

Social media

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Digital technology and online services now influence most corners of Australian society, from the way that government and businesses operate and influence lives, through to the everyday actions of citizens – the things people do, and how they do them. They have also come to form part of the communicative core of Australia’s democracy. The COVID-19 pandemic for a time forced through a series of related changes, as social distancing became a public health necessity for the common good, and traditional means of socialising were strained, especially in Australia’s dominant big city urban areas. Citizens, enterprises and agencies all embraced new digital technology practices as the principal way to maintain community and stay ‘informed’ on current events, with lasting implications for working patterns (WGEA, 2021; AIHW, 2023), retailing, private and government services, and political life.

How should the social media system operate in a liberal democracy?

- ◆ Social media should enhance the pluralism and diversity of the overall media system, lowering the costs for citizens in securing political information, commentary and evidence, and improving their opportunities to understand how democracy works.
- ◆ Social media should be easily accessible for ordinary citizens, encouraging them to become politically involved by taking individual actions to express their views in responsible ways, and enabling them to take collective actions to promote a shared viewpoint.
- ◆ The overall media system should operate as transparently as possible, so that truthful/factual content predominates, it quickly drives out misinformation, and ‘fake news’, ‘passing off’ and other lapses are minimised and rapidly counteracted.
- ◆ The growth of social media should contribute to greater political equality by re-weighting communication towards members of the public and non-government organisations, reducing the communication and organisational advantages of corporate actors, professional lobbyists or ‘industrialised’ content promoters.

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- ◆ By providing more direct, less ‘mediated’ communications with large publics, social media should enhance the capacity of politicians and parties to create and maintain direct links with citizens, enhancing their understanding of public opinion and responsiveness to it.
- ◆ Social media technologies (such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Google, YouTube, Snapchat and Instagram) have brought about radical changes in how the media systems of liberal democracies operate. Social media should unambiguously enhance citizen vigilance over state policies and public choices, increasing the ‘granularity’ of public scrutiny, speeding up the recognition of policy problems or scandals, and reaching the widest relevant audiences for critiques and commentary of government actions.
- ◆ Platform providers argue that they do not generate the content posted on millions of X (formerly Twitter) sites or Facebook pages, but only provide an online facility that allows citizens, NGOs and enterprises to build their own content. However, these large companies also reap important network and oligopoly effects that increase their discretionary power, and their platforms have become increasingly salient factors in democratic politics. Therefore, regulation of their activities should be considered if they create monopolies or oligopolies, suppress rival competitors, unfairly undermine the viability of established media, fail to deal with extremism and hate speech, or damage the integrity of elections or other political participation processes.
- ◆ Platform providers must take their legal responsibilities to ‘do no harm’ seriously and respond quickly to mitigate new social problems enabled by social media that are identified by public opinion or elected politicians, such as fake news and online harassment of minorities.
- ◆ The development of regulations and law around fast-changing ‘new goods’ like social media often lags behind social practice. Legislators and government need to be agile in responding to emergent problems created by social media, or to existing problems that are re-scaled or change character because of them. Where existing controls or actions to mitigate effects are already feasible in law, their implementation needs to be prioritised and taken seriously by police forces and regulators.
- ◆ As with conventional media, citizens should be able to gain published corrections and other effective forms of redress (including appropriate damages) against reporting or commentary that is illegal, unfair, incorrect or invades personal and family privacy. Citizens are entitled to expect that platform companies will respect all laws applying to them in speedily taking down offensive content, and that the firms will not be able to exploit their power to deter investigations or prosecutions by the police or prosecutors.

How users behave online, and the internal regulation of these key sites by providers, now occupy a central place in debates about how Australian democracy and society operate. The chapter reviews recent developments and then considers overall strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis). After this SWOT analysis, the remaining sections explore three topics in more detail.

Recent developments

All the main social media channels in Australia are controlled by globally owned internet platform companies, with Facebook and other apps owned by Meta dominating national user tables, as [Figure 9.1](#) shows. While Facebook has been in decline in many other advanced countries, its Australian market share has fallen only gradually and in 2023 it still remained the top app used both for all purposes, and for getting news. Facebook Messenger also ranked third for all purposes, but only sixth for news. The only non-Meta programmes in the Figure were Google’s YouTube video app and X (formerly Twitter), which has not been particularly successful in Australia. Other smaller but recently growing apps have included WeChat, and TikTok. Competition in the market between the global players has been intense and now defunct platforms include Myspace, Vine and Google Plus.

The platform companies offer people, other enterprises, state agencies and civil society organisations a space where they can:

- ◆ consume information on a variety of topics from a diverse range of sources
- ◆ create information in the form of content, such as text, images, or videos
- ◆ aggregate content which is relevant to their interests
- ◆ distribute any created and/or aggregated content, such as news-media
- ◆ and connect with others in commonly accessible spaces.

The giant corporations involved have all claimed that content-users are responsible for any harms or inaccuracies they create, and that they can only regulate what gets put up by setting general (impartial) rules. They have also strongly argued that specific social media regulations are a job that governments should steer clear of, especially in liberal democracies. Critics argue that the companies have done and still do far too little to root out hate speech and other evils – because their algorithms used to generate traffic (and attract online advertising) are deliberately designed to be addictive. They show viewers content that they find interesting, and in particular seek to prioritise ‘clickbait’,

‘disinformation’, sensational content and extreme opinions over more accurate, serious or considered materials. Over time too, the ways in which users access social media apps and news content have also shifted increasingly towards using mobile phones, rather than PCs or tablets ([Figure 9.2](#)), which may cut the times and reduce the focus that users give to news. In 2022, nearly two-thirds (61 per cent) of Australian survey respondents said that they got news from their mobile phones, while 44 per cent of consumers highlighted that it was their main device for doing so, a notable increase over time.

Figure 9.1: The major social apps in Australia in 2023

App used (company)	For all (%)	For news (%)
Facebook (Meta)	64	32
YouTube (Google)	57	23
Instagram (Meta)	42	14
X (Twitter)	20	12
WhatsApp (Meta)	29	10
Facebook Messenger (Meta)	48	9

Source: Reuters Institute (2023) Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023, written by Newman, Nic; Fletcher, Richard; Robertson, Craig T; Eddy, Kirsten; and Nielsen, Rasmus Kleis. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf

Figure 9.2: How Australians accessed online news content in 2016 and 2022

	2016	2022
Phone	51	61
Computer, PC	60	40
Tablet	27	22

Source: **Reuters Institute (2022)** *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022*, Newman, Nic; Fletcher, Richard; Robertson, Craig T; Eddy, Kirsten; and Nielsen, Rasmus Kleis. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News-Report_2022.pdf

of the conventional media corporations) sought to force the platform companies to pay media firms for reusing their news content – a saga covered in detail in [Chapter 8](#). Platforms such as Google and Facebook initially threatened to withdraw services from the country, but eventually caved-in to the government pressure and began paying for reusing Australian news content under private arrangements to avoid a mandatory media code.

A second area of acute concern with social media is that it allows users (individuals or organisations) to create and disseminate content at whim. So, while news media and journalism, and the content they create, has traditionally been the home of professionals, social media has allowed individuals with no prior expertise to fill the role of information provider. This information can be reconstituted into ‘news’, regardless of its factuality. Of course, this is not to ignore or marginalise the significant contribution that governments make to the propagation of misinformation. However, at the individual level, misinformation plays havoc on the everyday citizen’s capacity to discern truthful news from propaganda. In a time where we rely increasingly on the connective capacity of social media, we are faced with the challenge of reflecting, understanding and integrating ‘good’ information from ‘bad’. While social media has made it much easier to be connected and to socialise, it has also made it increasingly difficult to ascertain factual commentary from fanatical.

Australia’s systems of governance, representation and policy have found it difficult to maximise social media spaces within the scope of healthy democratic action. Social media’s greatest promise was its capacity to connect everyone to everyone else. This was also a promise of greater connection between citizens and political or state authority, resulting in better representation, accountability and more direct citizen involvement in decisions that influence their lives. Social media and the internet created a means of direct, public communication to political representatives – who traditionally may have been outside the reach or influence of everyday citizens. Social media can contribute the citizen ‘vigilance’ vital to liberal democracy.

However, as social media usage developed it became increasingly apparent that the new apps do not necessarily or just facilitate authentic and autonomous connections between isolated or dissociated groups. Rather social media algorithms determining what content people see can solidify personal interests within narrow networks, so that individuals live more in social media structures of already curated and like-minded content – potentially polarising differences between political groups and ideas. The connective capacity of online organisations has been

As Australians have increasingly used the internet and social media to supplement everyday communication and actions, they have moved away from relying on more traditional forms of media, including for political information. The *Digital Platforms Inquiry Report* by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission demonstrated that social-media platforms were now salient and completely unavoidable partners for many Australian businesses, including the news-media ([ACCC, 2019](#)). This report set off a two-year process where the federal government (partly acting at the behest

shown to be effective in replicating or supplementing the traditional structures of collective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). Yet the way in which these platforms have been structured continues to distance aspects of Australian community from one another.

There has also been an increased dialogue around the censorship or regulation of online and social media content. The federal government has a long history of trying to censor the internet and restrict the flow of content that it deems inappropriate. And during the COVID-19 pandemic all governments became strongly concerned with protecting public health by maximising accurate information and minimising the visibility of diverse sources of misinformation, such as conspiracy theories linking the pandemic to bizarre causes (for example, 5G phone masts) or seeking to inhibit people taking vaccines. These concerns increased the salience of questions around what content is healthy for Australian democracy and society. Prime Minister (PM) Scott Morrison criticised social media as an environment which lacked the accountability needed for a functioning democratic society. Influential calls have been made to censor or criminalise individuals who use social media platforms for disruptive or abusive behaviour (such as doxing) yet raising acute concerns over the censorship or control of the means of information flows counter to the founding ideals of a liberal democracy.

Both the bushfires in 2019–20 and the COVID-19 pandemic showed that social media now comprises an embedded feature of Australia's critical information network. To this end, it goes without saying that these spaces become principal targets for external influence and manipulation. Recent work has found that certain social media platforms are facilitating the erosion of Australia's national liberal-democratic identity (Jensen and Chen, 2021). Advances in social media technology and usage have consistently outpaced the design of government media regulations, and the understanding and resulting policy of representatives, creating increasingly large cracks in Australia's public safeguarding, and even its national defence network. Approaches to social media policy have been haphazard, sporadic and uneven at the same time as these innovative apps have become an unavoidable partner for most Australians in their daily lives.

How Australians use social media

As more Australians have used social media as their primary source of news there has been a gradual decrease in the proportion of consumers relying on traditional news sources for their information, like TV, radio and print, although Chapter 8 shows how conventional mass media have also built up their online offerings to dominant positions within the news media landscape. However, there have been some important and long-lasting generational differences in preferred news sources (Figure 9.3). For a majority of the youngest group in 2021 (Generation Z), social media was their largest source of news, followed by online news sites, while less than a fifth relied on TV news. Also for this group, YouTube (35 per cent) had overtaken Facebook (34 per cent) as the most popular social media platform for news. There has been an acute contrast here with the older groups for whom TV and radio remain the overwhelmingly dominant news sources. In between these poles, the Generation Y group resembled Generation Z in relying heavily on social media and online sources, with only a quarter mainly dependent on TV and radio. The Generation X group were more balanced in their use of different sources, with most people using TV considered as a single medium (and almost half broadcast news), but online news plus social media combined are slightly more important (Park et al., 2021, p.53).

Figure 9.3: Generational differences in the main source of news among Australian respondents in 2021

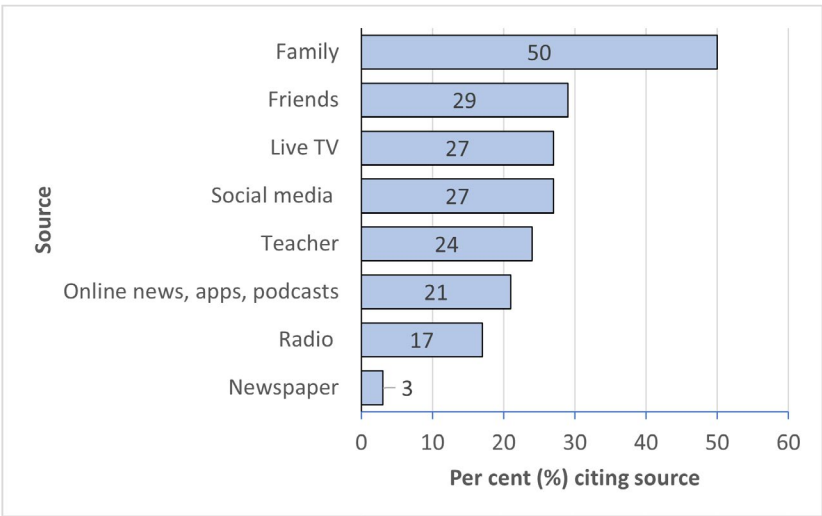
Age group	Social media	Online news	TV	Radio	Print
Generation Z (born after mid 1990s)	54	21	19	2	3
Generation Y (born 1980s to late 1990s)	37	32	23	3	5
Generation X (1965–1981)	17	33	40	7	3
Baby Boomers (1946–65)	8	22	56	10	5
Aged over 75	10	7	60	13	10

Source: Compiled from [Park et al., 2021](#), *Digital News Report: Australia 2021*, News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra, p.53. <https://apo.org.au/node/312650>

The continued role of social media in Australian life, coupled with a decline in intentional or purposive news consumption, calls into question the perceptiveness of the everyday Australian citizen in what constitutes news. News may not be flagged as explicitly as in conventional media, but this does not mean that the content does not have significant shaping capacity on the individual’s understanding of any given topic. *The Digital News Report: Australia 2021* ([Park et al., 2021](#), p.12) found that Australians consumed news on Facebook incidentally rather than intentionally, with almost half of those who used Facebook for news (46 per cent) viewing news while they are on the platform for other reasons. However, the report suggested that when users did see news, it was most likely to come from mainstream news outlets or recognised journalists. As [Chapter 8](#) discusses, while using platforms for news most users said that they pay attention to mainstream news outlets and journalists.

If we were to extrapolate from the results above to guess where teenagers get their information about politics, and bearing in mind that people in this age group are heavy online users, we

Figure 9.4: How teenagers (aged 13 to 16) reported their main sources of information about politics in 2023



Source: Figure designed by author using data from [Notley et al., 2023](#), *News and Young Australians in 2023: 'How Children and Teens Access, Perceive and are Affected by News Media'. Report Western Sydney University, University of Canberra, QUIT Digital Media Research Centre, p.6.*

might expect that internet or social media sources would predominate. However, in fact, [Figure 9.4](#) shows that the traditional sources stressed in political socialisation literature predominate, with school, family and friends important ([Notley et al., 2023](#)). Live TV and social media tied as media sources, but teenagers also read news online and used apps. This fits with a narrative of a lot of indirect news consumption in earlier work ([Evans, Stoker and Halupka, 2019](#)), but suggests some substantial online news engagement. Perhaps this finding is part of the standard story of socialisation, where political understanding has mostly been taken from sources closer at hand (as with face-to-face contacts)? The importance of young people's understanding of politics as related to social media is unpacked a bit more later in the chapter.

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis

Current strengths	Current weaknesses
Social media has great potential to close the gap between citizens and political representatives, allowing for more direct lines of communication and engagement. For instance, they allow political parties to connect in real time with wide audiences, facilitating the coordination of new networks. By replying and commenting, people have low-cost opportunities to contact and influence decision-makers at a national or local level.	It is important to make new connections from citizens to political authorities in ways that increase the representativeness of democracy, the quality of public debate and the accountability of actions. Critics argue that platform company algorithms create pockets of special interests, where the lines of communication are centred on insider/outsider status. In politics, this could result in different groups becoming isolated from contacts with others along party or ideological lines, with a risk of increasing political or ideological polarisation among voters. Social media reinforces political attitudes, rather than challenging them.
Social media allows politicians to express their views and reactions to events in real time, facilitating the free flow of ideas between representative and citizen (Taylor, 2018).	Some politicians use social media as a platform for angry and often inaccurate polemic. Corrections are rare and often go unnoticed (Taylor, 2018).
Social media provides free and open spaces where content can be created and shared with a wider community. The growth of social media expands the potential public foundations for a pluralistic and diverse media system.	The primary cost of apparently 'free' social media has been that users 'become the product' themselves. Social media platforms have made money by selling the user's online behavioural data profiles and preferences to advertisers and other vested interests.
Social media platforms such as Google and Facebook act as convenient gateways to digital-based services. Australia's social media environments function as 'one-stop-shops', centralising a range of differentiated services into a single platform.	Most social media users have no choice but to accept the complex 'terms of service' that companies enforce, or else lose the functionality, services, and networks that the major platforms provide.

<p>Adverse by-product effects of social media use on established or paid-for journalism and media diversity need to be taken into account. Social media companies argue that their activities are similar to ‘disintermediation’ (‘cutting out the middleman’) processes in other industries, allowing citizens more choice in how they gain information or services. Yet losses of advertising revenue to platform corporations that critically threaten the viability of existing media (like broadcasting and print/paid for newspapers) may have net negative effects on the overall media system.</p>	<p>Facebook and Google provide a cheap way for any political campaigner with money or large numbers of supporters to reach voters, often in a highly targeted way. Policy-makers need to consider how the new capabilities here affect the autonomy of citizens’ voting decisions, and whether electoral law – which imposes obligations and restrictions on broadcasters – should be extended and adapted to encompass political advertising on social media platforms.</p>
<p>Social media enables rapid and unprecedented scrutiny of policy-making and politicians’ pronouncements, with stakeholders’ and experts’ opinions freely available on X (formerly Twitter). Some liveblogs have tried to curate them, but this body of knowledge and inputs remains diffuse (Taylor, 2018).</p>	<p>Armed with huge cash reserves (often gained from setting up complex tax-avoidance schemes), the giant platform corporations have diversified into social media conglomerates. Facebook (which owns Instagram and WhatsApp), Google (which owns YouTube) and to a lesser extent X (formerly Twitter), now dominate social media platforms. These corporations’ power to shape how democratic discourse happens online has been and remains considerable, and almost unregulated at nation state level (Taylor, 2018).</p>
<p>Social media has been used successfully by some politicians in Australia to connect and organise with their followers. In some cases, social media functions as envisioned, and politicians use these platforms to engage a range of topics and ideas.</p>	<p>The capacity for parties and politicians to create greater engagement exists, yet in the main they continue to employ social media as a platform to circumvent accountability, and disseminating misleading information, that does little to enhance the standard of public debate.</p>
<p>Unaffiliated citizens, who are not part of a given political party, interest group or civil society body can nonetheless comment on these organisations’ and politicians’ behaviour at very low cost. They can quickly disseminate their message to a wide audience via social media and have some chance of evoking wider agreement or informative responses from other like-minded people (Taylor, 2018).</p>	<p>Most ‘retweeters’ and ‘likers’ are not professional journalists writing for fact-checked publications, but ordinary citizens with lower levels of information. So, critics argue that inaccurate and misleading information (‘fake news’) can spread more quickly (Taylor, 2018). Indeed, platform companies may have an interest in more sensational and irresponsible content continuing to circulate, since it may generate more interest and click-throughs than more prosaic but accurate information.</p>

<p>Digital-only publication and dissemination via social media have lowered the start-up costs for many alternative media outlets, broadening the range of professionally produced news and commentary available to citizens (Taylor, 2018). Videoblogs and podcasts have increasingly blurred the boundaries between conventional (high cost) media and low cost social media.</p>	<p>Digital-only publishing by highly committed or partisan publishers or web-broadcasters has also enabled some operators to flood online platform systems with multiple biased or untrue messages in ways that are completely non-transparent and ever-changing (Taylor, 2018).</p> <p>Disinformation and evils such as hate-speech are very hard to regulate either by governments or even by the platform companies themselves – although critics argue that they spend far too little on monitoring and are slow to ban even conspicuous offenders.</p>
Future opportunities	Future threats
<p>Social media, as a relatively new aspect of society, provides us a rare opportunity to structure something ‘right’, from the beginning. The regulation and structuring of social media platforms should be geared towards social good, maximising the avenues of citizen politics and engagement, while also serving as means to connect political parties. When structured with citizen interests at heart, social media can create new networks and structures to engage in the political process more broadly.</p>	<p>Stakeholders and experts were not given a sufficient consultation period to properly assess the Online Safety Bill 2021 and its potential impacts. The Bill was introduced only 10 days after submissions in response to the draft exposure bill closed, and the Committee accepted submissions in response to the Bill for only seven days. Given the extent of the changes introduced by the Bill, this was not a sufficient consultation period. Critics argue that the law leaves Australia significantly vulnerable on multiple fronts, including risks to national security, business innovation and growth, political participation, and governance (Suzor et al., 2021).</p>
<p>Social media has given ‘new Australians’ (those who form part of a diaspora from another country) with a means to connect with others regionally and nationally, strengthening domestic community ties and aiding cultural integration. Yet they also have helped communication to family and communities overseas. Foreign language social media platforms have provided a vital service for new Australians, as they have often been the first and lasting source of news information. For Australians with English as a second language, social media has provided information in an accessible format.</p>	<p>Social media has been used by extraterritorial entities and some other states in ways designed to undermine Australia’s social cohesion, national identity, and liberal democratic ideals. Australians have been participants in an ongoing cyber-war that they were largely unaware of.</p>

For the development of Australian society and democracy, three key remaining issues remain fiercely debated – about the maintenance of trust and impartiality, demands for the censorship of the internet and online social media content, and impacts on young people. The remaining sections cover each in turn.

Impartiality

The conversation around trust and impartiality relates to broader concerns around misinformation, national security and propaganda. Of principal concern here is the extent to which citizens now trust the multitude of news sources by which they find themselves bombarded every day. And does how citizens trust their news sources influence the formation of their political views? For instance, as innovative forms of news generation and consumption have come to predominate, how far has the capacity of everyday citizens to navigate a liberal democracy successfully, and formulate their own political interests, increased? Social media has given individuals a place of public debate where facts sometimes appear to be optional and opinions have dominated discussion.

Notions of impartiality and trust have varied significantly across generations according to the survey for *Digital News Report* (Park et al., 2021). Respondents who were Baby Boomers, or older people 75+ , were the most likely to support the notion that news should provide and question a variety of points of view in a news story, so that consumers can make up their own minds. Four-fifths (82 per cent) of Baby Boomers and 88 per cent of the 75+ group supported this notion of journalism, while only 68 per cent of Generation Z respondents supported the same ideal. On the issue of neutrality, 72 per cent of those aged 75+ felt that news should remain neutral on all issues, whereas only 42 per cent of Generation Z supported this position. There may be policy experience or media use factors involved here. The younger generation's view may reflect their experience with wicked problems, like climate change, where a prolonged and 'neutral' approach has hindered affirmative action. Alternatively, or as well, the younger generation's increased use of the internet and social media to search for critical information may have exposed them to the subjectivity of digital content creation more frequently, and lowered their expectations that impartiality is achievable.

The same survey's Australian respondents were overall less supportive of each of the propositions related to the impartiality of news when they got their news predominantly from social media. Just over two-thirds (69 per cent) of people relying on social media as their main source of news saw outlets as institutions that should reflect a range of views, by comparison with four-fifths of those who got their news predominantly from radio. Half of Australian respondents who used social media as their main source of news consumption agreed that content outlets should try to be neutral on all issues, compared with 69 per cent of those who mainly use print news sources. Substantial majorities of Australian respondents supported the proposition of giving equal time to all sides of the story, but the number was lower for people whose main source was social media, at 65 per cent, than for print news readers (79 per cent) or those who listen to radio news (83 per cent).

Looking more specifically at variations between social media platforms, the same survey found that Instagram users were the least supportive of the ideals of impartiality, neutrality and equal time (Park et al., 2021, p.34), while X (formerly Twitter) users at 77 per cent were most likely to agree that outlets should present a range of views. Among Facebook and YouTube users, 58 per cent supported the proposition that news outlets should be neutral on all issues, and that all sides should receive equal time – the highest levels for these items. Overall, of those who accessed news via Facebook or YouTube, only three-tenths of respondents supported the idea that some issues should not be reported in a neutral manner, the lowest levels for this item. X (formerly Twitter) news consumers were the most likely to support news outlets giving equal time to views the media operators deemed weak.

Censorship

In October 2021, asked about the potential censorship of Australia's social media, PM Scott Morrison claimed that 'social media has become a coward's palace where people can go on there, not say who they are, and destroy people's lives' ([Attwood and Williams, 2021](#)). His critical statement was indicative of the Liberal-National government's wider position on social media – which were seen not as a means of enriching liberal democracy, but rather as a source of disturbing personal and social issues. Australian politicians in general have also not focused much on the social goods arising from social media (such as the potential for democratic strengthening), but rather on their role as avenues of political criticism that should be limited more. Coalition ministers especially saw a lot of content as adversarial, and thus running counter to their capacity to govern effectively.

This logic has ignored the lines of accountability that social media has provided in better connecting representative and citizen, allowing voters to hold politicians more continuously accountable, in more detail and in real time for any actions taken which undermine democracy. For example, the 'robodebt' crisis over the government illegally trying to reclaim welfare funding from 'overpaid' families (discussed in [Chapter 13](#)) was given a limited amount of coverage on conventional news media and professional journalists. But it was overwhelmingly on social media and via the online criticisms of academics and lawyers involved with protest groups that the scandal was kept alive and continuously in focus before it eventually crumbled in the courts and under criticism from integrity agencies. Social media agitation also kept the issue going until a change of government in 2022 allowed the forensic examination of the 'robodebt' policy disaster by a Royal Commission.

However, a different view of social media has been most widely adopted by Australian politicians, one which assumes that social media is a public space where individuals can, and will, propagate harm. In particular, both Liberal and National ministers framed social media as primarily a social harm, a problematic viewpoint that led past rhetorical denunciation to a legislative attempt to control social media, and what citizens do in these spaces. The Online Safety Bill 2021 was introduced in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic to update national guidelines for online safety. The bill looked to replicate and build upon the enhancing Online Safety Act of 2015, contributing to the ongoing regulation and control of social media in Australia. A new agency was tasked to police the new powers, eSafety Commissioner ([2023](#)) and the new Act:

... retains and replicates certain provisions in the Enhancing Online Safety Act 2015, including the non-consensual sharing of intimate images scheme; specifies basic online safety expectations; establishes an online content scheme for the removal of certain material; creates a complaints-based removal notice scheme for cyber-abuse being perpetrated against an Australian adult; broadens the cyber-bullying scheme to capture harms occurring on services other than social media; reduces the timeframe for service providers to respond to a removal notice from the eSafety Commissioner; brings providers of app distribution services and internet search engine services into the remit of the new online content scheme; and establishes a power for the eSafety Commissioner to request or require internet service providers to disable access to material depicting, promoting, inciting or instructing in abhorrent violent conduct for time-limited periods in crisis situations. ([Parliament of Australia, 2021](#))

The bill was immediately criticised on the grounds that it did more damage to Australia's approach to social media as a democratic nation, than any good it did in strengthening protections for citizens. Critics argued that the legislation was rushed and not based on a sound understanding of the way in which social media, and the internet more broadly, operates in contemporary society. A team of academic law researchers compiled a response to the bill that outlined a long series of recommendations to sharpen up and narrow much of the regulation ([Suzor et al., 2021](#), p.2) including, but not limited to these points:

- *remove intent from the definition of 'cyber-abuse material targeted at an Australian adult' to enable takedown powers to function effectively.*
- *remove 'offensive' from the definition of 'cyber-abuse material targeted at an Australian adult' in order to avoid an overly-broad definition.*
- *extend the cyber-abuse scheme to 'conduct', in addition to 'material', empowering the Commissioner to deal with abuse that is perpetrated through repeated harassing posts that may not be viewed as harmful in isolation.*
- *extend the cyber-abuse scheme to 'identifiable groups of Australian people', in addition to 'a particular Australian adult', in order to ensure that threats and harassment against multiple people (or classes of people) are within scope.*

Few of these points were accepted or embodied in the legislation finally passed.

Some politicians in Australia have chiefly framed social media as a realm not only needing to be censored, but for its content providers to be punished for their criticisms of politics. In 2021 the then New South Wales Deputy Premier, John Barilaro, pressed a defamation legal action against a YouTuber and political satirist, Jordan Shanks, better known as 'friendlyjordies'. The case ended in an apology but cost the satirist \$100,000 in legal costs ([Douglas, 2021](#); [Glitsos, 2021](#); [Guardian, 2021](#)). Here, a sitting member of state government employed state resources to limit the distribution of political content on a citizen's social media channel. Critics argue that there is a critical difference between some necessary regulation of harmful content, and the targeted censorship, and use of state force, to silence political commentary. That risk seems to be ignored if politicians only show a disregard for social media avenues of civic engagement, and could end up eroding citizens' ability to freely criticise their government in online spaces.

Young Australians and social media

Social media means that the politicisation of people's views may occur at a far younger age. Australian teenagers are not that different from adults in political attitudes ([Chowdhury, 2021](#)) but are becoming more 'political' at a younger age. Yet structures of democracy have been slow to recognise this. To effectively engage this evolving demographic, governments must reconsider the role that young people play in shaping politics in the future through the education and socialisation that they receive in early formative years.

In 1990, Australia ratified the 'Convention of the Rights of the Child' (CRC), agreeing to take action to make sure that all children in Australia can enjoy key rights: 'The CRC sets out all the basic rights that children need to do well: like having a home and a family, getting a good education, being able to access quality health care, being safe from harm, and having a voice' ([Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019](#), p.3). Article 12 of the Convention requires governments to ensure that children and young people can participate in decisions that affect

them. Accessing the views of young Australians, a Whitlam Institute report ('What matters to young Australians') presented the most comprehensive contemporary study of young Australians available ([Collin and Hugman, 2020](#)). Exploring 30,000 essay entries, collected over a 10-year period, it found that young people have an articulated interest and personal stake in Australian democracy. Although they remain a largely marginalised group in politics, young Australians express complex and sophisticated understandings of the representativeness of governments. The report found that young people both write and think about actions on specific issues, such as climate change, homelessness and bullying, and it demonstrated their participatory capacity, challenging narratives that see young people as politically apathetic or disinterested in democracy.

Yet a systematic review of Australian and international research on young people, democracy, citizenship and participation in the period 2009 to 2019 argued that the political views and practices of young people have been under-researched, particularly for those aged under 18 ([Collin and McCormack, 2020](#)). More evidence has been needed on how young people understand issues, and conceptualise different agents, structures and responsibilities within the Australian democratic system – and social media is critical here. Focusing on the 'changing and persistent forces that shape experiences of youth, politics, democracies and societies' ([Collin and McCormack, 2020](#), p.9) contrasts with the more traditional approaches asking whether younger demographics satisfy or 'fall short' of meaningful democratic engagement and civic participation. Recent publications present evidence of the relationship between the perception of systems of democracy, and early education, in shaping the political behaviour and views of future citizens ([Ghazarian et al., 2020](#); (for USA) [Oxley et al., 2020](#)). If the system of governance is delegitimised for people at a young age, they may be set for a path of long-term political disengagement. The democratic health of a nation likely depends on that nation's investment in the political education of its youth.

I noted earlier that young people (aged 18–34) are increasingly using social media as their preferred means of communication, entertainment and news, but children still at school (aged 12–18) are more dependent on traditional means of political socialisation (and see [Ghazarian et al., 2020](#)). Yet this situation may transition fast on their leaving home or starting work. If Australian government and political elites view social media platforms only in restrictive and hostile terms, focusing on their control and censorship alone, they risk not engaging with the scope of young people's developing political attitudes.

Conclusion

Citizens and their political leaders still need to decide where the public good rests with social media, and how the democratically helpful or harmful aspects of the shift to less controlled communication can be assessed or balanced constructively. For instance, social media undoubtedly helped bring Australians together in the acute pandemic times, when social distance became a necessity. More broadly, many aspects of social media have facilitated social progress, from boosting and pluralising citizens' access to societal information and improving business innovation, through to improving entertainment and the general quality of life. Yet conservative critics and others are also right to draw attention to the new kinds of social harm that unregulated or weakly regulated social media may facilitate, such as hate speech, cyber-

bullying, or disinformation. But making censorship and control the main discussed response to digital challenges may impoverish democratic debate and mean that the restrictive actions and views of elected representatives seem to speak more to a narrative unconcerned with (or even antipathetic to) the people's participatory aspirations.

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