**Episode 8 – Disinformation**

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Kerry: This year, Australia will hold a national referendum. This referendum will ask voters if the Constitution should be altered to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.

With Australia’s last referendum being held over 20 years ago, many might not know why they’re held or how to vote.

Hi, I’m Kerry, and in this podcast, I’ll be joined by the team from the Australian Electoral Commission to unpack the process ahead of the referendum so that you can vote with confidence.

This is an unbiased and detailed look at why the referendum is important, how you can make your vote count, and why your answer matters.

Last episode we spoke about disinformation and the role that the AEC plays in debunking it during a referendum. There was so much to talk about and honestly, we could have devoted another whole episode to it – so we did!

Alex and Meg, welcome back.

Meg: Thanks for having us.

Alex: So good to be here.

Kerry: So, we know that social media is a common way to spread disinformation. What does the AEC do about that? It’s not like you can just call up Instagram, right?

Meg: I mean, we absolutely do! Having key relationships, with key players in the game is important. Mis and Disinformation spreads on social media, so that is kind of why we have to have correspondents and relationships. The good thing is these platforms already recognise this and they often have their policies and terms of services that directly prohibited electoral miss and disinformation in their platform. So, we are all on the same page. Because we play a role in educating the public and regulating electoral mis and dis information, the first step might be reporting that content and asking for it to be removed. It depends on the content and whether it breaches Australian law or the terms of service, and whether is in our role to be actually acting in that instance. But always, our decision to act is informed by our role and maintaining electoral integrity and trust in the electoral system.

To be absolutely clear, we’d only be acting where that content is misleading/deceptive about the voting process or might require an authorisation and it doesn’t have one.

Alex: I should also add it’s not really about, there’s occasionally claims made that it’s all about you know, oh you’re regulating my speech, you’re policing my freedom of expression. Definitely not about that at all. We are never looking to crack down on someone having just an honest, genuine political opinion. We’re here to make sure that when people are talking about the referendum process, the process that we run, the process that we’re the experts in, that that is happening factually, and that people aren’t spreading mistruths about that information. In many cases, spreading mistruth about an election or a referendum is actually counter to a platform’s terms of service and that’s a really important thing. So, at the end of the day, it can just look like the AEC using an official referral, which is something anyone can do to a platform and going ‘Hey, we think we’ve seen a post that breaches your terms of service because it’s lying about the referendum process’.

Kelly: I didn’t realise there was so much stuff that kind of happens in the background to ensure that information is being spread in the right way. How else can you tackle this kind of thing?

Meg: We have a disinformation register on our website, and I’ve touched on this a little bit before, but it’s basically a one-stop-shop for any kind of claim made about the electoral process and it provides a source of truth. There’s the claim on there that we run things by using voting machines, which is absolutely not true. And another way that we counter this is a firm but friendly approach to our social media. So, if you have a question or you’re unsure of something that you’ve seen on social media, absolutely just tag us and ask us, and we get that all the time.

Alex: We’re also not afraid to call something out if someone’s acting like a bit of a goose on socials, we prefer not to, but you know, I think we’re quite proud of having been recognised for doing that at the last election, and something that we’re looking forward to taking forward to this referendum as well. And of course, the third thing we do is podcasts and interviews like this one. So, I spend a lot of my time jumping on the radio or doing podcasts like this one. We’ve trained up a lot of on the ground staff, our election and referendum experts, and asked people to put their hand up if they feel like jumping on the radio and having a chat. So, if you’re listening to you know local radio in Broome and someone from the AEC pops on the radio, odds are it’s someone who lives quite near you. We like to think that makes it genuine for people. You’re talking to actual AEC experts about actual election and referendum topics. It’s really important that we walk the talk.

Kelly: How great to know that if you need any information and if it’s not heard here on our wonderful podcast, you can reach out to you guys on social media or potentially there’s even someone who lives near you who might be well skilled up on the information that you need to know.

Isn’t it just playing whack-a-mole though? You see disinformation, you debunk it, is that the best approach?

Meg: It’s one of the approaches, I think. Recently we’ve been researching this topic and trying to figure out what works best in terms of educating the public and getting that cut-through. We have more recently been trying to pre-bunk stuff, so kind of where we get an idea that there may be low literacy on a certain issue in the referendum, we’ve been trying to pump out videos and media on that topic so that before people even have time to answer the question, they have the answer.

Alex: And this is a field that’s really, really interesting to dig into as well, so digital literacy, misinformation, and disinformation, they’re terms that have existed for a while but it’s also a very active period of research right now. So, there’s new information coming out about this topic all the time. We’re trying to stay as much on the cutting edge of it as we can, because we recognise that there is a really, really important role that the AEC plays in, not only countering this stuff, but doing some public education and just making sure that when someone goes to vote, regardless of whether it’s an election or a referendum, that they’re casting the most informed vote that they can. I don’t mean informed about whether you are gonna vote ‘Yes or No’, but informed about how the system works. So, you know that whatever you put in the box at a referendum, that’s whether you write ‘Yes’ or ‘No,’ you know how that’s going to work. You know what you are voting for, you know how the vote will be counted. That’s really, really important. That’s part of being an informed voter.

Kelly: Your disinformation register talks about emotive language – now I’ve heard about not driving while I’m angry, so should I not be posting if I’m angry also?

Meg: I think when you’re reading stuff on the internet and feeling emotions from it, it’s a good time to stop and consider. A lot of mis and disinformation uses emotions as a technique to get people to react quickly to something, like perhaps share it or comment on it, kind of amplifying that content. So, I think when you read something and you feel like it’s very divisive or you feel a certain emotion, it’s a good time to stop and consider what you’re reading, whether there’s an authorisation and who’s posting it.

Alex: It’s important to note that it’s not just anger as well, it can tap into so many emotions – you know, sadness, anger, rage, righteous indignation is a great one as well. So, if you see that sort of social media pile on and there’s a main character of the day and everyone’s going ‘I can’t believe they’ve done something so reprehensible’, maybe it’s worth stopping and considering. I mean, maybe that person has done something reprehensible, I’m not going to tell you, I’m not judging, but maybe it’s worth stopping and considering before making that heated comment or having a crack at someone. This could be referendum related it could not be referendum related, it’s kind of a good rule for life. Always stop and consider, you know.

Kerry: Totally. This has been such a great chat, I’ve learnt so much today. Thanks Meg, thanks Alex.

Meg: Thanks Kerry

Alex: You’re so welcome.

Kerry: On the next episode…

Meg: Going to a polling place will look similar to a federal election, but instead of getting two ballot papers, one green ballot paper for House of Reps and one white ballot paper for the Senate, you’ll get a very special referendum ballot paper, and its colour will be buff – which is a real colour.

Kerry: …We will talk you through what to expect on voting day, and yep, that includes a democracy sausage sizzle.