISM Petition Project claims 31,000 scientists disagree with the scientific consensus on global warming.

However, around 99.9% of the scientists listed in the Petition Project are not climate scientists. The petition is open to anyone with a Bachelor of Science or higher and includes medical doctors, mechanical engineers and computer scientists.

Core fact communicated in headline

Core fact reinforced in opening paragraph, fleshed out with additional details.

Core fact reinforced with infographic

Explicit warning cueing reader that misinformation is coming and indicating the nature of the misinformation.

The myth

The gap created by this debunking is how can there be a consensus if 31,000 scientists dissent? This gap is filled by explaining that almost all the 31,000 scientists are not climate scientists.

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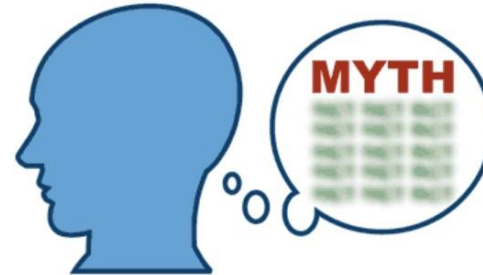
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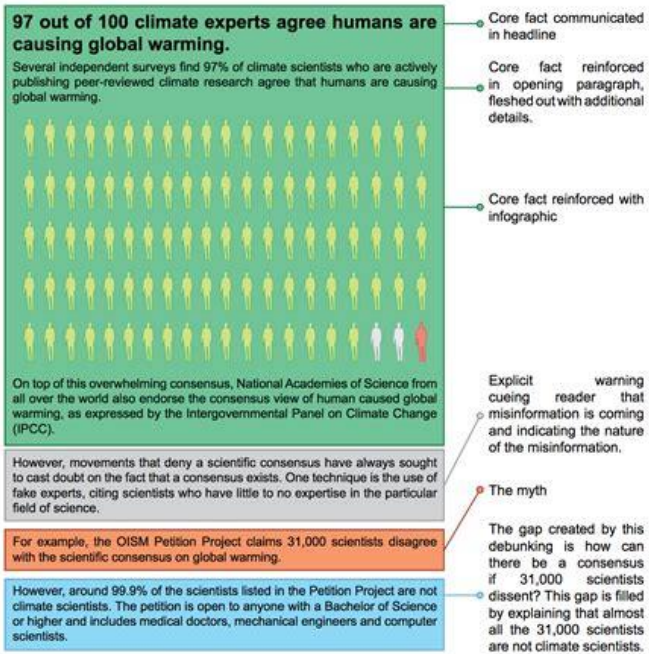
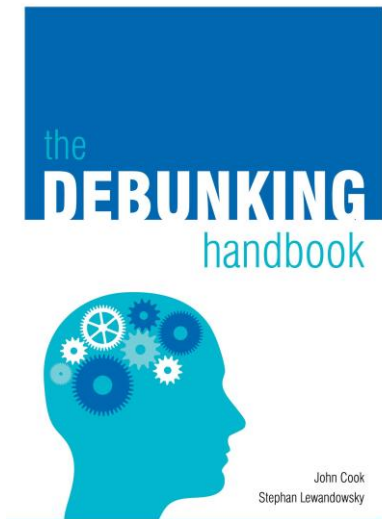
MYTH
FACT FACT FACT
FACT FACT FACT
FACT FACT FACT
FACT FACT FACT
FACT FACT FACT



How does one avoid causing the Familiarity Backfire Effect? Ideally, avoid mentioning the myth altogether while correcting it. When seeking to counter misinformation, the best approach is to focus on the facts you wish to communicate.

FACT
FACT FACT FACT
FACT MYTH FACT
FACT FACT FACT
FACT FACT FACT
FACT FACT FACT





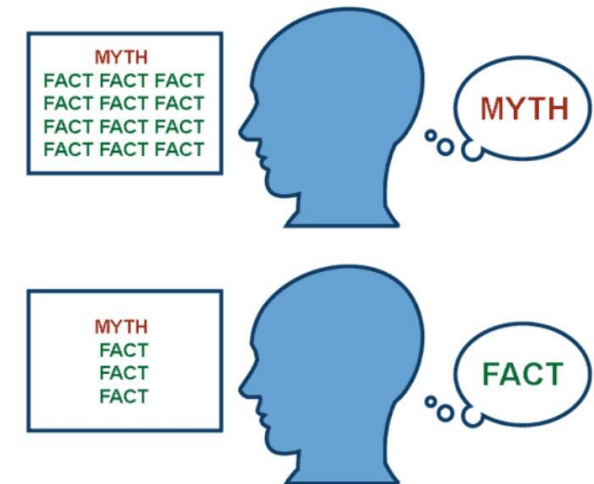
How does one avoid causing the Familiarity Backfire Effect? Ideally, avoid mentioning the myth altogether while correcting it. When seeking to counter misinformation, the best approach is to focus on the facts you wish to communicate.



The Overkill Backfire Effect occurs because processing many arguments takes more effort than just considering a few. A simple myth is more cognitively attractive than an over-complicated correction.

than an over-complicated correction

The solution is to keep your content lean, mean and easy to read. Making your content easy to process means using every tool available. Use simple language, short sentences, subheadings and paragraphs. Avoid dramatic language and derogatory comments that alienate people. Stick to the facts.



WIKIPEDIA HAS STRICT EDITORIAL POLICIES

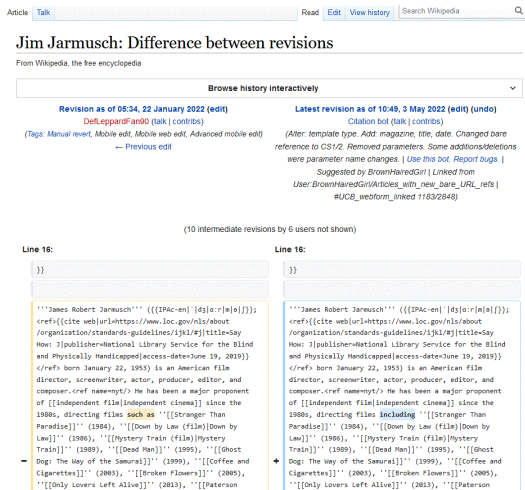
- **Neutrality** (WP:NPOV)
- **Reliability** (WP:RS)
- **Notability** (WP:NOR)

Crowdsourcing: Thousands of volunteers, administrators and bots ensure that these policies are adhered to.

For popular pages Wikipedia might be the most reliable information source ever created.

If a page hasn't had many editors it might be less reliable...
It's easy to see if there are danger signs:
No references? Warning banner?

Always possible to check the article's 'History' and 'Talk' pages.



 Open access |   | Research article | First published online November 8, 2022

Critical Ignoring as a Core Competence for Digital Citizens

[Anastasia Kozyreva](#), [Sam Wineburg](#), [...], and [Ralph Hertwig](#)   [View all authors and affiliations](#)

[OnlineFirst](#) | <https://doi.org/10.1177/09637214221121570>



PDF / ePub

Abstract

Low-quality and misleading information online can hijack people's attention, often by evoking curiosity, outrage, or anger. Resisting certain types of information and actors online requires people to adopt new mental habits that help them avoid being tempted by attention-grabbing and potentially harmful content. We argue that digital information literacy must include the

Critical Ignoring in the Digital World

Types of Information	Distracting and Low-Quality Information	False and Misleading Information	Trolls and Malicious Actors
Targeted Outcomes	Better Self-Control, Reduced Screen Time, Improved Well-Being	Improved Judgments of Information's Credibility	Minimization of Online Harm and Negative Experiences
Behavioral and Cognitive Strategies for Critical Ignoring	Self-Nudging • Remove Distracting and Hard-to-Resist Stimuli From the Proximate Environment • Set Time Limits • Do Not Use Distractions as Internal Rewards	Lateral Reading • Leave the Source and Verify Who Is Behind It Using a Web Search • Check the Claims Against Other Sources • Understand Your Search Results: Click Restraint	Do-Not-Feed-the-Trolls Heuristic • Do Not Engage With Trolls and Malicious Actors • Do Not Reward Their Behavior With Your Attention • Block Them and Report Them to the Platform

SIX FACT-CHECKING LESSONS FOR KIDS

1. Is the Earth flat?

2. Is Wikipedia reliable?

3. Street sandwich

4. Why you so mad?

5. Red cars

6. Garage dragon

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Version 1.0 tested in 2022 in
Ainslie, Harrison, Kaleen, and Mt
Stromlo primary and secondary
Schools [Y4, Y5, Y6]

Part of the ACT Education Directorate –
University of Canberra Affiliated Schools
Research Program.

Also funding from UC DVCRE industry seed
funding and a US Embassy in Canberra
public affairs grant.

- Rachel Cunneen, Faculty of
Education
- Mathieu O'Neil, Faculty of Arts
and Design

*Lessons available for download from
the APO website*

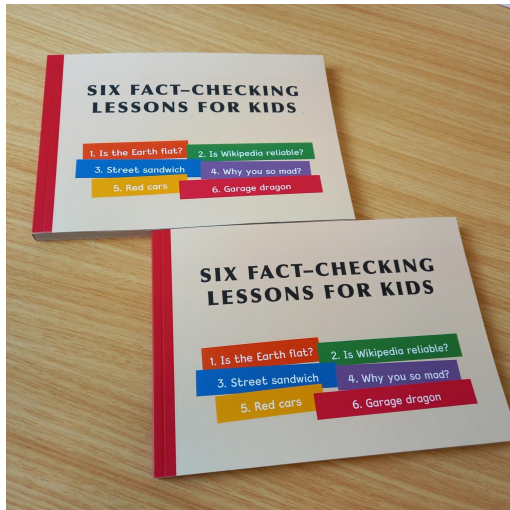
<https://apo.org.au/node/319173>

SIX LESSONS CO-DEVELOPED WITH FOUR ACT AFFILIATED SCHOOLS

Foundations



Advanced



1	Is the Earth flat? 	How do we know what we know? What is a reliable source?	I know what a reliable source of authority is.
2	Is Wikipedia Reliable? 	Understanding Wikipedia [Article page, Talk page, History, Policies]	I know when Wikipedia articles are reliable.
3	Street Sandwich 	Lateral reading	I know when I should check if a claim or person is reliable.
4	Why You So Mad? 	Learning to investigate ideas rather than attacking a person. Thinking before sharing ideas online.	I can identify an ad hominem argument.
5	Red Cars 	The difference between something being ubiquitous and something being true (cognitive bias).	I understand that seeing something everywhere (ubiquity) doesn't mean that it is true.
6	Garage Dragon 	Testing hypotheses; the possibility of falsification.	I understand the importance of testing hypotheses, and the difference between belief and evidence.

Lesson Four:

Learning intention:

I can identify an ad hominem argument.

This lesson teaches students how to distinguish between attacking a person and attacking an argument, and to understand the need to reflect before sharing information that is emotionally manipulative.



Take aways

**If you think there is an ad hominem attack:
CHECK!**

How do you check?

Do a search with Google or DuckDuckGo.

Look at the Wikipedia article.

If the article is OK (for example, it has lots of references): you have the answer.

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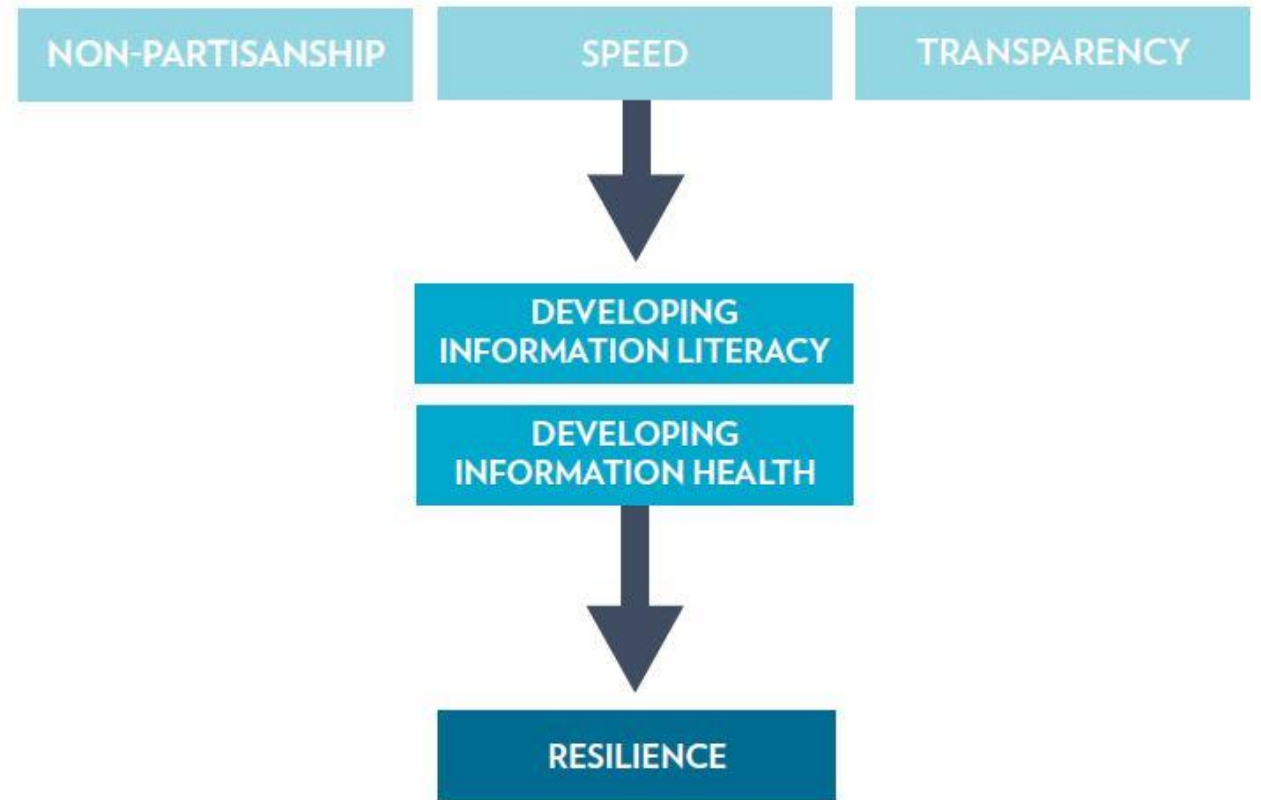


FIGURE 1: Information Resilience

Available for download from the APO: <https://apo.org.au/node/323760>

Version 2.0 being co-developed in
2024-2026 in Dickson and
Narrabundah Colleges with
teacher-librarians [Y11, Y12]

Part of the ACT Education Directorate –
University of Canberra Affiliated Schools
Research Program.

- Andrew Ross, Faculty of Education
- Mathieu O'Neil, Faculty of Arts
and Design



*Six Lessons (2022) available for
download from the APO website
<https://apo.org.au/node/319173>*

ACT citizens need new skills to process election-related claims effectively.

The larger the amount of potentially relevant but weakly authoritative information, the more urgent is the need for effective and cognitively viable information processing skills.

Knowing how to verify information in the attention economy will help ACT citizens not be taken in by “fake news”.

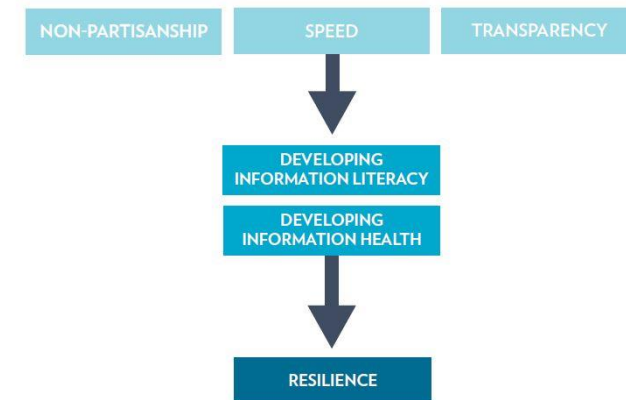


FIGURE 1: Information Resilience

The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) will inquire into and report on civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia. The inquiry will have regard to:

- the effectiveness of formalised civics education throughout Australia and the various approaches taken across jurisdictions through schools and other institutions including electoral commissions, councils, and parliaments; the extent to which all students have equitable access to civics education; and opportunities for improvement;
- the vast array of informal mechanisms through which Australians seek and receive information about Australia's democracy, electoral events, and voting; and how governments and the community might leverage these mechanisms to improve the quality of information and help Australians be better informed about, and better participate in, the electoral system;
- the mechanisms available to assist voters in understanding the legitimacy of information about electoral matters; the impact of artificial intelligence, foreign interference, social media and mis- and disinformation; and how governments and the community can prevent or limit inaccurate or false information influencing electoral outcomes;
- opportunities for supporting culturally diverse, geographically diverse, and remote communities to access relevant, appropriate, and culturally suitable information about Australian democracy, electoral events, enrolment and voting to promote full electoral participation;
- social, socio-economic, or other barriers that may be preventing electoral participation; and ways governments might address or circumvent these barriers; and
- potential improvements to the operations and structures that deliver electoral events to support full electoral participation.

Civic Information Literacy Tools

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INFORMATION LITERACY TOOLS		
Evaluating the reliability of sources		
Environment A – library, lecture, ... → facts are distinct from opinions	Environment B – web, social media, tv → facts, or opinions presented as facts?	
Reading strategies		
Vertical reading: deep critical engagement with ideas of a text, read in depth, check sources and authors, etc.	Lateral reading: evaluating the credibility of a source by comparing it with other sources while reading	
Checking out trusted sources		
Encyclopedia: BRIT, MCQ – experts compile evidence, editors check; restricted access	Online encyclopedia: Wikipedia – volunteers update content based on rules, admins ban vandals; open access	Other trusted sources: record of evidence-based reporting, transparency e.g. ABC, BBC, NYT, SBS, The Guardian...
Reflecting on the emotional impact		
Emotional manipulation triggers: Are there triggers such as: use of music, use of images, use of words, ad hominem attacks Why are they trying to make you angry or sad?		
COUNTER SPEECH TOOLS		
Assessing the level of hate speech		
Criminally prosecutable → report to the authorities	Guideline violation → report / ban account or other appropriate punishment	Gray area or general incivility → respond with counter speech
Applying counter speech		
Denouncing • Highlighting unacceptability • Warning of consequences	Empathizing • Showing understanding • Evoking compassion	Debating • Debunking / presenting facts • Pointing out inconsistency

Available for download from the Committee website [Submission 28]:
https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Electoral_Matters/Civicseducation/Submissions

Civics curriculum does not take into account information pollution
The [civics] curriculum is inconsistently applied by States and Territories

Proposal: we need civic tools

1. Civic literacy certificate: schools (primary / secondary), Defence, Police, APS?
2. Public civic literacy campaigns?
3. Libraries as key sites for civic literacy education?
4. Support for volunteers who engage in deliberation online

Australians need new skills to process election-related and other political claims effectively:

1. **Reacting...** according to the epistemic environment
2. **Choosing...** how to read (vertically or laterally)
3. **Checking...** trusted sources
4. **Questioning...** emotional manipulation

1. REACTING TO A CLAIM: WHAT IS MY ENVIRONMENT?

A-Library
evidence
is correct

vs

B-Web, Socials, TV
evidence can
be falsified



facts are
distinct from
opinions



facts, or
opinions
pretending to
be facts?

2. CHOOSING BETWEEN VERTICAL AND LATERAL READING

vertical reading is slow

- deep, critical
engagement with ideas:
dive into content, read
in depth, check 'About'
page, etc.

=> *potential waste of time
and attention if used in B*

lateral reading is fast

- look to the side
- open another tab
- do a search
- check what trusted sources say
- if the claim is correct: perfect
- if the claim is incorrect: move on!

=> *your attention was protected*

(your attention is precious, don't
waste it on dubious claims)

3. CHECKING OUT “TRUSTED SOURCES”

Encyclopedia - BRIT, MCQ: experts compile evidence, editors check; restricted access

Online encyclopedia - WP: volunteers update content based on rules (reliable sources, notability), admins ban vandals; open access

Other trusted sources: *record of evidence-based reporting, transparency e.g. ABC, BBC, NYT, SBS...*

DID YOU KNOW? Studies have shown that medical science content on Wikipedia is of equal quality to professional publications.

4. QUESTIONING: WHY YOU SO MAD

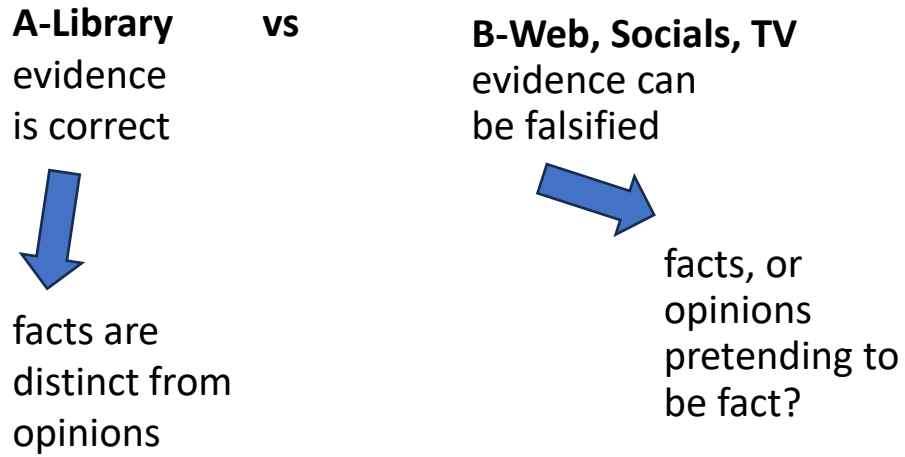
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- use of music
- use of words
- use of images
- 'ad hominem' attacks
- other triggers?

Why are they trying to make you angry?

Probably best not to share without checking the claim first.

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- Collaboration with Holger Heppner, HSBI (part of Bots Building Bridges / Volkswagen Foundation)
- Support for volunteers who engage in deliberation online such as Wikipedia editors, Reddit moderators
- How does one deal with hate speech?
- Creation of website and/or how-to guides publicised via social media

ENGAGE WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

TOOLS FOR ONLINE DELIBERATION

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ASSESSMENT OF THE LEVEL OF HATE SPEECH

Criminally prosecutable → report to the authorities
Guideline Violation → ban account or other appropriate punishment
Gray Area or general Incivility → Respond with counter speech

COUNTER SPEECH APPROACH

Denouncing

- Highlighting Unacceptability
- Warning of Consequences

Empathizing

- Showing understanding
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Debating

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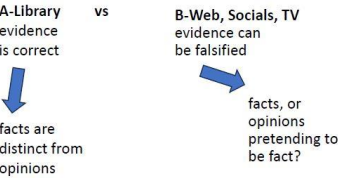


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REQUEST FOR COMMENTS

DEFENCE/SEC/COMMS PROFESSIONALS

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Probably best not to share without checking the claim first.

- Reflections about how this resonates with your role as professionals?
- Suggestions about content of campaign?

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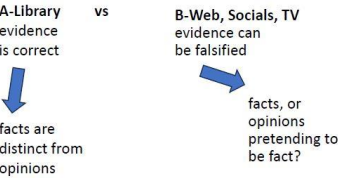
COUNTER SPEECH APPROACH

Denouncing • Highlighting Unacceptability • Warning of Consequences	Empathizing • Showing understanding • Evoking compassion	Debating • Debunking and Presenting Facts • Pointing out Inconsistency
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REQUEST FOR COMMENTS

DEFENCE/SEC/COMMS PROFESSIONALS

1. REACTING TO A CLAIM: WHAT IS MY ENVIRONMENT?



3. CHECKING OUT “TRUSTED SOURCES”

Encyclopedia - BRIT, MCQ: experts compile evidence, editors check; restricted access
Online encyclopedia - WP: volunteers update content based on rules (reliable sources, notability), admins ban vandals; open access
Other trusted sources: record of evidence-based reporting, transparency e.g. ABC, BBC, NYT, SBS, The Guardian...

DID YOU KNOW? Studies have shown that medical science content on Wikipedia is of equal quality to professional publications.

2. CHOOSING BETWEEN VERTICAL AND LATERAL READING

vertical reading is slow

- deep, critical engagement with ideas: dive into content, read in depth, check ‘About’ page, etc.

=> potential waste of time and attention if used in B

lateral reading is fast

- look to the side
- open another tab
- do a search
- check what trusted sources say
- if the claim is correct: perfect
- if the claim is incorrect: move on!

=> your attention was protected (your attention is precious, don’t waste it on dubious claims)

4. QUESTIONING: WHY YOU SO MAD

emotional manipulation is when someone tries to manipulate others by using emotional triggers that will make people angry or upset:

- use of music
- use of words
- use of images
- ‘ad hominem’ attacks
- other triggers?

Why are they trying to make you angry?
Probably best not to share without checking the claim first.

- Reflections about how this resonates with your role as security professionals?
- Suggestions about content of campaign?
- Thanks for listening!

ASSESSMENT OF THE LEVEL OF HATE SPEECH

Criminally prosecutable → report to the authorities
Guideline Violation → ban account or other appropriate punishment
Gray Area or general Incivility → Respond with counter speech

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- Debunking and Presenting Facts
- Pointing out Inconsistency