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

O'NEIL HEPPNER ROSS

DCPC24

NEWS AND MEDIA RESEARCH CENTRE

PROTECT YOURSELF FROM DISINFORMATION IN FOUR EASY STEPS

STEP #1
REACTING TO A CLAIM: WHAT IS MY ENVIRONMENT?

VS

Library
Evidence is correct

↓

Facts are distinct from opinions

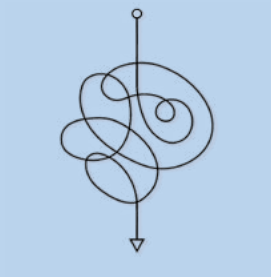
Web, Socials, TV
Evidence can be falsified

↓

Facts - or opinions pretending to be fact?

STEP #2
CHOOSING BETWEEN VERTICAL AND LATERAL READING

Vertical reading is slow



VS

Lateral reading is fast

Deep, critical engagement with ideas:
- dive into content,
- read in depth,
- check 'About' page,
- Read FAQ section, etc.

When browsing the internet:
- open another tab and do a search
- check what trusted sources say
- if the claim is correct: perfect
- if the claim is incorrect: move on!

✗ **Potential waste of time if used to fact-check on the Internet**

✓ **Your time was protected (your attention is precious, don't waste it on dubious claims)**

STEP #3
CHECKING OUT TRUSTED SOURCES

Encyclopedia
eg: **Macquarie Dictionary, Encyclopedia Britannica**
Experts compile evidence, editors check; restricted access

Online encyclopedia
eg: **Wikipedia**
Volunteers update content based on rules (reliable sources, notability), admins ban vandals; open access

Other trusted sources
eg: **ABC, BBC, New York Times, SBS**
Record of evidence-based reporting, transparency

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

STEP #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?
It's probably best not to share content online without checking the claims first!

ACT Government Education

UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA

CIVIC INFORMATION LITERACY TOOLS

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RESEARCH PROJECTS

Building information resilience: A collaborative project with ACT teacher-librarians. ACT Education Directorate-UC Affiliated Schools Research Program (2024-2026).
Chief Investigators: Ross, O'Neil.
Partner Investigators: Karinne Campbell (Dickson College), Melinda Jenkins (Dickson College), Jenny Howard (Narrabundah College).
Project Manager: Dr Megan Deas.

Bots Building Bridges (3B): Theoretical, empirical, and technological foundations for systems that monitor and support political deliberation online. Volkswagen Foundation, Artificial Intelligence and the Society of the Future (2021-2024).
Chief Investigators: Cimiano, Esposito, Seelmeyer, Veale, Muhle, Putz, Ackland, O'Neil, Graham.

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3 KEY POINTS

1. READ LATERALLY **Improve your capacity to assess information credibility**

- Students should use critical thinking skills (looking for logical fallacies, thinking intertextually) only when they are confident that the encountered information is credible. When they lack epistemic certainty, they should not read vertically, in depth.
- Instead students should learn about a source of information by leaving it, opening another tab on a browser, and searching elsewhere. Lateral reading teaches people to investigate who is behind a piece of information, to evaluate the evidence for a claim, and to compare information across sources.
- This contradicts centuries of critical thinking. Prevalent conceptual frameworks in the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority's (ACARA) "General Capabilities" (or broad learning objectives) are thus ill-equipped to deal with information over-abundance.
- An awareness that deep engagement must give way, in the first instance, to improved assessments of information credibility would better prepare students to tackle online environments where attention is a valuable commodity which should not be wasted on dubious content.

2. TRUST THE PROCESS **Wikipedia should be used in every classroom**

- Peer-reviewed articles are usually verified by two or three reviewers. Articles on Wikipedia are reviewed by hundreds of people. Wikipedia may be the most accurate resource ever created.
- Too many school teachers still consider Wikipedia to be unreliable. Teacher-librarians know better.
- Wikipedia articles must conform to strict editorial policies such as having a neutral point of view (WP:NPOV) and using reliable sources (WP:RS). Thousands of volunteer editors and administrators ensure that these policies are adhered to.
- Editors interested in an article can put it on their "Watch list" and are alerted every time it is modified. Admins, elected by the community, can ban vandals.
- If an article hasn't had many editors, it might be less reliable. But danger signs are easy to spot: No references? Warning banner?
- It's always possible to check the article's 'History' and 'Talk' pages. The knowledge creation process is transparent and auditable.

3. BEAT THE PLATFORM BLUES **Outrage generates eyeballs**

- Social media platforms do not profit from spreading falsehoods. They profit from our engagement, and from our data.
- Be alert to the use of triggers such as music, images, ad hominem attacks, which seek to manipulate our emotions. Why is the post trying to make us angry or sad?
- The more is known about us, the easier it is to target us with misinformation.

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

Terms of Reference for the Inquiry:

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.

ABOUT THIS SUBMISSION

1 The News and Media Research Centre (N&MRC) in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia. The N&MRC produces the Australian arm of the internationally-known annual *Digital News Report*. It has also been at the forefront of the co-development with University of Canberra Faculty of Education colleagues and primary and secondary school teachers of innovative information literacy methods, which were implemented in four ACT primary and secondary schools in 2022.[1] An updated version of these methods, co-developed in 2024 with teacher-librarians in two ACT 'colleges' (high schools), is presented in this submission.[2] The submission is also informed by N&MRC's participation in an international consortium investigating deliberation online with colleagues from ANU, QUT and Hochschule Bielefeld.[3]

SUBMISSION OVERVIEW

2 In the Internet age, 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. Civics education in the Australian school curriculum and civics engagement campaigns in Australian society therefore suffer from a fatal flaw: neither takes into account the fact that our information environment is under attack by foreign and domestic malicious actors. These actors produce or relay disinformation about Australian democratic institutions and electoral events to increase distrust in institutions and erode Australia's multicultural identity and social cohesion.

3 This failure to account for the impact of the information environment on civic understanding is exacerbated by the fact that the Australian curriculum is applied by states and territories, so its implementation varies widely. Further, when information literacy is on the school curriculum, strategies rely on critical methods that are ineffective in an online environment where attention is precious, and finite; they increase cognitive overload, hindering effective information processing.

4 Absent a whole-of-nation response, there will no longer be a consensus regarding how Australians determine what is true about core electoral and non-electoral issues. This is a national crisis which requires new thinking, challenging traditional methods and processes.

5 Specifically, there is an immediate need for civic information literacy tools that are effective when information is over-abundant (they must be fast) and which have broad community acceptance (they must be non-partisan and transparent). Developing such tools and ensuring they have as wide adoption as possible will not only benefit Australian institutions; it will also allow Australia to fulfil its regional leadership mission by providing a democratic alternative to authoritarian counter-narratives.

[1] Co-Developing a New Approach to Media literacy in the Attention Economy. ACT Education Directorate-UC Affiliated Schools Research Program (2021-2022); funding also provided by the US Embassy in Canberra's Public Affairs Program.
[2] Building Information resilience: A collaborative project with ACT Teacher-Librarians. ACT Education Directorate-UC Affiliated Schools Research Program (2024-2026).
[3] Bots Building Bridges (3B): Theoretical, Empirical, and Technological Foundations for Systems that Monitor and Support Political Deliberation Online. Volkswagen Foundation, Artificial Intelligence and the Society of the Future (2021-2024).

6 This submission outlines prevailing approaches to countering information pollution, summarises the information literacy methods for schools developed at the University of Canberra since 2021, and makes three key recommendations:

a. Creation of a national body for the Australian information environment, amongst whose tasks would be the development of effective and non-partisan civic literacy tools.

b. Widespread diffusion of such tools via public information campaigns, via the use of public libraries as diffusion hubs and via inclusion in territory, state and federal public service induction and training programs.

c. To address variable implementations of the national education curriculum, creation of a mandatory Civic Literacy Certificate comprising civics basics and information literacy tools.

AUSTRALIAN POLICY AND EDUCATIONAL RESPONSES TO INFORMATION POLLUTION

7 The 'information environment' 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.[4]

8 Whether produced by foreign interference or domestic extremists, weaponised disinformation aims to shatter social cohesion by increasing sectarian grievances and divides and to undermine trust in the institutions of electoral democracy. The diffusion of disinformation is accelerated by the open Internet and will be supercharged by generative AI such as Large Language Models. Recent examples include threats to public health via the spread of disinformation around COVID-19 vaccination, which hindered the adoption of basic safety measures; the targeting of Australian public servants, e.g. Australian Electoral Commission staff during elections or the Voice referendum; disinformation about climate change; attempts to worsen religious/ethnic divisions in society; and other attempts to increase distrust in institutions.

9 Attacks on the democratic and truth-based Australian information environment have not been met by adequate policy responses. This has several causes. Policy-makers may be wont to consider disorder in the information environment as a 'social media issue', rather than a structural crisis. They may also experience a feeling of powerlessness in the face of globally hegemonic digital media platforms. In addition, Australians frequently adopt a siloed way of thinking about threats in the information environment, which are addressed in terms of cybersecurity, disinformation, social cohesion, foreign interference, data, privacy and criminal exploitation. Silos extend to organisations, as agencies do not naturally share information. When analysis occurs in a truly integrated way, best current practice is often to coordinate through interdepartmental taskforces or similar mechanisms. These are usually built around a single issue, and non-enduring.[5]

[4] Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue (2024) What does it look like for Australia to use all tools of statecraft in the information environment. Canberra: www.asiapacific4d.com
[5] Ibid.

10 The Australian education system is also struggling to meet the challenges posed by information pollution. The National Assessment Program Civics and Citizenship (NAPCC), which is part of the National Assessment Program administered by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), does not include information literacy, i.e. methods to determine whether a statement is factual or a source is credible.

11 When information literacy is on a school's curriculum, implementations vary widely between states, territories, and private / public schools. A survey of 1,069 school children found that only 20% of Australian students aged 8-16 had received lessons at school in the past year to help them judge the trustworthiness of news stories.[6] This finding is confirmed every year by University of Canberra first-year students, who report vastly different learning journeys when it comes to information literacy.

12 In any case, the instruction students receive is poorly suited to deal with our toxic information environment. ACARA's 'Digital Literacy' (formerly ICT) General Capability has a key 'Investigating' element whose 'Evaluate information' component is described as follows: 'students are careful and critical of the information that they encounter when online, and exhibit discernment in their evaluation of the reliability and credibility of online information'.[7]

13 Previously the Australian Curriculum's Civics and Citizenship (7-10) component of the 'Information and Communication Technology (ICT)' Capability similarly stated that 'students develop the knowledge and skills to use digital technologies to research and source information on civics and citizenship, including critically analysing that information'.[8]

14 Such strategies align with other Australian curriculum General Capabilities such as 'Critical and Creative Thinking' and 'Ethical Understanding', which privilege deep, critical engagement with concepts. A commonly used information-checking methodology in Australian education thus uses the memorable acronym of C.R.A.A.P. ('Is it current, relevant, authoritative, accurate? What is its purpose?'). C.R.A.A.P. presents students with a checklist of website design clues, with some questions people might ask themselves when initially arriving at a webpage including: 'Are there ads? Is it a .com or a .org? Is there scientific language? Does it use footnotes?'

15 This 'checklist' approach is problematic. Several of these questions no longer lead to proof of reliability. Anyone can design a professional-looking webpage, or use spellcheck. Further, compiling questions leads to cognitive overload and hinders effective information processing, so students often latch onto the most visible signals, resulting in poor decisions – for example, that a URL ending with '.org' is inherently more reliable than one ending in '.com'.[9] An extensive checklist approach is also poorly suited for our information-rich world, in which a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention. Deep, critical methods are ineffective in information environments where attention is precious, and finite.

[6] Notley, T., Dezuanni, M., Zhong, H. F,. & Chambers, C. (2020). News and young Australians in 2020: How young people access, perceive and are affected by news media. Research Report, Sydney, Western Sydney University and Queensland University of Technology.
[7] ACARA (2021) Australian Curriculum: General capabilities – Digital Literacy (previously ICT). Consultation - introductory information and learning continua, p.8.
[8] https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/information-and-communication-technology-ict-capability/
[9] Caulfield, M. (2020, December 1) The truth is in the network, Project Information Literacy, Smart Talk Interview, no. 31. https://projectinfolit.org/smart-talk-interviews/truth-is-in-the-network/

CIVIC INFORMATION LITERACY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA

16 In 2022, a N&MRC-Faculty of Arts and Design/Faculty of Education project funded by the ACT Education Directorate – University of Canberra Affiliated Schools Research program and by the US Embassy in Canberra taught students in four primary and secondary ACT schools basic civic information skills.[10] This civic information literacy program innovated in two key respects.

17 Firstly, it taught students to 'think like a fact-checker'. This means that students should not engage with dubious content 'vertically', either by scrolling down a webpage, by looking at an 'About' page, or by analysing a claim in depth. Instead, students should learn about a source of information by leaving the webpage, opening another tab on a browser, and searching elsewhere: a concept known as 'lateral reading'. If the claim or source is found to be reliable, students can investigate in more depth, but if it is not, they should move on.

18 Lateral reading is part of the Civic Online Reasoning (COR) framework, developed by the Stanford History Education Group.[11] COR recognises the importance of the Internet as a source of political information and refers to the ability to effectively search for, evaluate, and verify social and political information online. What matters is not what students know, but the steps taken to verify claims. The term 'civic' to meant to differentiate COR from broader media literacy efforts and to emphasise the key role that finding credible information plays in democratic decision-making.[12]

19 Lateral reading has been shown to augment the capacity to determine the credibility of digital news and social media posts (by investigating the source of a website, critiquing evidence, and locating reliable sources) of middle school students,[13] high school students,[14] university students[15] and preservice teachers.[16] Another study found that introducing lateral reading skills meant students were more likely to prefer a more credible source of information over a less credible source when two sources were presented, whereas few students improved in their ability to assess a single deceptive website. This led the authors to conclude that skills-based information literacy instruction, though highly effective, must be paired with foundational knowledge about how the Internet is structured and about different kinds of online sources.[17]

[10] NCunneen, R. & O'Neil, M., Co-developing a new approach to media literacy in the attention economy. Faculty of Education, University of Canberra.
[11] Wineburg, S., McGrew, S., Breakstone, J., & Ortega, T. (2016). Evaluating information: The cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning. Stanford History Education Group. https://purl.stanford.edu/fv751yt5934
[12] 'Civic online reasoning does not seek to prepare students to become professional fact-checkers. Instead, it teaches students some of the evaluative approaches that allowed fact-checkers to find better information more efficiently. Civic online reasoning features three questions that were at the heart of fact-checkers' approach. First, students should ask, "Who is behind this information?" They should read laterally to probe the author or organization presenting the information and consider their qualifications, motivations, and perspective on the issue at hand. When students locate sources they decide may be trustworthy, they should ask, "What is the evidence?" and examine whether sufficient evidence is provided from reliable sources to support the claims made. Finally, students should routinely ask, "What do other sources say?" If they are uncertain about a source or claim, they should turn to the wider resources of the Internet and seek additional, reliable sources. As they search, students should exercise click restraint, or slow down on search results, to make a wiser choice about where to begin their research.' McGrew, S., & Breakstone, J. (2023). Civic Online Reasoning across the curriculum: Developing and testing the efficacy of digital literacy lessons. AERA Open, 9, 23328584231176451.
[13] McGrew, S., & Breakstone, J. (2023). Civic Online Reasoning across the curriculum: Developing and testing the efficacy of digital literacy lessons. AERA Open, 9, 23328584231176451.
[14] Axelsson, C.-A.W., Guath, M., & Nygren, T. (2021). Learning how to separate fake from real news: Scalable digital tutorials promoting students' Civic Online Reasoning, Future Internet 13, 60; McGrew, S. (2020). Learning to evaluate: An intervention in civic online reasoning. Computers & Education, 145, 103711.; Wineburg, S., Breakstone, J., McGrew, S., Smith, M. D., & Ortega, T. (2022). Lateral reading on the open Internet: A district-wide field study in high school government classes. Journal of Educational Psychology, 114(5), 893.
[15] Breakstone, J., Smith, M., Connors, P., Ortega, T., Kerr, D., & Wineburg, S. (2021, February 23). Lateral reading: College students learn to critically evaluate internet sources in an online course. The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review.
[16] Weisberg, L., Kohnen, A., & Dawson, K. (2022). Impacts of a digital literacy intervention on preservice teachers' civic online reasoning abilities, strategies, and perceptions. Journal of Technology and Teacher Education, 30(1), 73-98.
[17] Kohnen, A. M., Mertens, G. E., & Boehm, S. M. (2020). Can middle schoolers learn to read the web like experts? Possibilities and limits of a strategy-based intervention. Journal of Media Literacy Education, 12(2), 64-79.

20 Our second innovation was that we recommended using Wikipedia for the verification of claims. Though 'anyone can edit' the online encyclopaedia, volunteer editors ('Wikipedians') ensure that edits conform to policies such as neutrality - no subjective opinion is allowed - and verifiability: all information must be supported by a reliable source, such as an academic article or a book published by a legitimate publisher. Trusted editors can place articles on their 'Watch List'; they will then be alerted every time the article is modified, and unverifiable modifications will be eliminated.[18]

21 Studies have shown that medical science articles on Wikipedia are as correct as scientific publications.[19] However, despite Wikipedia's quality improving substantially over time, 'it is still perceived in a static and dated way, as from the time of its inception'.[20] This was indeed one of the most consistent and persistent findings in our research: negative perceptions of Wikipedia's reliability are widespread in the school teaching community. Many teachers are unaware of the Wikipedia community's strict enforcement of editorial policies.

22 In contrast, the free encyclopedia's focus on reliable sources and appropriate referencing resonates with teacher-librarian practice. Indeed teacher-librarians were consistently supportive of our approach. Whereas information literacy has no real place in the Australian curriculum, rendering its integration into teaching programs challenging, practices such as searching databases, creating inquiry questions, correct referencing, and academic integrity are core teacher-librarian business. Teacher-librarians also manage access to schools' reliable epistemic environments (e.g., academic databases), as opposed to their unreliable ones (e.g., the open Web), so are keenly aware that these distinct environments mandate different information processing approaches.

23 Our current ACT Education Directorate - University of Canberra Affiliated Schools Research project is being co-developed with teacher-librarians in two ACT colleges, and informs the following recommendations.

[18] Morgan, J. (2019). Research: Patrolling on Wikipedia/Report - Meta. https://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Research:Patrolling_on_Wikipedia
[19] Buchbinder, R., & Bourne, A. (2018) Content analysis of consumer information about knee arthroscopy in Australia. ANZ Journal of Surgery, 88, 346-353; Kräenbring, J., Penza, T. M., Gutmann, J., Muehlich, S., Zolk, O., Wojnowski, L., Maas, R., Engelhardt, S., & Sarikas, A. (2014) Accuracy and completeness of drug Information in Wikipedia: A comparison with standard textbooks of pharmacology. PLoS ONE, 9(9): e106930; Rajagopalan, M. S., Khanna, V. K., Leiter, Y., Stott, M., Showalter, T. N., Dicker, A. P., & Lawrence, Y. R. (2011) Patient-oriented cancer information on the internet: A comparison of Wikipedia and a professionally maintained database. Journal of Oncological Practice, 7(5), 319-23; Thomas, G. R., Eng. L., de Wolff, J. F., & Grover, S. C. (2013) An evaluation of Wikipedia as a resource for patient education in nephrology. Seminars in Dialysis, 26(2), 159-63.
[20] Jemielniak, D. (2019) Wikipedia: why is the common knowledge resource still neglected by academics? GigaScience, 8, 1-2.

RECOMMENDATIONS: PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

24 We echo the call made in a recent AP4D options paper, to which N&MRC contributed, for the creation of a national body for the information environment.[21] This body should coordinate work across government and engage in dialogue with non-government actors such as industry, civil society, non-governmental organisations and academics. Part of this body's remit would include contributing to Australian policy responses to social media platforms' impacts on the dissemination of disinformation, but we have chosen to omit this factor from our submission in order to focus on actions which can be accomplished without the need for international cooperation.

25 Another key task for a national body for the information environment would be the creation of a set of effective and non-partisan civic information tools to help Australians determine which claims and sources are legitimate, and worth their attention. In addition to representatives from the education and research sectors, this process should involve stakeholders such as the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), ABC Education, the Museum of Australian Democracy, etc.

26 Effective and non-partisan civic information tools should be made widely available via public education campaigns. In addition to media communications, public libraries could act as hubs for community dissemination and engagement.

27 Effective and non-partisan civic information tools should be incorporated into the training of Australian defence, law enforcement, and public service personnel.

28 Finally, we must recognise that much political deliberation occurs online, and that it is necessary to support people, and particularly volunteer editors (e.g., on Wikipedia) and volunteer moderators (e.g., on Reddit) who not only process informational claims, but also perform the important and often thankless task of curating information environments. We therefore recommend that civic information tools to identify and counter hate speech should be developed and made widely available via media communications and public information campaigns in public libraries and other government sites.

RECOMMENDATIONS: EDUCATION

29 Civic information literacy skills should be formally included in in the Australian curriculum.

30 Funding for teacher-librarian positions in schools should be maintained, and imparting civic information literacy skills should be included in their mandate.

31 To remedy variable implementations of curriculum across States and Territories, we suggest that effective and non-partisan civic information tools should be included in the primary and/or secondary curriculum in the shape of a mandatory Civic Literacy Certificate.

32 We now suggest examples of civic information tools for information processing (#1) and for countering hate speech (#2). Figure 1 (p. 9) provides an overview, which also includes basic introductory civic education concepts. Figure 2 (p. 10) provides a more detailed view of what core skills a Civic Literacy Certificate might include.

[21] Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue, op. cit.

CIVIC INFORMATION LITERACY TOOLS #1 INFORMATION PROCESSING: FACT-CHECKING

33 To be effective and have wide community acceptance, civic information tools should be *fast, transparent* and *non-partisan*.

34 Fast: in the 'attention economy' time is precious. Deep engagement with dubious claims is a poor strategy, as it represents time better spent elsewhere. Instead, students must acquire the means to quickly decide which claims are worth their attention. Lateral reading is fast.

35 Transparent: the notion that cabals are manipulating information in secret is foundational to the conspiratorial rejection of 'elite' politics, science and news media. Reliable, trustworthy information must therefore strive to be transparent. Members of the Demos UK think tank wrote in 2010: 'Conspiracy theories are a reaction to the lack of transparency and openness in many of our institutions. The more open our institutions, the less likely we are to believe we are living in a conspiring world'.[22] Wikipedia epitomises transparency.[23]

36 Non-partisan: to be accepted by primary and high school students, teachers, parents and other stakeholders, information literacy tools should not promote, or appear to promote, any social or political perspective. Lateral reading's focus on verification satisfies this criterion.

37 In addition, we distinguish between information environments where epistemic certainty is high (e.g., academic databases) and where it is unknown (e.g., Web, social media).

38 We summarise our information processing civic information literacy tools below (see Figures 1 and 2 for more detailed descriptions).

a) *Reacting* according to the epistemic environment
b) *Choosing* how to read (vertically or laterally)
c) *Checking* trusted sources
d) *Questioning* emotional manipulation

[22] Bartlett, J. & Miller, C. (2010) The power of unreason: conspiracy theories, extremism and counter-terrorism. Demos, p. 39. http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/thepowerofunreason

[23] A Wiki is a database which can be collaboratively edited and where every change is archived: on Wikipedia every change with its author and date appears successively in the article's 'History' page. If a reader clicks on a line, the two versions of the article appear side by side. Every article also has a 'Talk' page where 'Wikipedians' collectively resolve content disputes. In short, the editorial process is transparent and auditable.

CIVIC INFORMATION LITERACY TOOLS #2 INFORMATION CURATION: COUNTER SPEECH

39 Large social media platforms have relatively clear definitions of what is deemed to be hate speech, e.g. the discriminatory exclusion and dehumanization of people, and inciting violence, hate, and harassment. When hate speech occurs one always has the option of deleting it to limit the spread of hateful language and ideas. However, deletion or censorship risks restricting freedom of expression and some comments do not clearly fall into the abovementioned definitions of hate speech. Nevertheless, they require a response, because of their implications.

40 Broadly speaking, hateful comments and ideas can be differentiated into three categories.

a) Criminally prosecutable
b) Guideline or policy violation
c) Gray area, general incivility, or harmful misinformation

41 Criminally prosecutable comments should be reported to the authorities and then deleted. Violations of platform or community guidelines should be reported to the platform operator and punished accordingly. In all other cases, it might be beneficial to engage with hateful language and ideas to initiate a constructive debate, bring forth counter points and positively influence the authors as well as bystanders. Any counter-engagement with hateful language or ideas is commonly referred to as 'counter speech'.[24]

42 Counter speech is employed by NGO activists, professional community managers, and private users aiming to combat hateful ideas and language and promote a constructive debate culture. This can take the form of systematic campaigns or of spontaneous reactions. Counter speech techniques are generally not precisely defined and applied based on personal experience or vague guidelines. While there is evidence that counter speech is generally effective, the effectiveness and appropriateness of specific techniques has not been extensively investigated.[25]

43 We summarise our information curation civic information literacy tools below (see Figure 1 for a more detailed description). They can be used individually, consecutively, or in combination.

a) Denouncing
b) Empathizing
c) Debating

44 Denouncing hateful language and ideas is crucial in any situation. This can be done by simply stating their unacceptability, or by explaining why a comment was potentially harmful.[26] The message can be underlined by warning of the possible consequences of such a comment, e.g. personal consequences such as sanctions, or loss of face.

[24] Benesch, S., Ruths, D., Dillon, K. P., Saleem, H. M., & Wright, L. (2016). Considerations for successful counterspeech, Dangerous Speech Project; Cepollaro, B., Lepoutre, M., & Simpson, R. (2023). Counterspeech, Philosophy Compass.
[25] Baider, F. (2023) Accountability issues, online covert hate speech, and the efficacy of counter-speech. Politics and Governance, 11(2); Garland, J., Ghazi-Zahedi, K., Young, J.-G., Hébert-Dufresne, L., & Galesic, M. (2022) Impact and dynamics of hate and counter speech online. EPJ Data Science, 11(1), 3; Sasse, J., & Grossklags, J. (2023) Breaking the silence: Investigating which types of moderation reduce negative effects of sexist social media content. Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 7(CSCW2), 1–26; Schäfer, S., Rebasso, I., Boyer, M. M., & Planitzer, A. M. (2023) Can we counteract hate? Effects of online hate speech and counter speech on the perception of social groups. Communication Research, 00936502231201091.
[26] Stockmann, D., Schlosser, S., & Ksatryo, P. (2023). Social media governance and strategies to combat online hate speech in Germany. Policy & Internet, 15(4), 627–645.

45 Empathizing can be useful to build a bridge to the author of a hateful comment by expressing understanding for the author without endorsing what they have written.[27] Also, invoking compassion for the people affected can induce reflection of possible consequences of hateful language and ideas.

46 Debating is only possible if a comment has enough 'substance'. A common approach involves debunking a statement by presenting contradictory facts or pointing out logical contradictions within an argument.[28] Presenting additional facts and asking critical questions may lead to more in-depth exchanges.[29]

47 It can be difficult to assess which counter speech approach is the right one. Denouncing is almost always necessary, but a blatant statement can close the door to further debating or empathizing. Empathizing can be difficult when confronted with hateful statements. Debating requires that a comment has enough actual substantial content to be addressed and can easily escalate into lengthy, challenging arguments.

48 On an individual level, experience and sensitivity are important, especially when trying to empathize with the author of a hateful comment. If one is not equipped for a deeper argument, it may be best not to enter into a lengthy debate, but one can't go wrong by simply expressing disagreement with hateful content.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

49 We hope that this submission will inform policy and education responses to the grave threat posed by malicious disinformation to the Australian information environment and rules-based democratic order. We would be happy to provide further information to the Committee if deemed useful.

[27] Hangartner, D., Gennaro, G., Alasiri, S., Bahrich, N., Bornhoft, A., Boucher, J., Demirci, B. B., Derksen, L., Hall, A., Jochum, M., Munoz, M. M., Richter, M., Vogel, F., Wittwer, S., Wüthrich, F., Gilardi, F., & Donnay, K. (2021). Empathy-based counterspeech can reduce racist hate speech in a social media field experiment. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 118(50), e2116310118.
[28] Debunking can be informed by strategies outlined in the Debunking Handbook, such as not foregrounding incorrect information. See https://skepticalscience.com/debunking-handbook-2020-downloads-translations.html
[29] Ziegele, M., Jost, P., Bormann, M., & Heinbach, D. (2018). Journalistic counter-voices in comment sections: Patterns, determinants, and potential consequences of interactive moderation of uncivil user comments. Studies in Communication and Media, 7(4), 525–554.

Figure 1. *Civics and citizenships basics, Civic information literacy tools, Civic counter speech tools*

CIVICS AND CITIZENSHIP *[CIVIC LITERACY CERTIFICATE part A?]*

Key Civics Notions (TBC)	
Democratic system – civic institutions e.g. political pluralism, free and transparent elections, free press, independent judiciary, etc.	Democratic values – civic beliefs and attitudes e.g. respect, inclusion, multiculturalism, information literacy, etc.

INFORMATION LITERACY TOOLS *[CIVIC LITERACY CERTIFICATE part B?]*

Evaluating the information environment	
Environment A - e.g. library, peer reviewed databases, ... ➔facts are distinct from opinions	Environment B - e.g. Web, social media, TV ➔facts, or opinions presented as facts?

Choosing a reading strategy	
Vertical reading: critical engagement with ideas, reading in depth, etc.	Lateral reading: evaluating the credibility of a source by comparing it with other sources

Checking in 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...

Reflecting on the emotional impact
Emotional manipulation: Are triggers such as music, images, words, ad hominem attacks, etc., being used? 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 or policy violation ➔report / ban account or other appropriate sanction	Gray area, general incivility, or harmful misinformation ➔ 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

Figure 2. *Four civic information literacy tools: detailed presentation*

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 fact?

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

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.

APPENDIX

Commonwealth of Australia
Proof Committee Hansard
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters.
Inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia (public)

Friday, 13 September 2024
Canberra
[extracts]

Note on the text. The Australian variant of Hansard (the transcripts of parliamentary debates in Britain and many other countries) provides the opportunity to suggests edits to proofs of transcripts. At the time of publishing this report, in November 2024, the revised version of the testimony had not been released. The version published in this report therefore incorporates all the suggestions made (e.g., correcting mistakes and, on a few occasions, improving syntax) and so may differ slightly from the official revised version, when it is released.

O'NEIL, Mathieu, Professor of Communication, News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra [by video link]

Committee met at 08:30

CHAIR (Senator Brown): I declare open this public hearing of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands we meet on today and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. I welcome a representative of the News and Media Research Centre at the University of Canberra. Thank you for appearing today. Do you have any comments to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Prof. O'Neil: I'm one of the authors of submission 28 to the committee.

CHAIR: Thank you. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I advise that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and therefore has the same standing as proceedings of the respective houses. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and attracts parliamentary privilege. Would you like to make an opening statement, Professor O'Neil?

Prof. O'Neil: Sure, thank you, and thank you for inviting me to appear before you. I'll say a few words. We're living in a time of epistemic crisis. The very notion of 'information' is under threat. ABC Digital published an article today called 'How to spot fake and AI images', which I was interviewed for.

I will quote a few words from this article to set the scene. Manipulated imagery has been around for as long as photography. The difference today is the informational networks in which it is spread. There's a lack of gatekeeping: traditional media has quality standards and fact-checking. There's a lack of context: there's no explicit differentiation between real and fake, between news and AI hallucination. Low-resolution imagery which is standard on social media makes it harder to spot signs of manipulation, and it's easier to share or repost the content than it is to verify it. The format conditions users to interact with content at the surface level.

What does all this have to do with civics education? Well, you can provide as much information about electoral systems as you want, but if there's no way for people to tell whether other information they encounter is true or not then whatever correct information is being pumped out is useless, because people can't tell whether a countervailing claim has more legitimacy, or not. There's a crisis of trust in traditional democratic institutions which is emerging: in news media, science and representative politics, and alternative sources of information are on the rise. Health influencers have a huge audience. Toxic masculinists are followed by countless boys and young men. Conspiracy theories can affect public health or electoral outcomes, and hostile influence campaigns seek to worsen social divisions. So we need solutions that are practical and have wide community acceptance.

To develop an effective response, democratic education systems must think outside the box. The proposal for information literacy education—I can see you're looking at the poster that we're actually implementing in schools—is the subject of my submission, but there's a wider context, so I'll make two additional quick proposals to counteract toxicity and polarisation.

What we try to do with our program is to instil information processing and curation skills. This is done as part of the ACT Education Directorate and UC Affiliated Schools Research Program with Dr Andrew Ross. Foundational skills must be adapted to the information environment. They must be fast—you can't afford to waste time—they must be transparent, so that trust is restored, and they must be non-partisan to have the widest possible community acceptance.

There are four key skills that we propose. The first skill is determining what kind of information environment you are in. Based on that, the second is deciding how you are going to read. Are you going to read vertically, in depth, or laterally by to looking to the side and checking the source? The third is knowing what a trusted source is. And finally, being alert to emotional manipulation. This is currently being implemented in an ACT college by teacher librarians in ten year 11 classes. That's how to process claims effectively, but we also need to help those who curate information environments on how to deal with hate speech by giving them tools to determine what the best approach is.

I also want to say a few words about toxicity and polarisation. This is going to sound a bit weird, but we need to reclaim masculinity. The rightful contestation of patriarchy means that democrats have left the building, the rejection of toxic masculinity just throws out the baby with the bathwater. People like Andrew Tate, the influencer and kickboxer, or other similar personalities, have a great deal of appeal because they're fighters who prove their strength in action. Fighting is a natural human impulse, we must not suppress it; we must channel it. The core martial arts value is respect, and, when you're training, skills and a respectful attitude are what matters; gender is irrelevant. I think we should incorporate martial arts training and values of respect and self-discipline into the curriculum. It's a little bit left field, but if you want to appeal to people you have to use what works.

Finally, we must develop collaborative values against polarisation. In the attention economy, social media content is based on dominating one's adversary. Conflict sells; conflict attracts. All of the energy is devoted to 'destroying' the 'opposing point of view', so we should incorporate opposite values of cooperation into the curriculum and work together for a common goal that benefits everybody. Digital commons are a prime example of this. Open-source software, which is now an industry-standard, is becoming a necessity for students to learn, to learn coding principles and values of openness and transparency. Wikipedia, the antidote to disinformation which is auditable and based on the authority of the better argument, should be taught in schools. As you know, the second innovation of our information literacy method, apart from lateral reading, is that we encourage the development of Wikipedia literacy. I'm not saying to trust Wikipedia completely, just to understand when it works and when it's reliable. Wikipedia is an extraordinary resource which needs to be better valued and supported by government. Thank you for your attention. I would be happy to clarify any of these points.

CHAIR: Thank you, Professor O'Neil. We'll go to questions. You've got a number of recommendations in your submission. Could I just ask you to talk through each of those recommendations and expand on them a little bit? Also, for the committee and Hansard, could you explain as to why you think that those recommendations will assist us in terms of the terms of reference that we have on this inquiry?

Prof. O'Neil: There's one set of recommendations which are to do with public engagement. The first one is based on the paper, which I contributed to, by the AP4D think tank, which has observed the way government is dealing with the information environment, and they call for the creation of a national body for the information environment. The reason for that is that, because the Australian government's response is atomised between different agencies, there's no consistency and there's no follow-through. The taskforces which are created tend to deal with one issue—privacy, disinformation or cybersecurity—and there's no staying power.

Perhaps members of government also see the epistemic crisis, disinformation, as a social media problem which isn't really an existential crisis, which it is, because, if you have parts of the population who believe things that aren't true, or who can be misled, then there's no way that you can have a common discourse and a common identity anymore. So having one body that would coordinate, engage with civil society, engage with academia, engage with defence et cetera would be useful.

What I'm suggesting is that there should be a common toolset that people have, and the four key skills that we propose could be part of that toolset. These are practical, non-partisan rules about what to do to process claims. The reason we want to be non-partisan is, when you're dealing with schools, you're dealing with a huge array of stakeholders, whether it's children, teachers, teacher-librarians, parents or members of the public. You have to try and be as inclusive as possible, and I try and stay away from what's known as 'media literacy', which is unpacking discourses in media content, asking: 'Why is this image or why is this story featuring this kind of content or this kind of person and not that kind? What power is at play here?' That's very important, but it could be seen as partisan. It could be seen as trying to deconstruct power.

We need to give people tools to be able to fact-check effectively. If you have tools such as C.R.A.A.P.—an acronym for whether it is current, relevant, authoritative, accurate and what its purpose is —it takes you a very long time to figure it out. It's not effective, and that kind of approach is overwhelming, so people tend to latch on to the most obvious thing. They will say, 'This website is a .com, so it must be more reliable than a .org,' or look for spelling mistakes, or look for design clues. None of these things work anymore, because it's very easy to fake content now.

What we need is a method that allows you to effectively check the veracity of a claim or of a source, and that's lateral reading. You look away—don't go deep, don't go vertical—do a search, find what a reliable source says, use Wikipedia as a first stop for popular topics and then you can tell whether the claim is worth your attention. If it's not, move on. That's a very effective

technique that was pioneered at Stanford University. It's used widely in the United States and Canada, and people are aware of it here, but it goes against traditional critical thinking, which is: 'We have to find logical flaws in an argument. We have to look at intertextuality. We have to think deeply.' That's fine if you're sure about the quality of the source. But if you're not, you could be wasting your time because disinformation seeks to manipulate you by mixing the real and the fake, and it could take you hours to untangle those threads. So we also propose that there should be some public education campaigns. We say libraries could play a role in that. We say key public service or defence personnel should probably be made aware of such tools.

One thing that we found in doing research in this area, is that there's a great deal of disparity between the trajectories of students who arrive at university, in terms of what kind of information literacy skills they've acquired. That's within the ACT or in the regional areas around Canberra. Some students have some idea of what they should be doing. Others have never even heard of it. That's because the curriculum might be determined at the federal level or by ACARA, but its implementation varies widely between states and territories and between private and public schools. So we suggested that there should be some kind of certificate, which would be consistent across all sectors of the education landscape, to make sure everybody has a set of tools that is similar, that allows them to determine what is true and what is not, what is correct and what is not and what is reliable and what is not. That's a summary of what I said.

The other aspect is hate speech and counter speech, information curation. It's not just processing a claim but being in charge of an information environment. You can think of moderators on Reddit or of editors on Wikipedia. They have to moderate other people's discourses and they are not supported. So we said we should provide them some tools to be able to analyse and determine what kind of hate speech or offensive speech is being articulated and, based on that, how to react.

CHAIR: Thank you. I'll go to Mr Chester now.

Mr CHESTER: In terms of civics education, the integrity of the electoral process is critical as well. You mentioned in your opening comments the threats of misinformation. Do you have confidence in the role of the AEC here in Australia? The AEC is charged with ensuring misinformation is called out and is trying to deal with some of those issues on social media. From your experience, are you comfortable we're addressing that adequately or are we being outgunned a bit in that regard?

Prof. O'Neil: I'm not quite clear on everything that the AEC is doing, but they're dealing with very difficult problems. I remember listening to an interview with the commissioner of the AEC in the lead-up to the Voice referendum. He was saying that staff were being challenged by people about the use of Dominion voting machines in Australia and how these were going to be manipulated. He said, 'Obviously, there's no electronic voting in Australia.'

These ideas are being imported, so to speak, from the US or other places and people place a great deal of trust in them. What can you do against that? You can speak out against it and you can try and communicate about it, but if people are set in this belief system—the only way you can deprogram somebody who believes in a conspiracy like that is by gaining their trust on a personal level. Communication campaigns have limited efficacy with people who are deeply embedded in conspiracies, I'm afraid.

Mr CHESTER: Thank you.

CHAIR: We have some questions online from the member for Hasluck, Tania Lawrence.

Ms LAWRENCE: I'm from Western Australia, but obviously this is an issue without borders. I'm wondering whether you're seeing some elements that are working well. For example, on X there's the possibility now of readers making corrections. You can see a little blurb pops up below it that says, 'This is not quite right,' or it's maybe a shopping scam or something like that, and there's a little bit of that on Facebook. To the extent to which readers themselves have the opportunity to try and correct mis- or disinformation versus some of the actions of governments around the world—and we've just introduced some legislation to try and work towards addressing the extent of mis- and disinformation—are there examples you can point to that you think are working well, that can be supported further, or reforms that you've seen that are starting to get some traction?

Prof. O'Neil: I'm afraid I can only think of a counter example, which is that the community notes—the way they're trying to deal with misinformation on Twitter/X since Elon Musk took over and dismantled the specialised teams that were doing it—they've introduced this crowdsourced approach. Unfortunately, this can be weaponised.

There was a case a couple of weeks ago or a few months ago, I can't remember, where an antinuclear group was being targeted by opponents on Twitter/X who were constantly saying that they were misinforming, or breaching the terms of service. After a certain number of complaints, they're automatically kicked off Twitter/X. So they were being, basically, hounded out by these organised people who were using that as a way to attack their enemies.

That said, I'll go back to the example of Wikipedia, which is where you do have community management of claims and a set of rules, more importantly, that people have to adhere to, such as notability and reliable sources. It's a lot more difficult to manipulate the system when you have complete transparency and auditability. Every change on Wikipedia is archived, whereas social media companies are a black box. We don't know why they take decisions, particularly when they're being automated.

I think that Twitter/X was doing a reasonably good job pre-Musk, in terms of its teams that were moderating content, but since Musk's stated intention was to open the floodgates and let everybody speak and not have any restriction on free speech, etc, that's what's happened. There are case studies of what has been called the 'Musk effect'—that is to say, the increase of hate speech, the increase of engagement with hate speech, using metrics such as the amount of certain key words, which I won't repeat here. There's a clear increase in all of that since Elon Musk took over.

Ms LAWRENCE: Have you found whether the reforms that the EU have introduced have had any positive effect? They're a bit further advanced than we are. They've got programs from within schools, trying to improve the analytical skills of people utilising social media through to electoral campaigns, to help people understand the information that's in front of them. Are you seeing the effect of their reforms, which are relatively new as well, versus what's actually happening in practice with their elections?

Prof. O'Neil: That's an extremely wide-ranging question. I'm not even sure what exact reforms you're talking about. At first, I thought you were talking about the Digital Services Act, which was introduced in 2023.

Ms LAWRENCE: Sorry, that's where I was starting. That was their endeavour to try to work through and address some of that mis- and disinformation. Have you had an opportunity to look at the reforms they've introduced to understand how they're being implemented from schools into the community? In terms of electoral matters, trying to help people differentiate between information and mis- and disinformation, what has been the practical effect of that reform, or is it too early to say?

Prof. O'Neil: I think it's too early to say. It's an interesting question, but I'm not entirely sure how you do the trickle through to the schools. In terms of the response, as you no doubt know, there's an ongoing conflict between the EU and Twitter/X, and you can also look at the example of Brazil, which is even more extreme. There does seem to be a conflictual relationship between Twitter/X and certain state or multistate entities. These entities don't seem to be making a lot of progress in terms of forcing Twitter/X to adopt what they want them to adopt. It's a really good question: whether that has filtered down into schools, but I don't think there's any data that I'm aware of that has been published. It might have been collected but I haven't seen anything published yet on that topic.

Ms LAWRENCE: No, I imagine it is too early for evaluation because, as you say, it's just too recent. I have seen some of their programs, and they are fantastic. But I certainly appreciate your point that it might be too early.

CHAIR: Ms Chaney, you'd like to ask a question?

Ms CHANEY: I'd love to hear more about the civic literacy certificate idea and how that would fit in with the Australian curriculum's civics and citizenship component. Would it be the culmination of that part of the curriculum? What's the relationship there?

Prof. O'Neil: We summarised our proposal in a table on page 9, figure 1, at the end of our submission. This is just complete pie in the sky, castles in space. To be totally honest with you, I'm actually from France originally, and France is the opposite of Australia in that it's incredibly centralised: everything trickles down from the minister to four million employees and everybody does the same thing. So I was sort of trying to 'Frenchify' the Australian curriculum in a way. I'm half joking, but I do think that when it comes to this sort of thing, you need to have consistency. The idea was that you could have key civic notions and then you could have key civic literacy tools, and everybody would do that, because it's the same for everybody.

We all need to know the same information about the electoral system and about our democratic values, and we also need to be able to evaluate information correctly, so why not put them together? But I'm not an education designer; this is just trying to help. I can see what's happening, and I've been working on this issue of disinformation for a number of years, and I believe that we've found some tools that could help. We're just making suggestions, but in terms of the actual mechanics of it I don't have the skill set because I don't know enough about how a curriculum is designed. I would encourage the committee and the education designers to try and understand the urgency, which is that if we don't do something, we will have sectors of the population who are just lost because they've gone down rabbit holes and you can't get them back. It's just about having a common discourse—

Ms CHANEY: And some sort of micro credential that assures that people have a common understanding of those skills. That makes sense. Can you give us, from your experience, some more examples of how the current competency in relation to researching and sourcing information on civics and critically analysing that information is insufficient?

Prof. O'Neil: That's a great question. What you had in the submission was the intention, and now we've started to actually do it. When we started, it was with some questions to approximately 150 year 11 schoolchildren and we said something like, 'Here's a news item about Raygun'—the breakdancer—'Do you think it's reliable?' This was actually from msn.com. It was just based on tweets and allegations, so it had no credibility whatsoever, yet 21 per cent said, 'Yes, it's credible.'

We also had a second question, which was about some Extinction Rebellion photos. We explained what Extinction Rebellion was trying to protest about, and the photos were of two parks with all this rubbish strewn on them. It was basically two tweets. They said, 'Look at what these Extinction Rebellion people have left behind,' ha-ha, etc. There, 28 per cent of the students said, 'Yes, they've got photographic evidence. This is credible.'

They also had to justify their choice, so there were lots of great comments like, 'The tweet is just a photo,' 'There's no evidence,' 'It's not a journalist,' 'It's just a random person on Twitter'. So some of them had those skills. But the fact that 28 per cent just accepted a photographic image as proof, without any kind of context or explanation—I found that was pretty striking. Obviously, it's not a huge sample, but it does still tell you that there's a need to do something.

Ms CHANEY: The other thing I was interested in is that, in relation to widespread distribution of tools, you mentioned public libraries. That's fantastic, but most people are not going to go to the public library and seek the tool. Have you got any recommendations about other potential distribution channels?

Prof. O'Neil: TikTok. It depends what population you want to target. You've got low-socioeconomic people, you've got Indigenous people, you've got old people—there are different ways you could do this. I know the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia had a program where they would go into old people's homes with video archives that old people would find interesting, to try and stimulate them cognitively. You could imagine programs like that in old people's homes. It's not one size fits all. The tools are the same, but the way you reach the audience is different.

I'm actually wanting to go into TikTok, because I think that's where the young people are. We're going to do a competition. Once we finish the program, we'll say: 'Can you please do some videos based on what we've done and we'll put the best one up.' We just want to use any means available, basically. There are a couple of martial arts—Muay Thai—studios in Canberra that I know. I would love to work with them and say, 'Hey, can you do some Muay Thai-style posters to reach the people there?' or, 'Can we do something with you, because you'd be a great spokesperson?' It's just about finding the right vectors.

I agree that not everybody goes to libraries, but they are still a civic space. Teacher-librarians are key allies in this battle because they get it. A lot of teachers don't get it. Information literacy has no real space in the curriculum. The curriculum is already stuffed to the gills, so teachers are struggling to fit everything in—'You want us to do something else on top of it?'—whereas for teacher-librarians it's their core business, really. So they're really good allies. That said, I accept that not everybody goes to the library but it would still be a good base of operations to maybe do other things in the community.

Ms CHANEY: If I may, Chair, one more—or have we run out?

CHAIR: No, continue.

Ms CHANEY: You really helpfully discussed the need for tools to support information processing, like reacting, choosing, checking, questioning, thinking like a fact checker. I'm interested in your thoughts on the need for tools to support active information gathering or curating sources that are reliable and independent. How does that fit in?

Prof. O'Neil: We can talk about what's known as query literacy, such as how you formulate queries using a search engine. There are different ways, like Boolean searches, etc. In terms of trust—I'm thinking aloud here—I don't think you can work it out. You just have to first tell people. The BBC has a record of transparency and evidence, and if they make a mistake they'll correct it. But, in terms of how people can themselves work it out, they can work it out by looking at a Wikipedia article about a source. But that's about as far as I would go because in reality there aren't really any more universally trusted sources of information. Even a lot of people in Australia think the ABC is terribly biased one way or the other.

That's why I always go back to Wikipedia because they really try to keep it neutral. For popular articles, they're reviewed thousands of times. A peer reviewed article is reviewed by three people—experts certainly, but three people—whereas popular Wikipedia articles are reviewed by thousands of people. There have been many studies that show the medical science articles on Wikipedia are as good quality as professional journals. I do think it is a key resource in the fight against disinformation because disinformation is simply not tolerated on it. If there are no reliable sources, it's kicked out immediately. That to me means that it's working, because of the crowdsourced application of the rules they've created. Unfortunately, they're being targeted and harassed, which means there are fewer editors and it's not growing as much. That's why I think it should be supported as well.

Ms CHANEY: Thank you. That's it from me.

CHAIR: Professor O'Neil, have you conducted any research into where young people get their news, whether they're getting it from TikTok, Instagram, Facebook or newspapers?

Prof. O'Neil: The News and Media Research Centre runs every year the Digital News Report, which is part of a 40-country international survey about news consumption, and we are the Australian arm of that. The 2024 report was published in June, and—I can send it to you if you like—that gives a lot of information about news consumption. I'm not directly involved in it. I've worked on a couple of editions, but I haven't worked on it for a few years now. There is definitely a trend amongst young people to get information predominantly from social media. I don't want to say a figure, because I'll get it wrong, but it's significantly from social media more than from traditional media.

CHAIR: For someone who predominantly gets their information from TikTok, your organisation is looking to develop tools to encourage them to test the veracity of what they're seeing?

Prof. O'Neil: For what you've got in front of you, the four key skills, we want to try and develop campaigns so that people will have those skills. One thing I want to stress is it's not about telling people stuff; it's not about messages. It's about giving people practical skills. We've got a pretty small budget and I don't know that we've got much of a reach, but we'll start the ball rolling, and hopefully it'll catch on. I've got no illusions, but that's one way of doing it—to put some content out, hopefully content that is made by young people themselves, because they will respond to it. So we'd love that to happen, and we'll try to make that happen in the next few months.

CHAIR: Thank you. My final question is on a survey that you talked about in your submission. Is that a survey that's conducted every year? How's that survey put together?

Prof. O'Neil: Could you give me the reference page?

CHAIR: It says in your submission:
A survey of 1,069 school children found that only 20% of Australian students aged 8-16 had received lessons at school in the past year to help them judge the trustworthiness—

Prof. O'Neil: Yes, that wasn't us. That was Tanya Notley and her team at Western Sydney University. That was a few years ago. That was around 2020, I think. We just used that as an illustration of the fact that there just wasn't enough education in this space happening in Australia.

CHAIR: So that was 2020. Do you have any updated information? No?

Prof. O'Neil: No.

CHAIR: Okay. Thank you for your attendance today and for sharing this information with the committee. You undertook to provide the report on where people received their information from. Could you send that to the secretariat by Friday 27 September 2024? Again, thank you for coming along today.

Prof. O'Neil: I'd be happy to send it. Thank you so much for having me, and it's been a pleasure talking to you.

DIGITAL COMMONS POLICY COUNCIL

The DCPC is an international think tank established in 2021. It advocates for the recognition of the digital commons and the voluntary work that creates these common goods. It also seeks to support initiatives that use digital commons to accelerate the transition to a more ecologically sustainable and fair society. It does so by publishing public reports based on empirical data, educational resources for schools and scientific articles, and by making submissions and recommendations to government.

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November 2024

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ISBN (print): 978-1-74088-581-2
ISBN (electronic): 978-1-74088-586-7

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Citation: O'Neil, M., Heppner, H. & Ross, A. (2024) *Civic Information Literacy Tools*. DCPC/NMRC, University of Canberra. https://doi.org/10.60836/smyk-8669

Design: DCPC
Layout: Zita Leung

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