RMIT ABC Fact Check submission to DIGI draft code of practice.

WHO WE ARE

RMIT ABC Fact Check is a collaboration between RMIT University and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Its core business is to verify the accuracy of claims made by public figures engaged in public debate, with all articles published on ABC platforms.

Since March 2020 Fact Check has also been engaged in verification/debunking of misinformation and disinformation that circulates on digital platforms, with all research published on its subscription newsletter, *CoronaCheck.*

Fact Check takes an active role in strengthening understanding of mis/disinformation. In 2018 it produced an online Micro Credential in fact checking for RMIT students and, in collaboration with ABC Education, it has produced online resources for teachers to help secondary school students understand the nature of false information online.

In addition, RMIT University runs a fact checking course for journalism students.

CONTEXT

Accurate, reliable information is more important than ever to uphold democratic processes and institutions at a time when there is a trust deficit among the electorate.

Worldwide there is clear evidence of a cold information war designed to undermine western institutions: we're seeing the spread of bad information on digital platforms that fractures social cohesion, hampers quality discourse, exacerbates partisanship and undermines trust in expertise.

We are seeing state actors using disinformation to cause chaos and confusion particularly during election campaigns, which amounts to effectively using disinformation as an extention of foreign policy. This all has an adverse impact on both individuals and broader society.

We welcome the drafting of a code of conduct by the Digital Industry Group Inc (DIGI) outlining what platforms who sign-up to the code will do to address disinformation and credibility-signalling for news content. We acknowledge that some digital platforms have taken steps to improve the management of disinformation, but there is still more to be done. We add the following suggestions:

FEEDBACK ON DIGI DRAFT CODE OF CONDUCT

COLLABORATION SHOULD BE WITH HIGH QUALITY FACT CHECKERS

The draft code indicates that partnership or cooperation with independent fact checkers may be required

- for policies and processes that require human review
- for policies and processes that aim to disrupt advertising and/or monetization incentives for disinformation
- for measures to strengthen public understanding of disinformation through support of strategic research.

We welcome cooperation with digital platforms that sign up to the code and recommend that any participation or collaboration should only be with fact checking organisations that satisfy the accreditation criteria for quality fact-checking practice as outlined by the International Fact Check Network. The IFCN's code of principles is a set of standards that requires rigorous transparency around funding, sources and methodology, and insists on an open corrections policy and a commitment to non-partisanship and fairness.

ALLOW FACT CHECKERS ACCESS TO DATA
With regard to the draft code's objective 5: Strengthen public understanding of disinformation through support of strategic research, we make the following points:

While it is admirable that digital platforms who sign the code may commit to strengthening public understanding of disinformation by supporting research initiatives, this is not enough.

We suggest that digital platforms open a dialogue and build a closer relationship with fact checkers with a view to helping them do their job more efficiently. One of the biggest obstructions to the work of fact checkers is the inability to quickly access disinformation in real time.

We suggest that digital platforms commit to providing fact checkers with ongoing access to content that users, or the platforms, flag as being suspicious. Fact Checkers need to verify content as soon as it is identified as suspicious, not days or weeks later after it has spread far and wide.

We further suggest that digital platforms commit to providing fact checkers with protected datasets or other information that helps to improve fact checkers' understanding of the provenance of disinformation, how it spreads, who creates it and which types of users are most likely to share it.

Digital platforms can also help the work of fact checkers by providing them with clear information that explains how algorithms rank internet searches.

Lastly, ACMA should work with fact checkers to shape the collection of data and to identify useful areas to improve the operation of the office/dept/section overseeing disinformation breaches.

INCREASE FUNDING
The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected university funding streams and led to deep cuts. Funding to the ABC from the federal government has also been cut.

Fact-checking and verification are a crucial part of a healthy news media ecosystem and, therefore, of political discourse. However, they are expensive forms of journalism to practice and they are not easily commercialised to bring in a ready revenue stream.

Given the importance of reliable, accurate and trusted information to democratic processes, we welcome measures that may include funding for research or partnerships with academics. This would be an investment in inoculation against the current infodemic (as the WHO labelled misinformation relating to COVID-19) and any other infodemics that might arise in the future.

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION SHOULD BE SUBJECT TO THE CODE
We appreciate that signatories to the code need to balance their commitment to protect users from harmful content with the rights of users to free speech and expression.

The draft code does not include the following in its definition of disinformation:
-   misleading advertising
-   reporting errors
-   satire and parody
-   clearly identified partisan news and commentary

There already exist established complaints procedures for misleading advertising and reporting errors. And clearly marked satire and parody, of course, need no fact checking.

But partisan news and commentary often include egregious forms of misinformation and disinformation. Hyper-partisan commentary frequently leans on disinformation to mount spurious arguments. We have seen this on commentary broadcast through Youtube. Whether it's commentary that wilfully ignores science to promote climate change denialism or unfounded arguments that refute the virulence of COVID-19, there is no denying that such commentary must be based in fact. We strongly recommend that partisan news and commentary should be subject to the code.

Furthermore, political communication/information in the form of memes, tweets, Youtube videos, Instagram posts, and Facebook posts by political parties have the potential to promulgate mis/disinformation. Such information should also be subject to the code.

OVERSIGHT OF THE CODE
We have a number of questions in relation to oversight of the code as it appears to be silent on this matter:
Who is responsible for oversight of the code?
How do we measure whether the code has been successful in combating mis/disinformation?
What action will be taken against signatories who breach the code of conduct?

RMIT ABC Fact Check
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