

13 February 2019

ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry
Response to the Preliminary Report
Via email: platforminquiry@acc.gov.au



Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for this opportunity to respond to the ACCC's Digital Platforms Inquiry.

Given that the Internet was inspired by democracy and largely built with taxpayers' money, it's wrong for the world's most critical information sharing tool to now be dominated by technology giants with highly competitive, profit-hungry/predatory business models that lend themselves to being hijacked by people with sinister agendas, and seemingly obsessive aversion to paying taxes necessary for civilized societies to operate. As ClimActs' Climate Guardians discovered first hand in 2017, it's not possible for platform users to communicate with any decisions makers or people with accountability in Silicon Valley*.

At 374 pages, the Inquiry's preliminary report is a pretty dense document reflecting a huge amount of work for which the ACCC is to be commended. Like most ordinary citizens, I'm time poor so started by searching a few key words of importance to me. First on the list was 'bullying', followed by 'trolling', and they came up only once, in the same sentence (pg 277). Online 'harassment' came up just three times, all in one section (also on pg 277), while 'cyberhate' didn't come up at all. As The Australia Institute's recently released report shows, online abuse and harassment (in some cases absolutely shocking) is costing Australians (and disproportionately women) around \$3.7 billion in medical bills and lost income.¹ So evidence suggests that this aspect of the Inquiry demands a lot more serious attention. And, given the topic, it's noteworthy that this important information is thanks to independently funded, highly qualified and dedicated researchers and journalists whose livelihoods (and in some cases safety) are under threat as a direct result of digital platforms failing to protect their users.

Understanding that information technology has the capacity to truly transform all human societies into locally accountable yet globally aware and conscious communities, it's a wicked irony that the technology itself has become arguably the most powerful weapon in the heavy arsenal being used against fair and just democratic processes and systems by those whose extreme wealth and/or worldviews is challenged by facts. As human history has tragically shown time and again, unrestrained propaganda ideally feeds dysfunctional political systems that lead to dangerous socio-dynamics that enable the most power craving and cruel to exploit people and nature ruthlessly and seemingly without limits. Effectively addressing current critical and converging societal problems (deepening inequity within and between nations) and ecological crisis (such as climate change and mass extinction to name a few) demands globally cooperative, democratically organised

societies based on facts, fairness, and justice that are fundamental to the United Nations' [universal human rights](#) enshrined 70 years ago. We cannot do this with an Internet largely controlled by dysfunctional, profits-obsessed and seemingly unaccountable digital platforms.

There is so much brilliant and wonderful material on the Internet but users should never have to put up with being misled, deceived, spied upon, abused/trolled and/or having personal information harvested and exploited for profit and/or nefarious purposes in return for access to it. And, as Cambridge Analytica election scandals have dramatically revealed, out of control digital platforms that have lent themselves to being exploited by evil people with deep pockets now pose seriously grave threats to democratic societies everywhere.

Really it's an affront to all reason when for years now those who have amassed obscene personal wealth from developing highly sophisticated technologies that track users' every move—via numerous, interlinked platforms—claim they are doing all they can to end abuse on (as well as of) their platforms. Allowing them to continue making ingenuous and unconvincing excuses while remaining unaccountable for the obvious extremely serious problems they are hugely and knowingly profiting from is clearly not acceptable.

It's not working to have:

- an internet business model that rewards more clicks with more profits thus grossly incentivising the creation and spread of sensationalised 'fake news';
- digital platforms allowing themselves to act as vehicles for abuse, such as hate speech, and 'cyberhate' inciting violence;
- an increasingly concentrated ownership of surplus starved media struggling to maintain standards to produce high quality, original and trustworthy content that is consistent with an educated and informed society; namely independent, investigative reporting from professional journalists who comply with journalistic codes of ethics;
- a failure to come to terms with and counter the serious threats posed by digital platforms use of algorithms and social bots; and
- a radically increased concentration of wealth, power and influence in the hands of a few at the expense of most other people and all nature.

To actively address the dangerous erosion of basic truths (ones based on long understood and well-proven facts) and trust in our communities, to begin rebuilding fully accountable democratic systems that work for all Australians, immediate measures must be taken to:

- Ensure that all companies profiting from information technologies in Australia pay their fair share of tax;
- Establish a federal digital platform ombudsman to assist all content providers and service users defend against maladministration and abuse of power;

- Ensure adequate funding for fact-based public interest information from credible sources that in all ways fully comply with journalistic codes of ethics by contributing a fair and reasonable share of profits generated from material shared with those who created it;
- actively counter perverse incentives to create and spread dangerously divisive and corrosive 'fake news' by identifying, record-storing and imposing financial penalties (proportionally measured) on platforms found to have spread 'fake news'/'alternative facts' (aka lies);
- establish a fully transparent and publicly accountable 'Fund' (a 'Digital Platform Penalty Fund' for instance) from all profits found to have been generated by digital platforms spreading 'fake news' for financial and/or political purposes, noting terms modelled on those already applying in Europe; and
- with priority given to communities on the front line of resource conflict and/or climate change, use proceeds from the 'Fund' to finance socially and environmentally sustainable community based projects, including providing globally accessible micro financing loans to enable local communities to projects that will most quickly transition their economies towards full sustainability.

Given already existing highly sophisticated analytic software, there can be no doubt that digital platforms are infinitely capable of 1) measuring and storing records of material produced by media companies and shared by users, 2) arrange compensation to responsible creators of material based on its number of shares, and 3) identify, store, properly assess and compensate for the dissemination of 'fake news'/'alternative facts'.

HISTORIC URGENCY

As all social indicators are showing, unacceptable levels of inequity, blatantly self-serving leaders (ie do 'political donations' help explain Coalition leaders fondling lumps of coal in parliament?) combined with increasingly polarised and ill-informed public debates are escalating societal divisions. The ongoing, ruthless attacks on our public broadcasters are indicative of the deep systemic flaws in Australia's democracy, and at the heart of unjust and unsustainable social systems causing increasing unrest globally.

Weaponised by digital platforms, the destructive capacities of those seeking to peddle misleading and deceitful information to muddle and manipulate public debates for personal gain is enormous. For powerful vested interests to be using dangerous 'gaslighting' tactics in this new Age of the Anthropocene—a geological epoch where human impacts on the natural world have become so vast and enormous that they are threatening all components of the Earth's life support systems—makes our current converging threats more terrifying than anything else that humanity has ever faced. It's a salient fact that no human problems can be affectively addressed if the Earth's life support systems collapse.

Major scientific and technological advances in sustainable closed loop production systems have effectively enabled us to deliver basic needs (food, water, energy, shelter, knowledge) and a reasonable life to all local communities on a global scale. Yet, instead of progressing humanity towards fair and environmentally sustainable human societies, our 'common wealth' is being sapped and our future threatened by a cabal of powerful vested interests (most notably Big Polluters, Big Banks, Big Guns, Big Drugs, and Big Food) using aggressive and manipulative tactics to maintain control over key global resources and markets. While threats to human civilisation exponentially mount, we cannot continue ignoring the ways in which the wealthiest and most powerful in the global community are aggressively exploiting and degrading socio-political systems to further enrich themselves while pushing the ecological foundations upon which all lives depend to the brink and targeting and blaming relatively vulnerable and weak people for causing the poverty they are suffering, and problems generally.

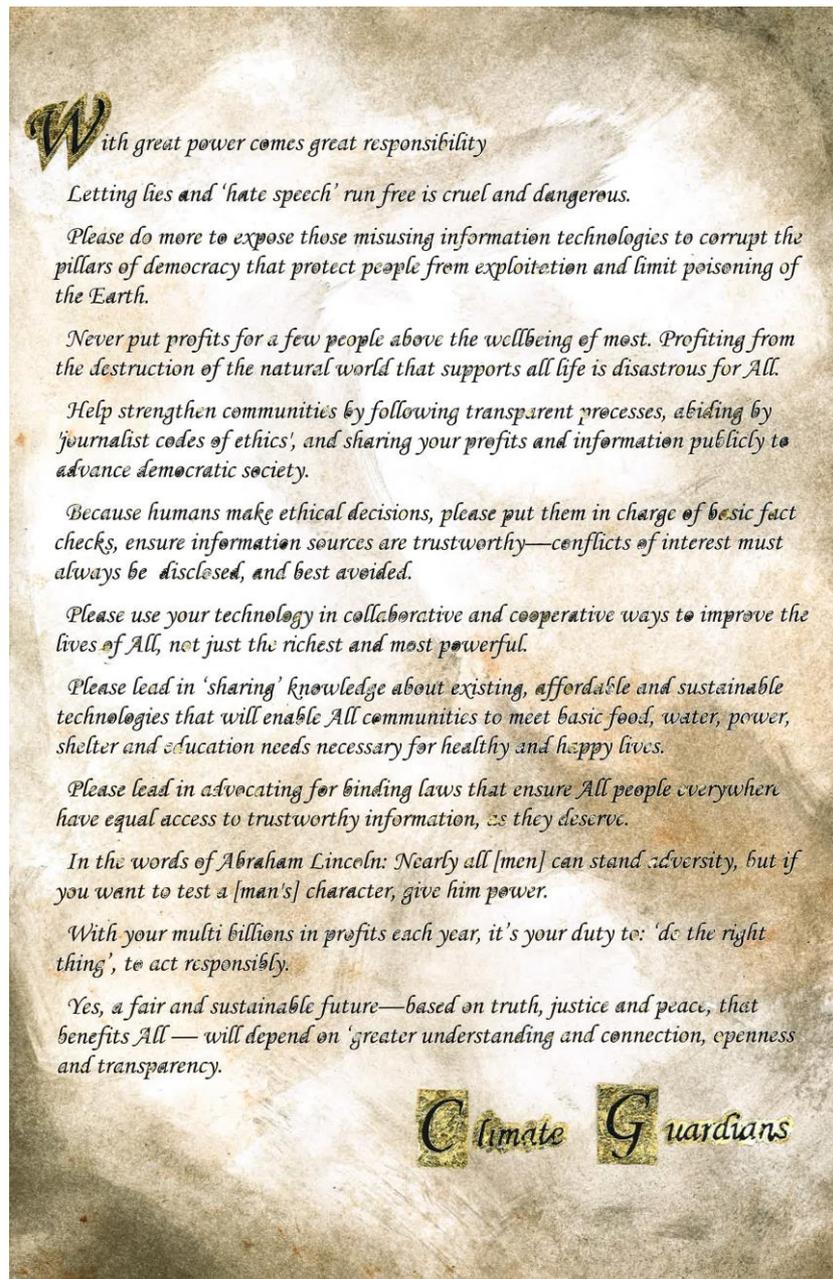
We have no chance of restoring healthy democracies capable of effectively addressing the serious problems outlined above without reliable, trustworthy, fully accountable digital platforms. We well know how to establish fair, transparent, and enforceable regulations. And we know that cooperatively organised democratic governments around the world are already taking bold action to hold digital platforms to account.

I will look forward to following the Inquiry's developments -

With thanks for this opportunity to respond to the ACCC's Digital Platforms Inquiry,

Yours faithfully,

Deborah Hart
Convenor
ClimActs
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With great power comes great responsibility

Letting lies and 'hate speech' run free is cruel and dangerous.

Please do more to expose those misusing information technologies to corrupt the pillars of democracy that protect people from exploitation and limit poisoning of the Earth.

Never put profits for a few people above the wellbeing of most. Profiting from the destruction of the natural world that supports all life is disastrous for All.

Help strengthen communities by following transparent processes, abiding by 'journalist codes of ethics', and sharing your profits and information publicly to advance democratic society.

Because humans make ethical decisions, please put them in charge of basic fact checks, ensure information sources are trustworthy—conflicts of interest must always be disclosed, and best avoided.

Please use your technology in collaborative and cooperative ways to improve the lives of All, not just the richest and most powerful.

Please lead in 'sharing' knowledge about existing, affordable and sustainable technologies that will enable All communities to meet basic food, water, power, shelter and education needs necessary for healthy and happy lives.

Please lead in advocating for binding laws that ensure All people everywhere have equal access to trustworthy information, as they deserve.

In the words of Abraham Lincoln: Nearly all [men] can stand adversity, but if you want to test a [man's] character, give him power.

With your multi billions in profits each year, it's your duty to: 'do the right thing', to act responsibly.

Yes, a fair and sustainable future—based on truth, justice and peace, that benefits All—will depend on 'greater understanding and connection, openness and transparency.

Climate Guardians

* deeply concerned about the impacts of seemingly lawless social media platforms and search engines and blocked from all avenues of communication, in late 2017, ClimAct's Climate Guardians hand delivered scrolls with this message to information technology giants in Silicon Valley.²

¹ http://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/P530%20Trolls%20and%20polls%20-%20surveying%20economic%20costs%20of%20cyberhate%20%255bWEB%255d_0.pdf 'Trolls and polls: the economic costs of online harassment and cyberhate', The Australia Institute, published 28 January 2019

² <https://climacts.org.au/2017/09/17/force-for-sustainable-progress-or-tool-for-tyrants/> 'Force for Sustainable Progress of Tool for Tyrants', ClimActs blog, posted 17 September 2017