

Online

Challenges

For

Election

Integrity

**5 case studies from the
2023 NSW Election**

Content Warning

While we have attempted to minimise our reproduction of misinformation, dehumanising hate speech and violent language in this report, we have included a number of examples and descriptions. Our aim is to provide those working towards social cohesion and election integrity with a strong and practical understanding of the challenges that specific online activities pose.

We have placed ◆ symbol at the top, right hand corner of the relevant pages to indicate where this content appears.

Support Services

The contents of this report may be confronting or distressing for a range of people targeted by hate speech, their families and friends. If you or someone you know is in an emergency and needs assistance now, call triple zero (000).

Service	Focus	Phone Number	Operating hours
Emergency	Emergency assistance	000	24 hours 7 days a week
Beyond Blue	Depression and anxiety support	1300 22 4636	24 hours 7 days a week
Lifeline	Crisis and mental health support with suicide prevention services	13 11 14	24 hours 7 days a week
13YARN	Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Crisis Supporters	13 92 76	24 hours 7 days a week
QLife	Free LGBTQ peer support and referral	1800 184 527	3pm to midnight everyday

Media reporting on this research

This report is research intended for stakeholders facing the challenges described in the research. As such, we have included details, links to, and reproduced emotive or pejorative language, hate speech, violent threats, and misinformation in ways that are not suitable for news media reporting, according to industry guidelines.

We request that reporters seriously consider the implications of how they report on this research in consideration of these industry guidelines:

- [MEAA Guidelines on Reporting Hate Speech and Extremism](#)
- [MEAA Guidelines for Reporting on LGBTQIA+ Issues](#)
- [Australian Press Council Advisory Guidelines](#)

Election integrity deserves greater coverage in Australia, but missteps that amplify conspiracy, division and false information are easy to make, as shown in the case studies in this report.


- **Consider how reporters are used** by extremists and conspiracy groups to spread disinformation and hate to wider audiences.
- **Don't link to extremists**, hate content or misinformation websites and content in your news articles.
- **Don't reproduce quotes or images**, or if there is overwhelming public interest, include extensive and unmissable context and consider how they may be re-edited and used in disinformation.
- **Flip the story.** There are lots of important, human stories to tell about online threats such as misinformation and hate speech. Reporting can focus on the voices and stories of the people impacted, such as election workers, election candidates from Muslim backgrounds and from the LGBTQIA+ community, in the context of this report for example.

We also recommend reporters explore the following resources on reporting extremism, hate and misinformation:

- [Covering extremism: a reading list](#), by Stevie Zhang
- [THE OXYGEN OF AMPLIFICATION: Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators](#) by Whitney Phillips
- [Reporting on extremism, from those who have done it best](#) by Pete Vernon

Contents

- [07 Executive Summary](#)
- [10 Key Definitions](#)
- [14 Introduction](#)
- [16 Methodology](#)
- [18 Key Trends](#)
- [21 **Case Study 1: Baseless claim of election fraud spreads online**](#)
- [26 **Case Study 2: Increasingly sophisticated conspiracy organising online and offline**](#)
- [34 **Case Study 3: Escalating hate online and offline**](#)
- [37 **Case Study 4: Hate-based intimidation of a candidate flares online**](#)
- [41 **Case Study 5: Media amplification of racialised disinformation attack on Candidate**](#)
- [45 **Recommendations**](#)
- [48 **References**](#)

 Please click each link to view

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We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians, in particular Gadigal, Wangal and Tharawal peoples, and Wurundjeri of the Kulin Nation, upon whose unceded ancestral lands we live and work. We pay respect to their Elders, past and present, and acknowledge the pivotal role that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to play within the Australian community.

About Purpose

Purpose is a global creative social impact agency. We use rigorous investigation, creative storytelling and insight-led activation to shift narratives, empower policymakers and drive systemic change. Purpose provides targeted research, training, strategy, and develops and deploys campaigns and programs to fight disinformation and other online threats.

Learn more at purpose.com

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The Online Hate Prevention Institute who has been working on these issues longer than most in Australia. Their support, insights and experience were extremely valuable in the development of this work.

Additionally, our earlier work with Reset Australia and the Sydney Policy Lab underpinned our approach and perspective on this work.

We've drawn inspiration from [Building Consentful Tech](#) (by Una Lee, Dann Toliver and their colleagues) in our use of content warning symbols to provide readers an informed way to interact with traumatic material.

Lastly, this project would not have been possible without the efforts of a dedicated team across Purpose. Researching online hate and disinformation can be personally exhausting and demoralising. We would like to acknowledge this difficult and important work to establish and deliver research about online threats.

Executive Summary

The spread of misinformation and hate speech online has presented serious global challenges to election integrity, including in some of the world's largest democracies in recent years. While Australia has a long record of well-respected election administration and participation from citizens and other stakeholders, no state is immune to these evolving challenges. A range of stakeholders—from government and election administrators, to political parties, the news media, cultural institutions, civil society and community associations—have important roles to play in defending and enhancing our democracy, and can benefit from deepening their practical understandings of these emergent online dynamics.

The 2023 New South Wales (NSW) Election, held on March 25, was an important opportunity to observe online threats to election integrity in Australia. In the lead up to the election, the NSW Electoral Commission (NSWEC) identified the circulation of misinformation in the community and online as having 'the potential to undermine confidence in the integrity of democratic processes' (NSW Electoral Commission, 2023a). In response, the NSWEC took several steps to mitigate these risks: establishing an online disinformation register, running a 'Stop and Consider' campaign, and working directly with social media platforms to reduce the risk of harm.

Purpose partnered with the Online Hate Prevention Institute to conduct practical research into emergent online threats to election integrity in Australia and support efforts to de-escalate and mitigate them by:

- running an exploratory research project to monitor online threats during the election and highlight key trends;
- considering the implications for programs or policies that might remedy these threats; and,
- building an evidence base for future programs aimed at tackling threats posed to electoral integrity.

As a result of our research, this report provides 5 rich case studies to illustrate the patterns of online activity that those working on election integrity and social cohesion in Australia are facing. Using an exploratory, digital-ethnographic approach, we monitored and explored the context of specific incidents, following how they played out across multiple platforms, channels and websites. Our real-time observation produced five case studies with the following themes:

- 1. Baseless claim of election fraud spreads online ([page 21](#))**
We trace the viral spread of a video making baseless claims of corruption by election officials, across conspiracy groups to the mainstream media and high profile politicians.
- 2. Increasingly sophisticated conspiracy organising online and offline ([page 26](#))**
One unregistered political party, the AustraliaOne Party, made false claims of election rigging a

central element of its campaign. It was able to mobilise supporters to monitor and challenge election workers at voting centres, promoting the false belief that the election was being rigged.

3. Escalating hate online and offline (page 34)

Social cohesion has been identified by experts as an important element of election integrity. In this case study we review the online activity surrounding one of the most widely reported hate-based incidents during the election campaign, violence against LGBTQI+ protesters outside St Michael's Church in Belfield on March 21.

4. Hate-based intimidation of a candidate flares online (page 37)

After election day, on March 30, a widely condemned, homophobic tweet by Mark Latham became a catalyst for intense media reporting and online activity, both rejecting and supporting Latham's sentiment. MP Alex Greenwich, the target of the tweet, has stated that following the incident his social media accounts were bombarded with graphic homophobic attacks and his electoral office received abusive calls, which led to arrests.

5. Media amplification of racialised disinformation attack on candidate (page 41)

In line with a pattern of Islamophobic attacks on candidates in recent years, Tina Ayyad was targeted with fake election leaflets impersonating her campaign. We did not detect an online component to this operation and found that it was through the news media's reporting that the material was circulated. Social media activity around these reports became their own platforms for further racism.

Alarming, these cases are the tip of the iceberg. Our findings focus solely on activity that is published on public online platforms. They do not encompass what was circulating in private channels, including private groups, messages, accounts and member-only forums.

For those working to support election integrity and reduce online hate, we have highlighted the five key trends emerging from these case studies:

- **Our first four trends described how elections appear to be providing a catalyst for an escalation in organising and tactics:** Actors we observed displayed a growing ability to organise themselves rapidly into offline action, using a complex combination of private message groups and multiple public channels across a range of online platforms. In the badgering of election staff (case study 1), violence against LGBTQI+ protesters (case study 3), or the distribution of fraudulent pamphlets (case study 5), each incident became a new platform for comments and remixing to further reinforce and distribute their narratives. These groups show an ability to skillfully manage the different capacities and advantages of mainstream social media platforms (like TikTok, Facebook and YouTube), as well as private groups and more 'edge' platforms (like Telegram, BitChute and Rumble).
- **The fifth trend covers the roles news media are playing in amplifying misinformation and hate:** News media actors played a role in two key ways. Firstly, they did occasionally publish problematic material themselves, with varying levels of contextualisation and explanation (case studies 1 and 5). In both these cases, more could have been done to label and contextualise the content if there was indeed strong public interest in bringing it to broader attention. Possibly the more significant role news media played is in

continuing to progress a story, which provided an ongoing foothold for misinformation and hate to spread through comments and other activity across social media platforms (case studies 1, 3, 4 and 5). False claims of election corruption can rapidly circulate and reproduce while corrections by the media or official sources struggle to keep up. While the claims were frequently questioned and challenged by commenters, a large number appeared to take the posts as confirmation of a conspiracy. News media practitioners face difficult decisions in establishing what and how to report. The case studies in this report can be used as material for further reflection and discussion of practice.

Online activity is highly complex and is often deleted before it can be detected — allowing for only a partial perspective on what has occurred. It is therefore important to note that Purpose’s work does not tell a comprehensive story of what is happening in this space. Rather it is a contribution of initial trends and insights to guide further research, testing, monitoring and interventions. Purpose has made a series of recommendations at the conclusion of the report, that we hope will help to further develop effective ways to combat online threats to election integrity.

Key Definitions

Disinformation and misinformation

Disinformation and misinformation both refer to a range of false, inaccurate or misleading information and claims, with the difference being that disinformation is spread intentionally to cause harm (Freelon & Wells, 2020; Jack, 2017). Misinformation is problematic information, but is not necessarily shared with the intent to mislead or deceive, for example, when the false information is accidentally shared, or when those who share it believe it to be true. Disinformation is material known by the distributor to be false, inaccurate or misleading, and is shared with the intent to deceive. It is shared to serve various end goals, including manipulating political discourse, advancing an agenda, suppressing political participation or for financial gain. It is often hard to prove an actor's intent—and accusations of bad intent can be easily disavowed—which makes it difficult to apply *disinformation* as a label in many cases (Jack, 2017).

Electoral misinformation

Electoral misinformation includes false claims and other kinds of inaccurate or misleading information about election processes or outcomes. Common topics seen in election misinformation include: vote counting; voting technologies and handling; who is eligible to vote; election practicalities, such as dates and deadlines; record keeping; and, baseless claims of corruption in electoral systems.

The NSW and Australian Electoral Commission have both established 'Disinformation Registers' that list prominent pieces of electoral misinformation identified in relation to the elections they manage, alongside official responses or corrections (Australian Electoral Commission, 2022; NSW Electoral Commission, 2023b).

Hate speech, hate-based

Hate speech is any form of expression that attacks people because of who they are, or more specifically, because of what is referred to as their protected characteristics. There are different definitions and different protected characteristics used by different institutions who have programs to address hate speech, such as the UN or social media company Meta, and these definitions change over time (Meta, 2022; United Nations, 2023). In its recent policy recommendations, the Council of Europe, provides this useful and detailed definition and set of characteristics, which we generally rely on:

"hate speech is understood as all types of expression that incite, promote, spread or justify violence, hatred or discrimination against a person or group of persons, or that denigrates them, by reason of their real or attributed personal characteristics or status such as "race", colour, language, religion, nationality, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation." (Council of Europe, 2022)

In NSW, certain instances of hate speech that 'incite hatred, serious contempt or severe ridicule' are offences under the *NSW Anti-Discrimination Act*. The protected characteristics are 'race', 'homosexuality', 'being transgender', 'having HIV or AIDS', and (recently added), 'Religious belief, affiliation or activity' (Anti-Discrimination NSW, 2021; NSW Attorney General, 2023). Under Federal law, 'vilification on the basis of their race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin' is prohibited under the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.).

In this report we also use the term 'hate-based' to describe incidents that appear to be targeting people because of their protected characteristics.

Intimidation

Intimidation, in an electoral context, consists of acts that may deter individuals or groups from fully participating in the election. Intimidation often takes the form of threats of violence or through the use of hate speech or disinformation. The impact and meanings of intimidation for individuals vary and can't be assumed.

Election Integrity

Election integrity is a foundational component of democracy, that provides for the free and fair expression of the people's will and for the legitimate transfer of power. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance has published this definition:

"We define an election with integrity as any election that is based on the democratic principles of universal suffrage and political equality as reflected in international standards and agreements, and is professional, impartial, and transparent in its preparation and administration throughout the electoral cycle" (The Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security, 2012).

Research by Founding Director of the Election Integrity Project, Pippa Norris, highlights a number of significant characteristics of election integrity as a complex system of social practices. She has found, she has found both a general consensus among election experts in how they understand election integrity, and also that public perceptions of election integrity tend to align with these experts' assessments of elections (Norris, 2013a).

In Norris's 2013 article 'The new research agenda studying electoral integrity', she highlights how election integrity can be impacted by both *internal* government actors who run elections, as well as *external* actors like the media, opposition parties and others (Norris, 2013b, p. 566). She also highlights how breakdowns in social cohesion and trust can catalyse challenges to election integrity.

She distinguishes between two different orders of problems that challenge election integrity and compares how these problems may have impact in different contexts (Norris, 2013b, p. 566). *First-order*

Key Definitions

problems are defined as involving deadly violence and major human rights violations that fundamentally challenge state stability. *Second-order problems* are more 'mundane issues of maladministration, lack of technical capacity, or human error which undermine the integrity of the electoral process' (2013b, p. 566). Norris argues that in situations lacking strong social cohesion or much experience of successful elections, even minor second-order problems can catalyse more fundamental first-order problems. On the other hand, longer-established democracies may have 'deeper reservoirs' of support for 'democratic principles and practices' to draw on to defend elections from both internal corruption and external attack (2013b, p. 566). Norris warns that expectations of election integrity are 'not frozen in time', and public perceptions of *second-order problems* can corrode trust and, in a positive feedback loop, make states more vulnerable to further problems (2013b, p. 567). In the context of rising conspiracy and misinformation about election processes in some established democracies (Craig et al., 2023), we would like to highlight these evolving dynamics of election integrity.

In democracies around the world, official bodies have been established to promote and maintain integrity across the electoral cycle. In Australia, this includes the AEC, with each state and territory having an electoral commission — the NSWEC in NSW.

Acronyms

AAP	Australian Associated Press
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Association
AEC	Australian Electoral Commission
ASIO	Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
CARR	Community Action for Rainbow Rights
CLM	Christian Lives Matter
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019, and associated global pandemic.
LGBTIQ+	People of diverse sexualities and genders. See ACON's guide on related terminology .
NSW	New South Wales
NSWEC	New South Wales Electoral Commission
MP	Member of Parliament
MEAA	Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance, Australia's primary media workers professional association.
QAnon	A baseless conspiracy theory and political movement that emerged from rightwing online cultures since 2017.

Introduction

In recent years, online platforms have been a site of significant social tension and the spread of misinformation that has presented serious challenges to election integrity around the world. In Brazil's 2022 election, online disinformation campaigns targeted voting technologies and the impartiality of authorities (Brown & Canineu, 2022), resonating with similar dynamics in the 2020 US election (Craig et al., 2023). The 2022 Philippine presidential election saw an online influence-for-hire industry aiding politicians in manipulating public discourse (Symons-Brown & Henry, 2022). In the 2022 Kenyan General Election, graphic hate speech and disinformation online were used to stoke tensions and discourage voting (Orero, 2023). These dynamics are interconnected across geographies, as groups draw inspiration from each other's tactics and narratives.

While these are global trends, Craig et al have pointed out that the impact of these tactics is highly dependent on local context, writing:

The real-world impact of electoral disinformation depends on the presence of conditions favouring its success. Social media product and policy lapses, along with the prevalence of hate and extremism, increase the likelihood election denialism will take hold. In contrast, strong

central administration of elections, well-proven accountability mechanisms and the adherence of candidates to the norms of democracy make it much harder for denialists to win. (Craig et al., 2023)

This resonates strongly with Pippa Norris's understanding of election integrity being highly context dependent and evolving (2013b) (see [Election Integrity under Key Definitions](#)). Our question is then, how are these dynamics taking shape in the Australian context?

The 2023 NSW Election was an important opportunity to observe online threats to election integrity in Australia. Whilst the 2022 Australian Federal Election did see some groups and politicians spread 'stolen election' narratives, echoing themes from the US 2020 election, these narratives did not lead to any major upheaval as they had in other contexts. This points to the high quality of Australian election administration and the trust placed in it by the vast majority of participants. As an indication of the underlying strength of election integrity in Australia, in a 2013 study, Norris found it to be one of highest ranked nations in both public perceptions and expert assessment of election integrity (Norris, 2013a, p. 585).

This relative strength and cohesion is not a reason to dismiss these threats or ignore their development. On the one hand, misinformation and hate speech have the capacity to rapidly spread between groups and platforms online and escalate, including into offline violence. At the same time, groups attacking election integrity or amplifying social tensions develop their capacities and resources overtime.

Lastly, the election scholars cited above emphasise the importance of social cohesion to election integrity. Hate-based intimidation and other tensions are not evenly distributed across our society and their implications for election integrity can easily go without the attention they deserve.

Accordingly, Australian electoral authorities have taken a number of measures to combat online threats to election integrity. In the lead up to the 2023 NSW Election, false information spreading online and 'in the community' was identified by the NSWEC as having the potential to 'undermine confidence in the integrity of democratic processes' (NSW Electoral Commission, 2023 a). To combat disinformation, the Commission implemented a number of measures to 'uphold public confidence in and understanding of the electoral process and the election outcome', including establishing a 'Disinformation register' on its website to rebut false and misleading claims, running a 'Stop and Consider' campaign to urge voters to check the source of electoral communication, and working directly with online platforms, presumably by labelling and removing problematic electoral misinformation.

To support those working on election integrity in Australia, Purpose conducted a focused research project to monitor and analyse online threats during the lead up and immediate aftermath of the 2023 NSW Election. Our aim was to provide an evidence base for better understanding the evolving issues at hand in Australia, and to support the design of future programs. As discussed in the following section, our approach is to provide rich case studies that can be used to think through the effectiveness of proposed interventions and what kinds of stakeholders need to be involved. We have drawn out key trends (page XX), and made our own initial recommendations for those responding (page xX).

Methodology

This report provides a series of rich case studies to illustrate the kinds of patterns of online activity that those working on election integrity and social cohesion in Australia are likely to encounter.

In collecting and analysing data, our primary research aim was to identify the patterns of misinformation and disinformation, hate speech and intimidation (see [Key Definitions](#)) that took place around, and were directly relevant to, the 2023 NSW Election. We then considered the implications for programs or policies that might work to remedy these threats, which have been summarised in the recommendations below.

Our approach utilised an exploratory, digital ethnography-based methodology. This approach allowed us to discover and explore the context of specific incidents, and then follow what played out with them across multiple platforms, channels and websites. Compared to other approaches, such as content analysis or categorisation of a specific large dataset from one platform, we believe this approach provides policymakers and practitioners with a more grounded and practical sense of the challenges they face.

An important methodological consideration is that online activity is highly complex, occurs across private and public spaces, and is often deleted before it can be detected. This means that any study can only practically provide a partial perspective on what has occurred. Our approach to this challenge is to provide further depth on what we believe are important cases, rather than attempt to summarise

an overall information ecosystem. Our account is only one collection and interpretation of events, and readers should consider it in combination with other accounts and analysis.

From February to April 2023, we conducted monitoring across publicly accessible online sites to detect harmful content related to the 2023 NSW State election. Our search was focused on identifying prominent electoral discourse related to the [key definitions above](#), particularly [hate speech](#) and [electoral misinformation](#). Data was initially collected and assessed based on online activity occurring between four weeks before the March 25th Election, until two weeks after: Feb 25 to April 8 2023. Once our case studies were established, we also reviewed their ongoing development through May where appropriate (case study 2 for example).

The public channels we monitored included YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, Twitter, TikTok, Rumble, BitChute, Odysee and Gab. In addition to direct observation on social media platforms, our primary software tools were [Junkipedia](#), [Crowdtangle](#), [Meltwater](#), the [Facebook Ad library](#) and the [Wayback Machine](#).

For efficiency, we started our monitoring using our existing actors lists and known electoral misinformation narratives in circulation, such as those published on electoral commission disinformation registers, to set our initial parameters. These included actors categorised as 'news media', 'Far Right', 'electoral candidates' and 'conspiracy'. In addition to the general significance of the news media and candidates in sharing and discussing the election, we drew on our 'Far Right' and 'conspiracy' lists because of the historical context of the election. The NSW Election period coincided with Sydney WorldPride 2023, and we anticipated the LGBTQI+ community to be targeted because of their increased salience at this time. We also anticipated that actors

Methodology

would exploit COVID-19 conspiracies, Qanon and other anti-government sentiment, and connect these into false claims about election corruption, as has been seen in other recent elections (Craig et al., 2023). As we observed the list accounts' online activity, we further grew our monitoring lists, remaining open to misinformation and hate speech from unexpected directions.

As we monitored online activity, we collected and noted potential case studies, and prioritised cases based on their potential risk and significance to the research topic. These cases were prioritised for deeper research and investigation. We then reviewed and extracted key trends to highlight from the cases, described in the following section. Finally, in discussion with project stakeholders and drawing on Purpose's decade-long social impact practice, we developed initial recommendations for those grappling with these trends and working to support election integrity in Australia.

Key trends

Five key trends stood out from our case studies as deserving careful consideration by those working to support election integrity and social cohesion. Four concern the way that events like elections appear to provide a catalyst for rapid escalation in groups' organising and tactics, and our final trend is about the roles news media actors play.

During the 2023 NSW Election, actors leveraging conspiracy and socially divisive speech displayed a growing ability to rapidly organise online and offline action, using a complex combination of private message groups and multiple public channels across a range of online platforms (see case studies 2 and 3). Offline incidents, such as the badgering of election staff (case study 1), violence against LGBTQI+ protesters (case study 3), or the distribution of fraudulent pamphlets (case study 5), were incorporated online as new platforms for commenting and remixing to further reinforce and distribute their narratives. This raises important questions about how this situation will continue to develop. These groups show an ability to skillfully manage the different capacities and advantages of mainstream social media platforms (like TikTok, Facebook and YouTube), as well as private groups and more 'edge' platforms (like Telegram, BitChute and Rumble).

Will these groups and individuals continue to build their profile and capacities to mobilise larger numbers of people into bigger actions overtime and at future elections? Or will their capacities

diminish or tactics de-escalate? The trajectory of these efforts hinge on the ever-evolving context in which they play out. There are a number of key trends to this organising to be further monitored and considered by those hoping to de-escalate the tension and actions around these groups:

1. **Initiating and filming engagement with election workers and systems appears to be a successful tactic for groups deploying election fraud conspiracies.** Based on their online activity, and its traction across social networks, it appears that groups deploying false narratives about corruption in Australian election administration have had significant success in mobilising and energising their supporters by organising them to directly engage with and surveil election workers (case studies 1 and 2). Activities include sharing video, images and other content of confronting workers and investigating election administration, on the basis that the election is corrupt and this work is revealing the conspiracy. It appears to be motivating a dedicated group of supporters into action, and the resulting social media content has had very large reach across multiple social networks. The case studies in this report should also be considered in connection with the recent phenomenon of conspiracy organisers disrupting local council meetings and other democratic institutions across Victoria (news.com.au staff writers, 2023; Preiss & Dexter, 2023; Schapova, 2023). In light of these developments, stakeholders in election integrity may face an increase in the scale and escalation of these tactics in future elections around Australia.

- 2. Fear mongering is powerfully leveraged in both conspiracy and hate material.** By drawing on existing social tensions, lack of trust in institutions and stereotypes, these actors raise the stakes for their followers to amplify divisions and motivate action. These groups consistently position themselves the victim of attacks from other groups such as migrants or LGBTQI+ people and the target of government conspiracy. For example, AustraliaOne leader, Riccardo Bosi, threatened his audience that if they didn't take action to challenge the election fraud he alleges, the government would take their property and kill them (case study 2). Christian Lives Matter associates warned that LGBTQI+ campaigners and governments are deliberately provoking Christians and are a threat to their childrens (case study 3). The distributors of fake election pamphlets against candidate Tina Ayyad warned that she would persecute Christians and make her electorate a 'Muslim stronghold' drawing on long running Islamophobic campaigning in Australia (case study 5). These tactics use fear to motivate their audiences.
- 3. Disinformation narratives and discourse are being imported from around the world, the USA in particular.** Worldwide, actors are looking abroad to re-purpose narratives and content for their local purposes. The AustraliaOne Party (case study 2), for example, frequently shares and discusses US politics and conspiracy material. Their claim of 'election fraud' involving complicit election staff echoed the 2020 US Presidential Election, where staff were repeatedly accused of fraud (case study 1). Researchers at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue have described this distribution of US election fraud narratives as a growing global phenomenon (Craig et al., 2023, p. 6). Additionally, AustraliaOne Party members circulate QAnon conspiracy narratives

about satanic pedophilia rings and cultivate audiences from global online conspiracy. sub-cultures (case study 2). They position themselves as well connected with and supported by like minded activists from around the globe. Similarly, Christian Lives Matter associates promote and share right-wing Christian material from the US, including recurring narratives linking transgender people with pedophilia, and portray conservative Christians as marginalised (case study 3), echoing similar assertions by conservative Christian groups in relation to LGBTQI+ visibility and rights in the US (Walker, 2022).

- 4. Conspiracy is used as an entry point to recruit and mobilise further action.** While those promoting baseless election fraud conspiracies have been unsuccessful in overturning the election result, the use of these tactics have broader implications. They serve as crucial opportunities for subculture groups and organisers to attract and mobilise larger numbers of supporters, and also to motivate their core base into actions like monitoring election workers. They also both tap into and contribute to the widespread lack of trust in government institutions and the media (Edelman Trust Institute, 2023). For example, AustraliaOne Party utilised a range of conspiracies to grow their audience and drive supporter action, including donating, volunteering, attending rallies, monitoring election staff and contacting the NSW Electoral Commission (case study 2). Christian Lives Matter associates claimed that the 'government is coming after our kids' to mobilise supporters to attend rallies (case study 3). The incorporation of conspiracy themes needs to be understood as an organising tactic, to build and motivate a supporter base, rather than as a coherent campaign or cause in itself.

5. News media actors are playing a role in amplifying misinformation and hate.

Throughout the case studies of this report, Australian news media institutions play a significant role in amplifying instances of misinformation and hate content from fringe groups to their large audiences. The amplifying role of news media has previously been highlighted by researchers (Phillips, 2018).

News media organisations operate in an increasingly competitive and high pressure context and publishing decisions are often difficult and nuanced. Accordingly, Australian media regulators and professional bodies provide advice to practitioners to avoid unnecessarily spreading harmful content and false claims (Australian Communications and Media Authority, n.d.; Australian Press Council, n.d.; Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance, 2020). The significant cultural and political power of the news media means their practices must be continuously reviewed and improved.

Through our case studies, news media actors play a role in two key ways. Firstly, they did occasionally publish problematic material themselves, with varying levels of contextualisation and explanation (case studies 1 and 5). In both these cases, more could have been done to label and contextualise the content if there was indeed strong public interest in bringing it to broader attention.

Possibly the more significant role news media played however is in continuing to amplify a story, which provides an ongoing foothold for misinformation and hate to spread through comments and other activity across social media platforms (case studies 1, 3, 4 and 5). The reamplification of conspiracy and hate

speech through comment and replies was a consistent pattern we observed in social media posts sharing news articles about the incidents described in our case studies. The consistency of this reaction suggests it is likely an expected response. For their part, social media platforms have an array of approaches to moderating problematic comments, and in many cases do not act or act inaccurately to provide correct cultivate audiences from global online conspiracy sub-cultures (case study 2) ions. In considering the future of election integrity and online activity, the ability of actors to hijack the news media with sensationalist claims and stunts remains an important pattern for a range of stakeholders to grapple with.

Case Study 1:

Baseless claim of election fraud spreads online

From 22nd March 2023, just days before the election, footage of a person confronting NSW election staff and accusing them of interfering with pre-poll votes began circulating across multiple online platforms, including TikTok, Telegram, Twitter, Facebook, Rumble and BitChute. The footage shows NSW Election Commission staff moving sealed ballot containers to a car. The people filming off-camera say, “it’s another rigged election is it?”, “that is illegal”, “this is nice and dicey isn’t it?”, “how corrupt is this?”, and dismiss the NSWEC staff member’s explanation that votes aren’t counted at this early voting centre.

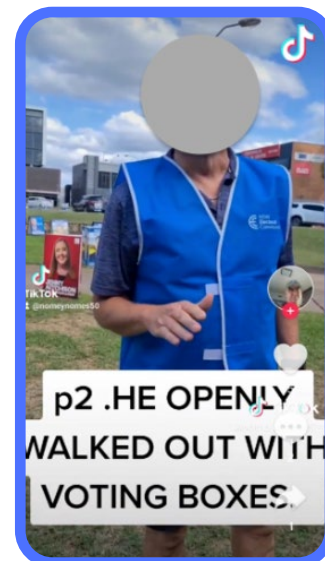
In a follow up video, they speak over the staff member, calling them “crooks”, and state that the same alleged corruption occurred in the Federal election and that the staff weren’t “going to get away with it this time”. We observed multiple uploads of the footage across platforms, including posts that have since been removed, which had received hundreds of thousands of views and thousands of comments in aggregate.

In a statement on its Disinformation Register, the NSW Electoral Commission has explained that it is “usual practice for full ballot boxes to be moved during the early voting period to the Election Manager’s office, for secure storage when an early voting centre has taken a large amount of votes. [...] This relocation of boxes is permitted and there are processes in place to ensure there is a robust audit trail ...” (NSW Electoral Commission, 2023b). After the election, APP FactCheck

also published an assessment of the video, referring to an instance of it uploaded to Facebook, finding it 'false' (AAP FactCheck & William Summers, 2023). The Daily Telegraph online also reported on the incident as an example of 'volunteer harassment' on election day (Alexi Demetriadi, 2023).

Over the following days, the footage was reposted by high profile accounts, amplifying the false claims of electoral corruption to more viewers, and catalysed a string of other posts. Former MP Craig Kelly uploaded the video as [a Twitter post](#), with the text: "I'm sure there's a good excuse as to why a bloke in shorts and a T-shirt is driving off with ballot boxes full of votes in what appears to be his private car. But whatever the excuse - the SECURE CHAIN OF CUSTODY OF THE BALLOTS HAS BEEN COMPROMISED". Kelly has over 90,000 Twitter followers. According to the platform's post metrics, his video received over 120,000 views and thousands of interactions. Six hours after Kelly's tweet, the [NSW Electoral Commission account posted a reply](#), linking to its explanation of the incident, however this reply was seen less than 9,000 times, fewer than 10% of the views of Kelly's Tweet. Twitter later added a link to AAP FactCheck's report on the case published after the election, below Kelly's video.

According to the platform's metrics, Kelly's video received over 120,000 views and thousands of interactions. 6 hours after his Tweet, the NSWEC posted a reply, linked to its explanation of the incident—however, this reply was seen less than 9,000 times, fewer than 10% of the views of Kelly's Tweet.

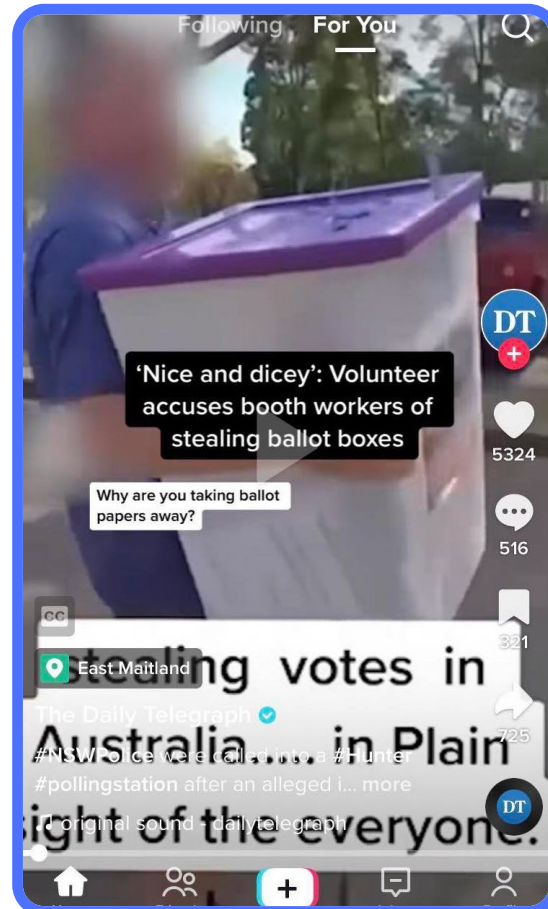


Screenshot of a post from different social media platforms sharing the footage

Kelly followed up his tweet with [another](#): “Nothing to see here - it’s just an innocent misunderstanding”, with a link to 2022 2GB reporting on images that claimed to show federal election ballot papers out of place in Port Macquarie. This appears to imply a pattern of corrupt handling of ballots, as it provides little context such as the Australian Electoral Commission’s explanation at the time that the image appeared intentionally constructed to suggest a compromise to ballot security (Australian Electoral Commission, 2022). While Kelly’s tweet was viewed over 15,000 times, the [NSW Electoral Commission’s additional response was](#) only viewed around 120 times. Kelly later [followed up again](#), challenging the integrity of Australian election counts. These tweets were seen over 50,000 times. Commenters repeated claims that Australian election agencies are corrupt and referred to US election conspiracies.



Redacted screenshot of Craig Kelly’s Tweet, Mar 23, 2023, his video received over 120K views and thousands of interactions.

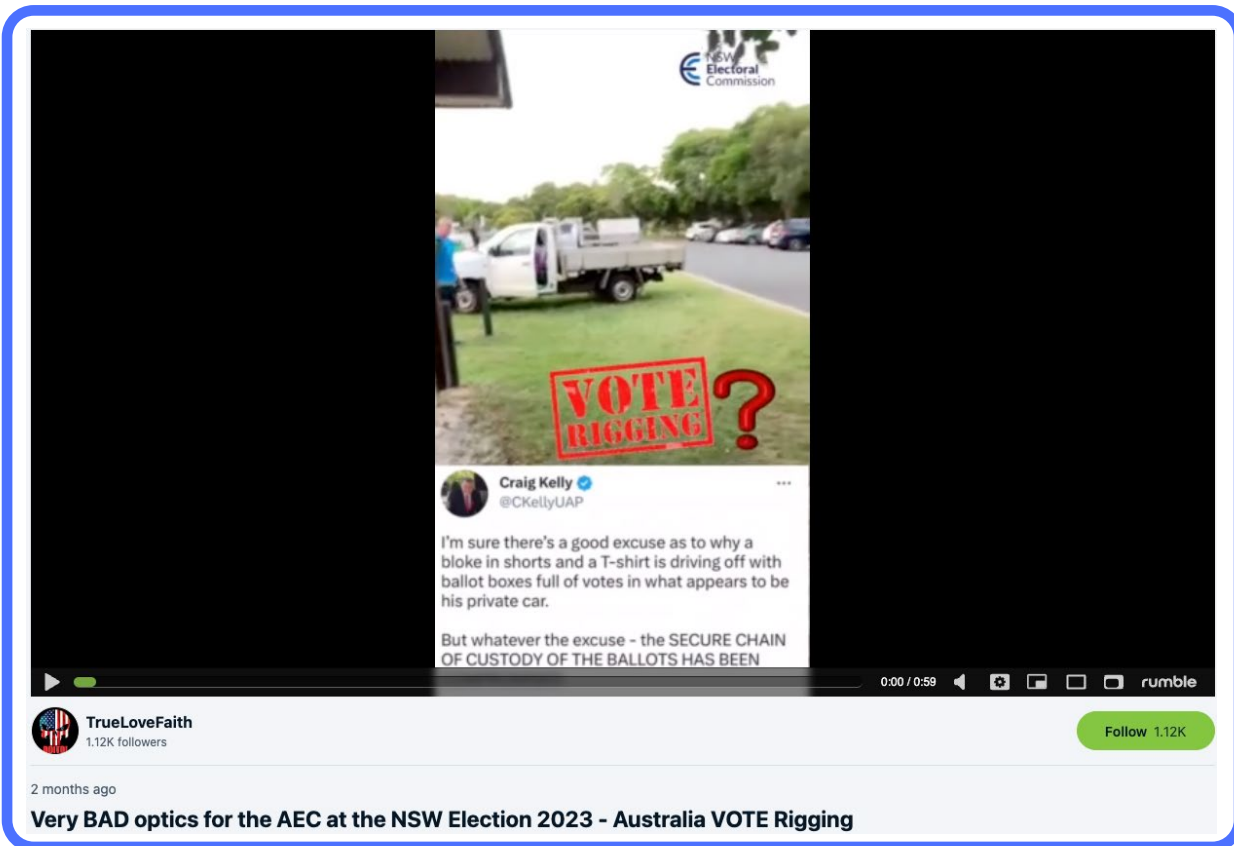


Screenshot of Daily Telegraph TikTok video

Other accounts with large followings that posted variations on the video included prominent online correspondent described as an 'anti-vaccine activist' by APP, [Maria Zeee, to Telegram](#), and former head of the Australian Christian Lobby [Lyle Shelton to Facebook](#), who posted an image of the incident with questions to the NSWEC and later updated his post with a link to its explanation. In both cases, post commenters frequently responded with baseless claims that the NSW Electoral Commission and AEC were corrupt.

The Daily Telegraph's post has received over 192,000 views, been reposted over 440 times and received over 500 comments including many that claimed the election was corrupt.

One of NSW biggest media outlets, The Daily Telegraph, published an excerpt from an early TikTok upload of the footage to its TikTok account, followed by over 200,000 people. The Daily Telegraph's post has received over 192,000 views, been reposted over 440 times and received over 500 comments including many that claimed the election was corrupt. The post text, only presented in full if viewers tap 'more', characterises



Screenshot of Rumble video with the superimposed NSWEC watermark

the incident as “#harassment” of election workers but does not reference the NSWEC’s explanation or correct the video’s claims.

It refers viewers to a link in the account’s bio, the only place links can be provided via TikTok, which leads to an article that includes the NSWEC’s response and further information. It is likely that only a small share of viewers would have reached this clarification, because of the multiple steps required.

Before election day, another TikTok video was posted that compiled footage of election staff moving ballot boxes from the polling stations, with Craig Kelly’s tweet, and imposed the NSW Electoral Commission logo as a watermark in the top right corner. This falsely implies Kelly had shared official footage from the NSW Electoral Commission. This video was shared by other accounts across platforms, one of which received 870 likes, 225 comments and 295 shares, and on other platforms, including [Rumble](#) with the title “Very BAD optics for the AEC at the NSW Election 2023 - Australia VOTE Rigging”.

This appears to falsely imply that Kelly had shared official footage from the NSW Electoral Commission.

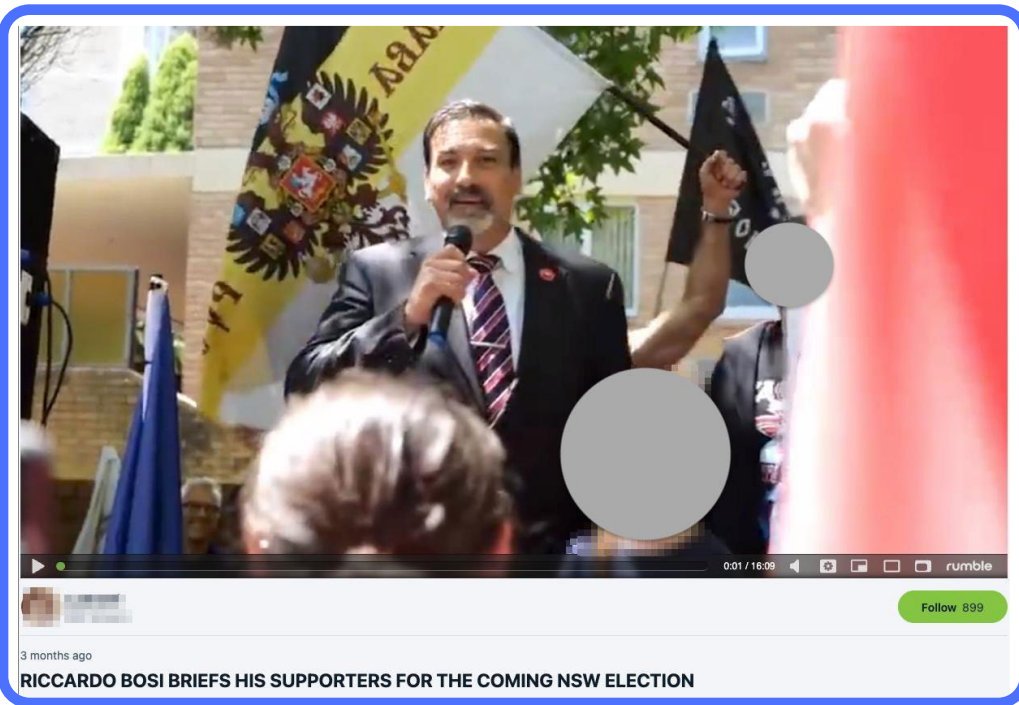
This case shows how false claims of election corruption can rapidly circulate and reproduce, and how official and media corrections are outpaced by this spread. While the claims were frequently questioned and challenged by commenters, a large number appeared to take the posts as confirmation of conspiracy. This footage will have a lasting impact, and the level of engagement by the thousands of people who viewed it and added their comments demonstrates that it is part of a bigger narrative that continues to develop and present a worsening threat.

Case Study 2:

Increasingly sophisticated conspiracy organising online and offline

During the 2023 NSW Election, an unregistered political party made baseless election corruption claims a central element of its campaign, accelerating its online and offline organising. AustraliaOne Party (also known as ‘Australia One Party’ and ‘A1’) is an unregistered political party and political organising group, established by online conspiracy influencer Riccardo Bosi and supporters around 2018-2019. AustraliaOne Party ran 18 candidates at the 2023 NSW Election under ‘Group U’ on the Legislative Council ballot paper, gaining a total of 35,888 votes (NSW Electoral Commission, 2023c). Given AustraliaOne Party’s escalating conspiratorial messaging and successful mobilisation of its supporters’ on-the-ground action, we believe it is an important group to understand in the context of Australian election integrity.

Broadly, AustraliaOne Party positions itself as the Australian political vehicle for people interested in an ever evolving array of conspiracy subcultures that have developed online over the past decade, including QAnon, COVID-19 conspiracies and ‘The Great Reset’. Consistent with these cultures, they characterise themselves as outsiders and ‘ordinary Australians’ who are revealing the ‘truth’ and fighting domination. While they remain a small organisation and fringe movement, AustraliaOne Party appears to be consolidating a dedicated and growing base of supporters who are motivated to campaign and recruit on its behalf.



Redacted screenshot of a Rumble video of Riccardo Bosi speaking at a campaign rally before the NSW State Election

AustraliaOne Party's Online Organising Practice

Aligned with contemporary conspiracy subcultures, AustraliaOne Party and its supporters are prolific online. Across the official accounts of the party and those of its key members and candidates, the group is extremely active across a range of websites and social media platforms. They display a sophisticated approach to using both mainstream social media platforms, like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, as well as more 'edge' platforms, like Telegram, Rumble, BitChute and Gab. The party appears to enthusiastically embrace new platforms too, like Project Matilda. Since early 2023, the party has been hosting regular video panel discussions and speeches from candidates, as well as maintaining a regular online newsletter. AustraliaOne Party's account managers maintained engagement and activity across this array of channels, during and since the election.

Much of this activity reproduces the content and aesthetics of the broad array of conspiracy narratives and cultures, particularly QAnon-like claims about elite paedophile rings being protected by police and politicians. It also incorporates Islamophobic and transphobic themes. Bosi in particular frequently uses highly escalatory language about

fighting a 'global war' and elites who are 'going to kill us'. This material frequently gets thousands of views and hundreds of comments across platforms, suggesting AustraliaOne Party is quite successful at tapping into the intense interest of people following these subcultures.

In addition to 'AustraliaOne Party' accounts, key members are also highly active. Leader Riccardo Bosi has largely shifted off mainstream channels since 2021, though still has a large follower base across Facebook (121k), Twitter (7k), Instagram (21k) and YouTube (3.7k). He is now highly active on Telegram through the AustraliaOne account, as well as Rumble and BitChute, participating in regular livestream discussions and delivering speeches. AustraliaOne Party's subscribers for these videos on Rumble have grown 400% since 2021, from 5,000 to over 22,000 followers. Other key candidates and associates circulate AustraliaOne materials across Facebook, republishing and sharing its videos. Some associates manage multiple Facebook pages and groups, each with several thousand members or followers.

In addition to their central website, australiaoneparty.com, AustraliaOne Party produced a specialised election site to recruit, publish and fundraise for the March 2023 election, "[MyVote.one - Time for Truth](http://MyVote.one)". The site features a range of integrations and functionality to solicit donations, recruit and register volunteers, sell merchandise, instructions of how to vote and candidate profiles. Since the election the site has been removed.

AustraliaOne Party also appears to be closely connected to an independent online news aggregation and publishing outfit, Did You Know? (didiyouknow.ink), which is syndicated through the MyVote.one website and has been frequently shared on AustraliaOne Party's Telegram. Did You Know? publishes articles that draw on a broad collection of conspiracy narratives, including AustraliaOne Party material. These articles are published on its website and shared through multiple social media accounts, including on Telegram, Facebook, Instagram, Bitchute, Rumble, and Twitter. The website requests donations to a bank account 'Did You Know Au Pty Ltd' (company registered in late 2022) and via the online platforms Locals and Subscribe Star.

The NSW Election appears to have been a major organising moment for AustraliaOne Party. In addition to the group's intense online activity, images posted to Telegram suggest that it successfully recruited volunteers to support their campaign at voting booths, some travelling

to join from interstate. Its online engagement is being converted into on-the-ground mobilisation, using tools like the MyVote.one website, their newsletter and their broader online campaign tactics.

Escalating election corruption conspiracy

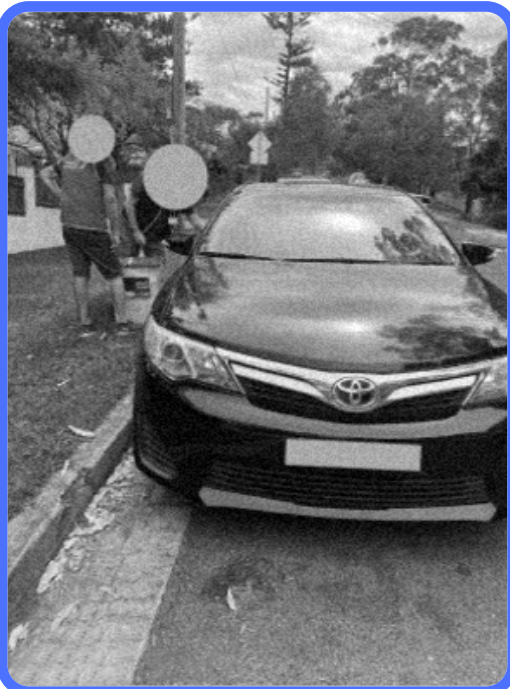
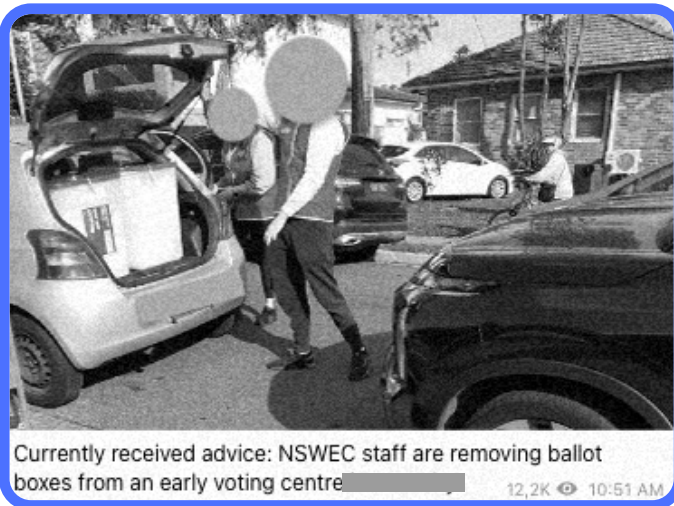
AustraliaOne Party's videos and posts frequently repeated baseless claims that the election was 'rigged' or being 'stolen'. This narrative included claims that the vote count was corrupt, that boxes of votes were stolen, and that NSW Electoral Commission staff were changing votes. In a speech at a campaign launch rally on February 18 2023 (uploaded to BitCute and shared across social media) Riccardo Bosi claims that 'the NSW Electoral Commission will be found guilty of election fraud' if his party does not win. These election fraud conspiracies became a central element of the AustraliaOne Party campaign, before and after the vote on March 25.

It appears that AustraliaOne Party requested their supporters to actively monitor NSWEC workers at voting centres. A recurring theme in the group's online activity has been sharing videos and images posted by their supporters filming and questioning NSW Electoral Commission workers about their practices, at times in a badgering manner. Key AustraliaOne Party candidates have been very active in encouraging supporters to monitor election staff, and have frequently asserted that they are revealing that the election is corrupt and fulfilling an important accountability function. In a video posted March 23, Bosi called on viewers: "New South Wales, they 're stealing your election... so please get out there with your cameras and get more evidence of crime". Footage posted by supporters was then subsequently used as props to evidence claims of election corruption in video panel discussions and compilation videos, which in turn were shared to motivate supporters. During the campaign AustraliaOne Party's Telegram account shared the NSWEC's explanation of its processes for managing pre-poll ballots, but then continued to imply that they were corrupt and shared claims of election fraud.

Case Study 2: Increasingly Sophisticated Conspiracy Organising Online and Offline

In one panel discussion uploaded to multiple platforms on 23 March, Bosi and AustraliaOne Party associates discussed their claims with a supporter 'Missy Doodah', who appears to be the woman who filed and shared the viral footage described above in Case Study 1. She described receiving an AustraliaOne Party email encouraging supporters to film and watch out for election staff removing boxes and being motivated to respond:

"I've got that email from you guys to say watch out for this one hour before that happened. I read it, went and showed it to everybody, to make sure everyone read it that was there ... I ran to grab my phone..."



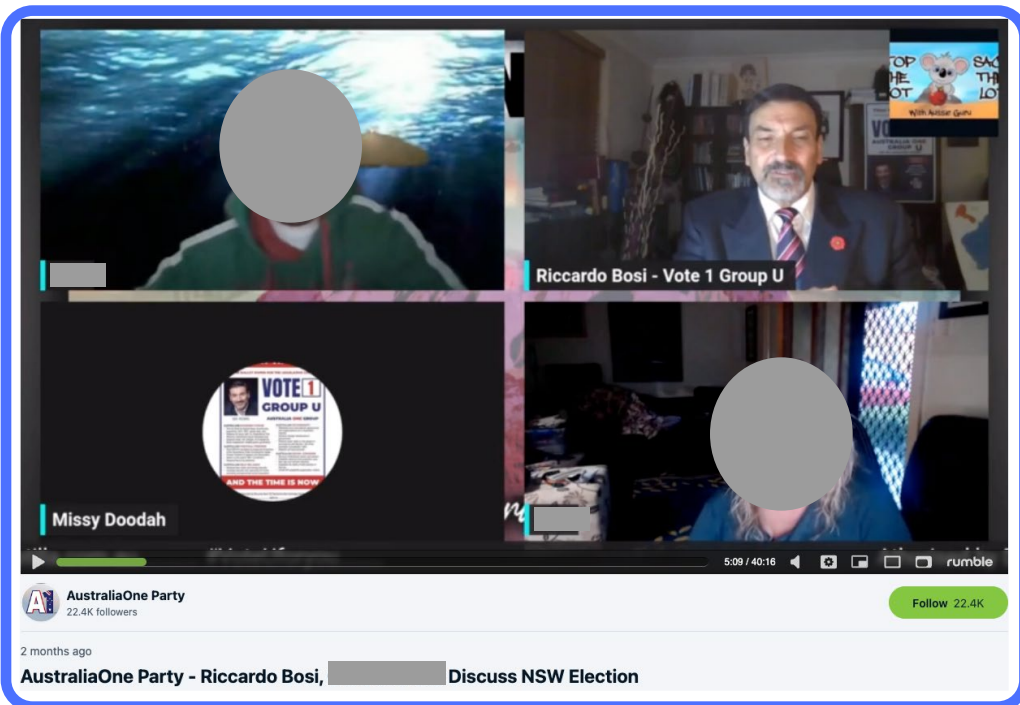
Redacted screenshots of monitoring NSWEC staff at locations around the state, shared in AustraliaOne Party Telegram channel

She also says she felt “intimidated” by an alleged response by authorities to her and fellow volunteers’ activities, which she characterised as “harassing”.

In the other video published on March 27 titled ‘The Big Steal’, Bosi continued to share Missy Doodah’s video, arguing that the electoral commission staff looked frightened when being “caught”. He repeatedly claims that the AustraliaOne Party’s supporters uncovered ‘evidence’ of election fraud. On Rumble, this video is one of the group’s most popular uploads in the past year. Commenters echo Bosi’s claims, with language such as “cheat”, “corrupt”, “fraud”, and “stolen”, and a number use coded QAnon subculture acronyms. Several commenters called for violence: “The only way now is a military coup”, “The true fruit of A1’s victory will be tasted when all these corrupt bastards meet the hangman... What happened was nothing short of TREASON”, and “Death penalty for Treason is the only solution.”

After the election, AustraliaOne Party published a number of ‘election update’ videos. In the fourth video in the series, published on May 15, Graham and Bosi host “research consultant” Gideon Jacobs, a “statistical guru”, to share his data

“I’ve got that email from you guys to say watch out for this one hour before that happened. I read it, went and showed it to everybody, to make sure everyone read it that was there ... I ran to grab my phone...”



Redacted screenshot of AustraliaOne Party panel discussion on Rumble.

analysis investigation of the NSW vote count. APP FactCheck reviewed Jacob's claims, finding them to be inaccurate and false (Summers, 2023). According to Jacobs, his analysis demonstrates anomalies in the count that have resulted in AustraliaOneParty (Group U) receiving an artificially low share of the vote. Bosi describes these as "disturbing trends, disturbing anomalies" and calls on viewers to alert the media and complain to the government. He then targets the NSW Electoral Commissioner, saying:

"... you're either an honest incompetent or you're a piece of corrupted filth that's gonna swing by your neck till you're dead if you're found guilty. Now for that idiototic ASIO, that's not an incitement nor is it a threat, it is a logical consequence of a piece of masonic filth if he's guilty of stealing the election".

He also uses the colloquialism 'for the high jump' (referring to punishment by hanging) to describe the punishment envisioned for NSWEC election staff who he believes were complicit in the corruption alleged by the AustraliaOne Party.

Bosi then addresses his audience, connecting the election conspiracy into AustraliaOne Party's broader rhetoric about a global 'genocide'. He says,

"Ladies and gentlemen, you know the implication, they're coming for your kids, they're coming for you... they're gonna come for your house, they're gonna come for your money... and they're gonna kill you. You have no way out of this, you're going to die, a miserable death... you're not safe and I'm not wrong."

AustraliaOne Party members have been of interest to Federal and NSW police over the last 18 months. Due to his violent threats against politicians and government figures Bosi was reportedly being monitored by Australian Federal Police in 2022 (Rice, 2022). In February 2023, during the election campaign, AustraliaOne Party candidate David Graham was charged with intimidation against staff of radio station 2GB (Sibthorpe, 2023).

While AustraliaOne Party remains a fringe group and are not attracting mainstream support, their election campaign appears to have been a major mobilisation and escalation in their

Australian election workers may continue to experience intimidation and threats in upcoming elections.

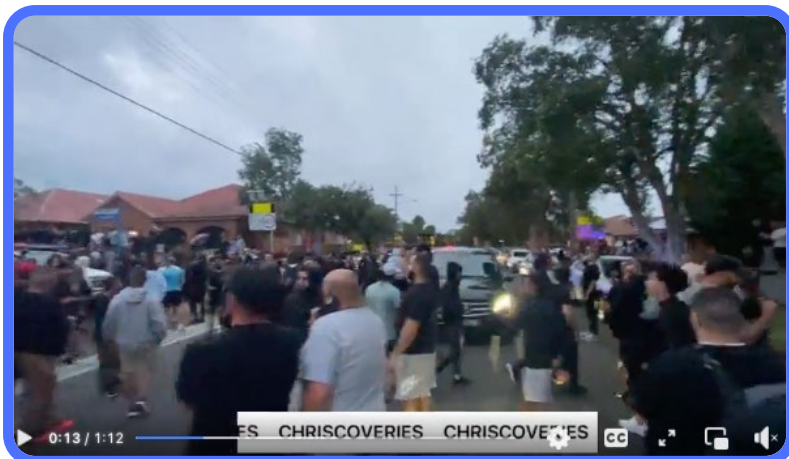
Case Study 2: Increasingly Sophisticated Conspiracy Organising Online and Offline

organising. Their success in motivating supporters, along with the large online engagement with their election fraud conspiracy material, suggests that Australian election workers may continue to experience intimidation and threats in upcoming elections. Stakeholders researching and implementing programs towards election integrity should continue to monitor how the group and their practices evolve.

Case Study 3:

Escalating hate online and offline

One of the major media stories of the election campaign was an attack on a group of LGBTQI+ campaigners outside St Michael's Church in Belfield, central-west Sydney on March 21. There to protest an appearance by One Nation candidate Mark Latham, the group of roughly 15 from Community Action for Rainbow Rights (CARR) were chased and violently confronted by a group of over 200 men, reportedly including members of the Christian Lives Matter (CLM) group. Three men were charged by NSW Police. Among them was Christian Sukkar, who has reportedly spoken at CLM rallies in Sydney, and who pleaded to encouraging the commission of crimes over a video he posted online ahead of the event (Duffin & Jordan, 2023). In recent months, anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric and organising by CLM had been escalating both online and offline. This incident shows how escalating online rhetoric can boil over into offline violence.



Screenshot of a video footage from Chriscoveries of the violent incident outside St. Michael's Church in Belfield

CLM is a Sydney-based group that describes itself as organised around defending Christian faith. Its name is an appropriation of the US-based protest movement, Black Lives Matter. In an interview with Maria Zeee, CLM Facebook group founder Charlie Bakhos, says the group was started to “raise awareness of persecuted Christians around the world” and shifted to focusing on religious freedom in Australia (Zeee, 2023). While Bakhos stresses that he doesn’t believe his group “hates gay people, LGBT” or “anybody” (and that hate is against his faith), but is standing up to an “evil ideology”, “pushing paedophilia” which he says “good people” need to unite against. In the introduction to the interview, Maria Zeee associates LGBTQIA+ festival World Pride with the “destruction of society”, and says: “the people of Sydney seem to have had enough of the LGBTQIA+ movement actively promoting and participating in paedophilia”.

As early as 2017, the media has reported CLM being associated with anti-LGBTQI+ incidents, such as the vandalism of murals (Smart, 2017).

In the interview, Bakhos’s explanations suggest that CLM are more of a loose movement of people (rather than structured membership) who identify with the ‘Christian Lives Matter’ slogan, which appears on social media, as a hashtag online, and printed on t-shirts. They appear to be actively commenting and posting across Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp, and have their own private message groups in addition to their public organising. Bakhos says he has not been involved with many of the events attributed to CLM, but also that he is organising lawful protests and sharing the videos and material of other groups’ campaigns.

As early as 2017, the media has reported CLM being associated with anti-LGBTQI+ incidents, such as the vandalism of murals (Smart, 2017). In the lead up to the 2023 NSW Election, CLM has been linked to what has been reported as an ‘anti-pride’ march in Newtown on March 3 (Kelly, 2023; Wilson, 2023a); and a protest in Hyde Park on March 18 at which several attendees held a large banner reading ‘LGBTQ = PEDOPHILIA’ (Gregoire, 2023). Bakhos denied any connection to specific incidents in his Zee media interview (Zeee, 2023).

It has been reported that in the days before the CARR protest of Latham’s campaign event on March 21, a social media post promoting the event “circulated around the religious rights community” (Baker & Duffin, 2023), and CLM members organised to attend the church

“to pray the rosary” (Beaini, 2023). Reportedly in the context of private WhatsApp group discussions about counter actions (Chriscoveries, 2023), Christian Sukkar had shared a video of himself calling on people to physically confront CARR protesters:

“If you’re going down tomorrow to see the protesters, there is only one way. And that way is to grab them and drag them by their fucking hair and get them out of there. If you want to pray the rosary, take Charlie Bakhos and you go to St Charbel’s and pray the rosary there ... to the real boys, to the real motherfucking G’s you go there tomorrow tomorrow and you fucking shake them up ... Time to rise, time to let them know where we stand. That’s the only answer I’ve got for you.”

Sukkar was charged by NSW Police with encouraging the ‘commission of crimes’, and was sentenced in May after pleading guilty. The ABC reported that he has since apologised and said he did not intend to incite violence (Calderwood et al., 2023) and had sent a follow up video asking for people to behave peacefully after receiving a call from police (Chriscoveries, 2023). Later however, outside court, Sukkar was reported to have said of the incident, “It does send the right message: stay away from our church, stay away from our children” (Varga, 2023). In an interview with independent reporter Chriscoveries, Sukkar said that he believes the CARR protesters were sent by ‘the government’ to provoke the community (Chriscoveries, 2023).

While there are currently around 27,000 members in the Christian Lives Matter Facebook group and 19,000 followers on Instagram, it was reported that the group has become more private after the intense media scrutiny following violence at Belfield (Wilson, 2023b). It appears that many of its Facebook posts in 2023 have been removed and the Instagram account has been deactivated, reactivated and now according to Instagram’s notice, ‘the page may have been removed’. While this makes it difficult to verify the extent of anti-LGBTQI+ material in these spaces, it has been reported that there had been ‘multiple posts critical of LGBTQ+ activism and pride’ (Kelly, 2023).

Case Study 4:

Hate-based intimidation of a candidate flares online

In the week following the election, on the morning of March 30, then-NSW Leader of One Nation who has since quit the party, MLC Mark Latham, tweeted a sexually graphic, homophobic attack on Independent MP for Sydney, Alex Greenwich. Latham, who is followed by over 66,000 Twitter accounts, deleted the Tweet within 24 hours after it became the focus of widespread reporting and condemnation (Tatham, 2023). Latham has since defended his speech across social media and in an online radio interview (Latham, 2023). The incident has become one of the most reported on and highest profile hate speech incidents of the election. We have chosen not to reproduce the content of the Tweet here.

NSW Police confirmed to media that they had begun investigating Greenwich's complaint of vilification against Latham (Tatham, 2023). Additionally, Greenwich has initiated proceedings to sue Latham for defamation. While these measures are targeted at Latham as an individual, they do not address the larger abuse of Greenwich and homophobic vilification that has found a platform through this incident.

Social media posts of news reports and other commentary detailing these events became their own platform for further homophobic speech and valorising Latham for his comments, including by sharing links to homophobic medical misinformation. Since March, Latham's ongoing tweets and Facebook posts about Greenwich and the response to the incident, as well as commentary posts by news media outlets and others across a wide range of online platforms (including

Instagram, Telegram, Gab and Youtube), have continued to generate large numbers of interactions both supporting and criticising Latham. Many of the posts reproduce homophobic and dehumanising narratives and language that ridicule homosexual and/or transgender people as a threat to society.

Many commenters on Facebook and Twitter argued that Latham's homophobic statement was balanced by an earlier statement by Greenwich that Latham's actions and campaigning against LGBTQI+ education and rights made him a 'disgusting human' (Baker & Duffin, 2023). These posts reproduce a narrative that justifies homophobic speech as a legitimate response to LGBTQI+ people, who are positioned as a threat to heterosexual people. This narrative positions those who fight against the visibility and social inclusion of people with diverse sexualities and genders as being the victims of media, political and government bullying.

This incident highlights the relationship between the social media activity of a high profile individual, the way their actions are amplified through their large social media followings and by intense media reporting, including ongoing hate-based abuse of candidates. Greenwich has stated that following the incident his social media accounts were bombarded with graphic homophobic attacks and his electoral office received abusive calls, which were reported to NSW Police who made several arrests (Staszewska, 2023). These follow another recent arrest of a man making homophobic, violent threats against Greenwich (Baker & Duffin, 2023).

Greenwich, who is one of the few openly LGBTQI+ parliamentarians in NSW, said in a statement to media, "I've been openly gay in public life for 15 years and in parliament for over 10 years, and never have I experienced such a homophobic, sexualised attack that exposed me to contempt, ridicule and extreme abuse, based on my sexuality" (A. Smith, 2023). This case highlights the way that hate-based intimidation of candidates can rapidly escalate around elections.

"I've been openly gay in public life for 15 years and in parliament for over 10 years, and never have I experienced such a homophobic, sexualised attack that exposed me to contempt, ridicule and extreme abuse, based on my sexuality"

Twitter Impressions for posts mentioning MP Alex Greenwich per day, during the 2023 NSW election

Twitter impressions (times that a post appeared to users) of tweets including the text "@AlexGreenwich" or "Alex Greenwich" between Feb 25 and April 8.

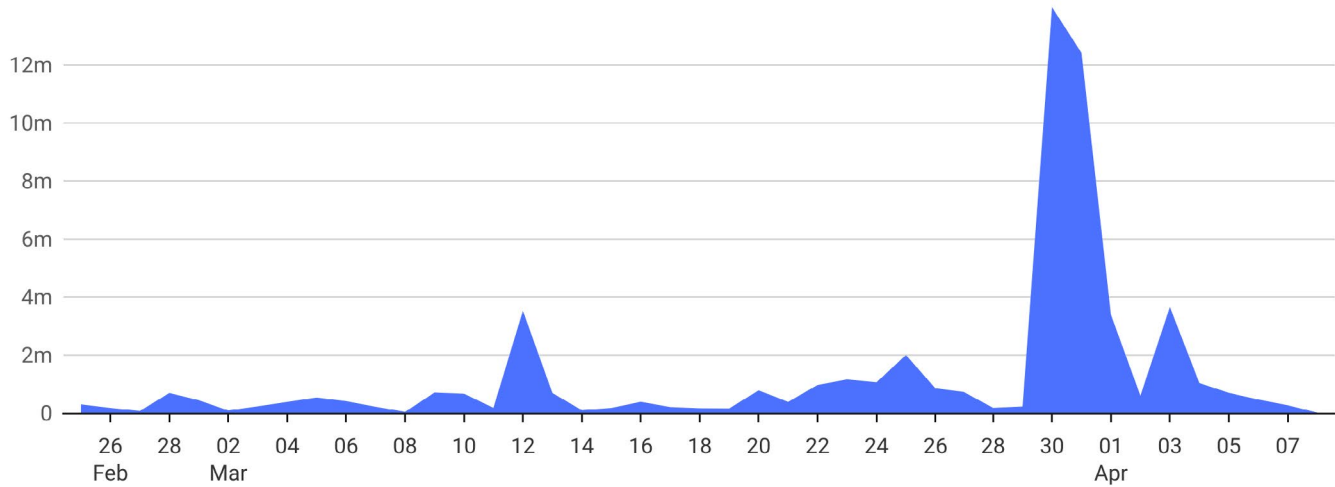
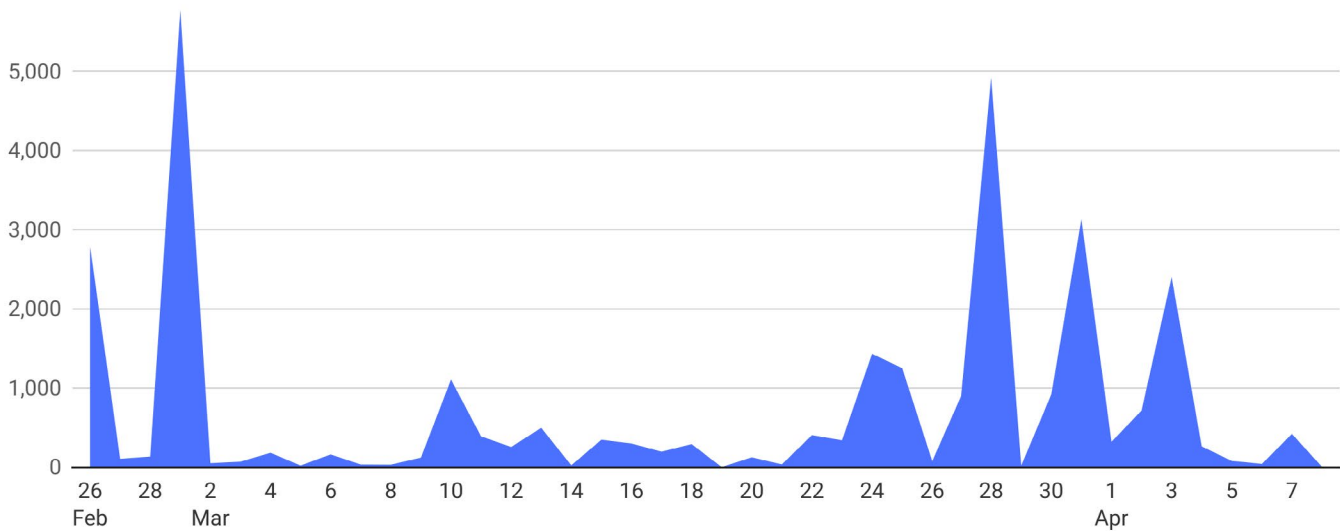


Chart: Purpose • Source: Meltwater • Created with Datawrapper

Interactions with Facebook posts mentioning MP Alex Greenwich, by post creation date, during the 2023 NSW Election

Total interactions (reactions, shares and comments) for posts with text including "Alex Greenwich" or "AlexGreenwich", between Feb 25 and April 8, by post creation date.



Facebook does not provide data on the date of the interaction, only by the date of the post. It is highly likely that interactions continued to happen after the post date as Alex Greenwich became a media focus after March 30. An earlier peak in interactions for a post made on March 1 occurred when Greenwich appeared on popular Sydney radio station 2GB and was mentioned by its Facebook Page.

Chart: Purpose • Source: CrowdTangle • Created with Datawrapper

Redacted screenshots of Facebook comments on social media posts about the incident in the days following

The trouble with the LGTB "community " is that they think they are free to abuse,insult, blaspheme etc but push back against their abuse and you are painted as the worst person in the world, picking on the poor "special people". I don't condone what Mark Latham said but I understand his frustration.

Like Reply 9 w 95

yes I agree..they are trying to force upon us their lifestyle

Like Reply 9 w 25

This wouldn't have happened if Greenwich had minded his own business in the first place....he had a crack at Latham about attending an event he was invited to but didn't organize which is nobody's business!!! But like all bed wetters they have to comment on everything and this is the result!!!

Like Reply 9 w 46

The truth hurts.Better sit in their safe space

Like Reply 9 w 14

There's no lie in what he said. Mark was spot on again.

Like Reply 9 w Edited 22

he only stated the obvious.

Like Reply 9 w

The thing is when you have your "community" don't force your community on people who don't want it or in front of our children. Live and love who you like but don't force people to agree with it 🙌 I'm sick and tired of hearing about who's rights trump who's and these peoples constant moaning. My children will be who they are without any direction from you lot.

Like Reply 8 w Edited 20

Does this guy not know that a man and a woman's body are different, they were created this way for a purpose by our almighty Creator. No human made law will ever change that the facts and the truth will always remain. People should wake up to be honest not provide convenient devils laws to suit sins ! Accept the truth .

Like Reply 5 w

Go after them mark

Like Reply 8 w 7

The poor little princess!

Like Reply 8 w 7

Top fan

If he thinks, what Mark Latham said was "vile", does that mean he also thinks what he does is "vile". Can't have it both ways. There appears to be a big difference from saying and doing, according to the left.

Like Reply 9 w 195

How about they stop shoving their LGBTXYZ agenda down our throats every day and making it normal. It is Not!

Like Reply 9 w 27

Case Study 5:

Media amplification of racialised disinformation attack on candidate

On the morning of March 15, 9News broadcast a report that Tina Ayyad, the Liberal Party candidate for Holsworthy in Sydney’s south-west, had been targeted with Islamophobic pamphlets, distributed to households (9News Staff, 2023). The pamphlets had been designed to impersonate Ayyad’s official campaign material. The dehumanising text presented Muslim people as a menace, that Ayyad was apparently trying to sneak into parliament to make Holsworthy a “muslim stronghold”.



Screenshot of 9News report, showing the fraudulent pamphlets impersonating Tina Ayyad's campaign (9News Staff, 2023)

Following an investigation by NSW Police, in late May, two months after the election, a 50-year-old man was charged with offences under the NSW Electoral Act. Reportedly, the man has entered a plea of not guilty and, “claimed all the information in the flyer was true before he denied he created it” (Tullis, 2023).

This is not an isolated incident for Muslims in Australia, especially electoral candidates. The language of the pamphlet echoed long running Islamophobic campaigning by a number of different actors, including the One Nation Party (Chamas, 2019; Pauline Hanson’s One Nation, 2016), and themes present in Australian Muslims’ accounts of racism described in the recent *Islamophobia in Australia (2014-2021)* report (Iner, 2023) and the *Sharing the Stories of Australian Muslims* report (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021). Additionally, a similar incident occurred in the 2019 Federal election, in which West Australian MP Dr Anne Aly was targeted by unauthorised, racist attack pamphlets making false claims about her policy platform (Laschon, 2019). Senator Mehreen Faruqi, Australia’s first Muslim woman parliamentarian, has also described being targeted with extreme anti-Muslim racism and harrasment (Faruqi, 2021), and Australia’s first Muslim federal minister, MP Ed Husic, has also been targeted (Veiszadeh, 2013). In this sense, the pamphlets fit into a pattern of Islamophobic intimidation of electoral candidates, particularly women.

In this sense, the pamphlets fit into a pattern of Islamophobic intimidation of electoral candidates, particularly women.

Over the 48 hours following 9News broadcast, the incident was further reported by news media online, including by some of Australia’s biggest news sites, the Daily Telegraph, News.com.au and the ABC. As usual, these outlets shared links to their reports across their various social media accounts, which combined, have many hundreds of thousands of followers.

In this case, we did not detect related online material targeting Tina Ayyad and it appears that this concerted, Islamophobic campaign against her was deployed through pamphlets only. The total quantity of pamphlets was not reported, however there has been no indication that they were distributed beyond the suburb of Barden Ridge. Accordingly, it appears that for the overwhelming majority of those who encountered this material, it was in news media reporting online and on television.

It is not known if this was the response the authors had hoped to provoke, however this would fit the tactic of troll-infused 'controversy marketing' (Holiday, 2017; Napier-Raman, 2021). In this approach, actors intentionally attempt to provoke widespread, negative coverage using public stunts. The aim is for their messages to be amplified and be seen by those with aligned views, who they would otherwise be unable to reach. This creates a dilemma for news media reporting which risks providing 'oxygen' for racist abuse (Phillips, 2018).

The media's reporting of the material created an online foothold for this campaign in two ways. Firstly, outlets including 9News, the Daily Telegraph, News.com.au and the ABC all published high resolution images of the pamphlet covers. The Daily Telegraph included an additional image of the full content from the back of the pamphlets and 9News featured a high resolution image for viewers to read on screen. While 9News did include text on screen, 'racist smear', and smaller text that Ayyad was the target, there was no visual label that the pamphlets were fraudulent impersonations of campaign material or 'fake'. Viewers watching the program without sound, in a waiting room for example or auto-playing in their Facebook Feed on mute, could have easily seen the pamphlet material without the context that it was fake material.

Secondly, the news media's online reporting of the fake pamphlet became its own platform for Islamophobia as their report URLs were shared and commented on across social media platforms. Crowdtangle shows that on Facebook there were a number of shares of these reports into private groups, where the content of the discussion is unavailable to researchers not already members of the groups. In public comments, replies and shares of the media report URLs, commenters repeated Islamophobic and xenophobic tropes. One particular theme was to deflect from the intention of the pamphlet by disputing whether it was racist or anti-religious at all. Because of the moderation of media outlets' social media pages and the ephemeral nature of online posts, a fuller picture of how people responded remains unclear.

While there is clearly public interest in reporting hate-based disinformation and intimidation of candidates, publishers must consider how their reporting may also contribute to amplifying them. Previous research has described the way that offline hate-based harassment can become the catalyst for online incidents (Iner, 2022, pp. 148–152), which appears to have played out here. Careful management of how disinformation is repeated and framed within reporting is required to mitigate this risk.

Redacted screenshots of comments on shares of news reports of this incident across Twitter and Facebook.

[Redacted Profile] · 11h
Replying to @9NewsSyd and [Redacted]
Islam should be prohibited in the West

🗨️ ↻️ ❤️ 1 📊 28 📤

[Redacted Profile] · 6h
Replying to @9NewsSyd [Redacted]
Leaving aside the leftist-premise-affirming Finklethink ("opponents of this Muslim conservative are the real racists!"), Liberal chasing the ethnic bloc vote with this type of candidate tells us a lot about the demographic trajectory of Australia.

🗨️ ↻️ ❤️ 3 📊 19 📤

[Redacted Profile]
Smearing muslim is an attack against religion not race. Muslim is not a race.

Like Reply 4h

[Redacted Profile]
Well this is unacceptable but ISLAM IS NOT A RACE! Islam is a political system that has a religious piece called ISLAM but also has a LEGAL piece - the very nasty SHARIA and the war side - JIHAD and an abusive side with a very nasty term KAFIR for all non - believers, There are also acceptable LYING TERMS FOR NON-BELIEVERS - DAWA AND TAQUIYYA , These can be used to decieve the much hated KAFIR but not a Muslim. Read koran 33.61 !

Recommendations

Ensure the design of interventions is adequately informed by those experiencing the negative impacts.

Our research was limited to reporting on the activity that occurred in public online spaces. This sheds little light on the experience of many of those most impacted—i.e. those subjected to violent physical threats, harassment, intimidation and hate speech—including electoral candidates, election workers and members of targeted communities. Further research and listening to those impacted is required to inform specific projects that seek to address these issues. Any future electoral integrity interventions and programs must ensure that lived-experience informs their design. Building trusted relationships with affected stakeholders is imperative.

Expand research to other geographies, and not just around election campaign periods, to better understand the complexity of these emergent challenges.

Election experts highlight that efforts to defend election integrity operate on a long cycle, not just in the brief period around voting. In Australia elections also occur across local, state and Federal governments, and bad actors build their narratives and capacities across these opportunities to escalate their influence. Therefore we recommend increased resourcing for monitoring activity generally, but importantly for longer periods of time and across regions. This should include monitoring capabilities and resourcing for electoral commissions as well as independent researchers and civil society practitioners.

Establish election integrity longitudinal studies, or a 'barometer', to aggregate research, establish trends, and provide an evidence base to assess interventions.

There is currently a lack of repeated, detailed assessments of the state of election integrity in Australia across election cycles that incorporates research into emergent online threats. A long-term research program is needed to guide policy and programs that respond, and to then assess the impact of these interventions. This program could incorporate a range of research qualitative and quantitative studies, including case studies-based

reports, to provide a rich picture of the evolving situation. The framework for looking at internal and external election actors and practices, as well as first-order and second-order problems, provides a useful structure (see [Election Integrity](#) above under Key Definitions).

Collaborate with news media practitioners to further develop their capacities to support election integrity and limit the impact of misinformation.

While there is clearly public interest in reporting hate-based incidents, disinformation and other threats to election integrity, publishers must also consider how their reporting may also contribute to amplifying threats. This practice requires constant reflection and development in the face of rapidly evolving tactics and narratives. It is recommended that election integrity stakeholders develop partnerships with newsrooms, journalist associations (e.g. MEAA) and educators to further literacy around election integrity, how misinformation spreads and the impact of intimidation of candidates and voters. Efforts could include training resources, incorporating contemporary case studies into curricula, contributing to communities of best practice, events and constructive reflection on practice and more.

Prototype and develop programs that increase citizen engagement in election integrity, that promote their constructive roles in elections.

Citizen monitoring and scrutiny is regarded as an important element of election integrity, and many people have a keen interest in Australian elections and the cultures and events around them. These interests however are also being manipulated by bad actors to make baseless claims of election fraud and mobilise supporters to monitor and engage election workers in intimidating ways, starting from the assumption that they are corrupt. We recommend the development of civil society, election commission, and government programs that reward and engage constructive participation in election monitoring in ways that undermine and crowd out bad faith actors. There is an existing community of election workers, volunteers and scrutineers to build on and support in more local communities. We believe there are opportunities to use this momentum to enhance election integrity, and avoid missteps that may play into conspiracists' narratives.

Develop programs that build media, digital and civic literacy of the electorate to increase their ability to identify and report problematic content.

While the responsibility for detecting and countering threats to electoral integrity should not sit with the public alone, it is well established that increasing the public's awareness of misinformation and other online threats serves as a critical component of inoculating audiences against their impacts. Better equipping communities and individuals with the media, digital and civic literacy enables their full participation in our democracy. While there are established and concerted efforts to increase media literacy, for example by the Australian Media Literacy Alliance, this needs to be complemented with digital literacy programs that provide the community with the knowledge and understanding of how news and information is spread and amplified online. Practice-based learning, that involves people in community media and civic processes, are one promising direction.

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