Transcript: **Facts and Other Lies with Ed Coper**
Recorded live on 16/03/2022
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Facts and Other Lies with Ed Coper

Guest
Ed Coper

Author, Facts and Other Lies

Peter Lewis

Director, Australia Institute's Centre for Responsible Technology

In conversation with

Ebony Bennett
Deputy Director at the Australia Institute

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Ebony Bennett [00:00:02] G'day, everyone, I'm Ebony Bennett, Deputy Director at the Australia Institute, and welcome to our 2022 webinar series. Thanks so much for joining us today. I want to begin by acknowledging that I live and work on Ngunnawal and Ngambri country and pay my respects to elders past and present. Sovereignty was never ceded, and this always was and always will be Aboriginal land. As you will know, if you've tuned in before the Australia Institute does do these webinars at least weekly, but the dates and times do vary. So head on over to Australia Institute dot org dot AU to sign up for future events. And if you're into tech, don't forget to head on over to the Centre for Responsible Tech. And this Friday, we've got their Burning Platforms regular fortnightly catch up. That should be a good one this week. Well, I'm very excited about today's topic and it's very topical indeed. Would your younger self believe the news of today? We all know and sense intuitively around us that we're living through a time of fake news and disinformation. And Ed Coper's new book 'Facts and other Lies: Welcome to the Disinformation Age' puts fake news into historical context, explains how disinformation has fractured society, everything even threatening democracy itself. And more importantly, it explains why disinformation is so potent and so hard to stop and what we can to do to prevent its proliferation here in Australia. He's the author of the book. He was on the frontlines when the internet collided with democracy, growing Australia's first online political movement to quickly amass more members than every political party combined. Ed is a leading political communications expert who pioneered techniques to bring politics into the digital age. He's very accomplished, and it's a fascinating book, and today Ed is going to be in conversation with Peter Lewis, Director of the Australia Institute Centre for Responsible Technology and co-author of the Public Square Project. Ed I'm going to start with you, obviously. Firstly, congratulations on the book. It's a great read and tell me why it was now the time to write this book.

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Ed Coper [00:02:13] Well, thanks, Ebony and hi, everyone. This, as you said, as has been a very timely book, and I came to the realisation that something like this would be would be needed when over the course of the last few years living in the states and seeing firsthand the rise of Trump in my professional life, I've always used the internet to try to get facts and information to people and to rally round advocacy and political causes. And the way that worked in the early days of the internet changed over the last few years. And it's a it's a radically different place and it's a place, as the book describes, that really favours extreme opinion and falsehoods. And and we really started seeing the real world consequences of that change over the last few years. But there's there's a whole host of reasons for why, and there's not a lot of accessible resources since since Trump arrived, there's been a lot of academic research into some of the root causes of this, and there's been some really fascinating studies that have that have highlighted what it is about technology and our brains that that have led to these problems. But much of it's really limited to academic journals. So I really thought it would be a good time to to start bringing that all together and looking at the best research on these solutions as well. And when you do that, it's quite surprising. So I felt like a book like this might be a timely resource in the world in 2022 .

Ebony Bennett [00:04:02] That certainly seems to be the case and very topical indeed, and I will just remind everyone online, if you want to ask Ed a question or a question, you can put that in the Q&A box and a reminder please keep things civil and on topic in the chat. And I really enjoyed how you kind of went into a bit of the history of truth and lies and what that all means. Why did you think it was so important to kind of give people that context before you dive into why it's all gone to hell in a handbasket?

Ed Coper [00:04:33] Well, I think one of the one of the problems broadly when we look at misinformation and disinformation is is we really get focussed on some of the symptoms and and that's been an approach that has led us to to find solutions that aren't really fit for purpose because we haven't looked at the root causes. And so before we can tell what is different and what has changed in this new disinformation era, we've got to start by acknowledging what what isn't different and what hasn't changed. And some of the things that have always been around the fact that we lie lying is a part of normal human evolution. There are some very good reasons why we lie normally to protect others other people's feelings. But there is. There's always been lying. There's always been political lies. That's always been a part of about political discourse and there's always been disinformation as well. You know, this isn't new. The Cold War was filled with propaganda and disinformation and and the Russians became expert at it. That's not new, either. So we've got to look at the context that created these these issues to learn what's different and what it is that that changed our current era to be one that has tipped the balance towards falsehoods and and favouring these conspiracy theories and extreme opinions. And and we can't do that without a pretty good working knowledge of how we got here.

Ebony Bennett [00:06:09] Yeah. Pete, I think you were talking earlier to me about being interested in that difference between disinformation and some of the other concepts that it was there.

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Peter Lewis [00:06:20] Yeah, and I'm congratulations on the book and it's great to say a practical book, a political analysis and also a great deployment of bad jokes within the same 330 pages. So absolute kudos to the way that you've approached this project. I did like the way you brought ideas so that, you know the apocryphal story that Eskimos have 100 different words for ice. So it's almost breaking the idea of truth and lies into disinformation, misinformation, mal information, and then saying, Well, how are those pieces different? And then how do we actually attack each of them? So I think if you look at it as just we're in this world where no one believes each other, it's almost too big to do anything about. It feels overwhelming. And I thought it was really interesting how you you've even got this lovely little table towards the end, but you sort of break things down into almost a grid, which I probably is the kind of the the tech geek in you that's saying, Well, how do we adapt these different elements of the process? So I don't know if it's interesting for those that are that are in this session, maybe just particularly those three top lines, the difference between miss this and Mao and then how you build those different, I guess so most diagnoses and prognosis is out of that.

Ed Coper [00:07:44] Yeah, no. It's a great distinction to to unpack because we we generally use, you know, misinformation disinformation as catchall terms or fake news, as you know, as a catchall term to talk about quite a lot. And as you say, there's the problem with doing that is the the issue gets a bit too big to grasp and the solutions are a bit nebulous. So misinformation really just refers to any false or faulty information, and sometimes they can be perfectly legitimate reasons for that. So one of the best examples of good misinformation is satire. You know when when the Twitter advocate puts out a story that it's a wonderfully important piece of information that is that is serving a very legitimate purpose, but it technically is misinformation because it's not true. Or, you know, potentially a journalist might make a perfectly honest mistake and then issue a correction later. That is also misinformation. This is false information that's been put out there. Mal information is information that may be true, but is put out there with a malicious intent. So revenge porn might be a good example. That's not misinformation, but it is information that is being weaponized for some nefarious purpose. And then disinformation is false information that that is put out there to deliberately deceive people for some kind of ulterior motive as well. So that's what the book is really interested in unpacking and focussing on, because the disinformation landscape is very sophisticated, it's very effective, and people have found incredibly powerful ways to manipulate online platforms and manipulate us by spreading false information. They're able to do it in ways that look like real information that our brains will willingly accept as truth and then connect to other people in this networked world to spread disinformation with a passion and a purpose. And that is a really powerful formula, and it's how these very strange and clearly false ideas can all of a sudden become strong narratives that will drive people to get in their truck and drive to Canberra and protest on the lawns of Parliament House with these very passionately held beliefs. So that's what disinformation is, and that's that's really what the what the important thing to unpack is because that's what is open to manipulation, and that's what really severs some of the key links in our democracy.

Ebony Bennett [00:10:29] And a lot of the context for that is that it happens on social media platforms, particularly Facebook. Is that what really kind of took this perhaps phenomena that's been occurring for a long time and just kind of turbocharged it?

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Ed Coper [00:10:44] Yeah, that's the big, it's the big, hairy elephant in the room that that's that's the thing that changed between the early utopian days of the internet, where we all celebrated the fact that we could bypass censorship and and connect to each other and spread our troops around the world on a level playing field. The problem with that is this these days. There's way too much information on the internet. We have access to literally everything, and that creates a volume of information that is too much for anyone to handle. And if people who've had a Facebook account for a long time would remember that the reason it's called a timeline is because it used to be quite literally every post your friends posted in chronological order that they posted. Now you might have thousands of friends on your Facebook feed. It's just too unwieldy. And so the platforms that served us information had to start making decisions about which information they would service. And to do that, they relied on what we call an algorithm, which is just simply a mathematical process of of taking various pieces of information to make a decision about what you ebonyi, not anyone else, but you in particular want to see on your Facebook page. You know someone they might think that one of your friends is closer than another and and prioritise their content, but it's a lot more sophisticated than that. They know everything about you, so they might think that one particular niche gardening topic is something that you'd be really interested in. And they might say that a lot of other people on the platform are interested in the same niche gardening topic. So they decide that you want to see this particularly engaging piece of gardening content that that Peter might not be interested in. And so that's what they put there for you to digest. Now, that's a fairly innocuous example. The problem is that same process. If you are someone who instead is an anti-vaxxer, then they will know and the algorithm will decide that you will want to see anti-vaccination content and they will shield you from any counter factual information that might correct that mistaken belief. And so this is what we call the filter bubble effect, where because of the way the platforms present you information that the only they only want to show you things that you will engage with and you are interested in, then that just pushes people down rabbit holes. And a lot of people who are members of extremist groups on Facebook were were recommended those groups by the algorithm, they didn't find them organically. It wasn't a friend who suggested it to them. It was the the platforms itself that said, Hey, you sound like a neo-Nazi. You might be interested in joining this neo-Nazi group,

Peter Lewis [00:13:45] but it actually even goes one level deeper than just the filter bubbles. And I think you touched on this in the book, too, but I want to draw it out. It's not just that the recommendations are benign. There is also this acceptance within Facebook that the the number one priority for a user is to have them engaged and to be online longer, because then they're giving more of their behavioural information art that they can harvested. Repurpose is sold for advertising. So as was disclosed in the Facebook papers from Francis Hagen, who is the internal whistleblower last year, Facebook knows full well that information that's designed to either anger or enrage or excite users is more potent. People will stay on longer and engage more deeply. So it is not just that you are getting what you want, you are getting the loudest version of what you want and that creates an anaesthetic. I think on these platforms that everything is catastrophize everything, eg everything is outrageous. And as you make the point in the book that actually leads to a world which isn't conducive to considered conversation, I love at one point you can compare the way the right now does politics on the platforms, which is just throw a lot of names and get people angry to hosting an Australia Institute webinar, which is like a slow version of sharing ideas and thinking things through. But and I think we're all a bit naive when the internet started being used for politics

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that it was going to be a a platform that supported the left and supported Progressive just because we got there early. I think Obama was the proof point that the internet was progressive. I always make the point. Obama's no proof point, Obama was Obama, once a once in a generation politician that was going to thrive in whatever context he rose up in. But I think we we caught a trick here and have been paying the price ever since because the tools that we use to mobilise and mass fundraise have now been used for a whole lot of different reasons. And I don't think we saw it coming. So there's a few things there, but I think it does go to the business model of the platforms and how they they're not benign in the way they operate politically.

Ed Coper [00:15:57] Yeah, absolutely. This is a fundamental part of of the issue that that we all need to grasp and you that the easiest way to think about it is that the early days of the internet. That favoured hope. And now the internet favours highs, so Obama was really from the era of hope and Trump was from the era of height and and we saw in their campaigns the the evolution from from the internet being some way that progressives could use to to spread positive ideas to to one that is more social media driven now that favours inflammation, outrage, hyper partisanship and false information. So I call this the MAGAphone, which I invite everyone to to borrow that term because I think it's important to understand that Trump and his his followers is not some foreign domestic political interests that we can watch as a spectator from other countries. This is a global movement that is represented by the MAGA set and and it's everywhere from the lawns of of Wellington to at Parliament in Wellington, the lawns of our own parliament to Ottawa, to to Europe and Russia and Ukraine. Not right now. And so we really need to grasp exactly this. This dynamic that you mentioned and and that is the MAGAphone is something that can take the type of Fox News style outrage that even Fox News isn't evolved enough there. It's brought by and Infowars and Alex Jones and and all of the rest of that really far right. Shock jock ecosystem. I take that type of of falsehood laden outrage and you put it on social media and the and the platforms love it. And then you give it to people who who support those sorts of ideas. And they are so good at forming groups, finding each other, sharing that information and not just sharing it, but weaponizing it. I get that if you can make something ricochet around the the internet, then then it becomes a narrative that that can dominate society and political discourse. And we saw that in America, when you have a an unexpected, society changing event like the pandemic coming, coming along, that when the traditional institutions in America thought that they could act and behave in the traditional way of giving public health advice and expecting people to listen to information and compliantly follow the directions to safety, the cupboard was bare. They didn't say America decided this was a political problem, not a not a public health problem. Because of this MAGAphone and the power of it, where they could decide that a mask mandate was actually a conspirational direction from political elites to control them. And that became the reality. We saw it in the aftermath of the election there in 2020, where one candidate clearly lost. And rather than accepting the results that could just create their own reality and carry on as if as if that result never happened. And so they are a bit further down the rabbit hole, but the same thing is happening in Australia and elsewhere in similar western liberal democracies. So the MAGAphone is something that works symbiotically with how social media platforms work, and it was no slight to the Australia Institute style webinars, which which I love and endorse, but unfortunately, we can't compete. If you put this video on on a social media platform, it's not going to be able to compete against, you know, the latest far right meme about some wild conspiracy theory.

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Peter Lewis [00:20:17] Can I just jump in one bit there? It's almost the difference between reaction, which, you know, reactionary is the right wing playbook versus movement building that there's there's another book, I'll put it in the chat for people that are interested that's just come out called 'The Quiet Before' by a guy called Gal Beckerman. And he makes the point that if you look at social movements and political movements from the decolonisation movement in Africa to the democracy movement in Russia, in the Cold War, I'm going to have much more in the bunch. More in between movements take time and the building of a movement is not something that happens in a share or a meme. And he contrast that with some of the past sort of the Arab Spring. You know, those sort of fast clicktivist movements that don't have the same. Resilience underneath them, and I think it's. I've actually got a view that a lot of what the left does on social media is an absolute waste of time, and that can be sort of maybe a discussion that can go into what we're talking about the next election. But it seems to me you can't micro-target yourself to political change. You can build a list, you can send them shit. But does it actually do the job that movement building is traditionally done?

Ed Coper [00:21:34] I think these these movements are different in that and they behave differently and the vast majority of disinformation spreads organically, not through advertising. I think a lot of people think of, you know, fake ads driving a lot of this. But it is. There is a very rapid breakdown in traditional social and ideological groupings across society. And we caught one of the first moments where a lot of people realised this was Brexit, where how the UK traditionally was divided was completely irrelevant. For an issue like Brexit, which was disinformation driven, a lot of the information around the Brexit vote was was just purely social media disinformation. And they found that people didn't divide along traditional labour and conservative lines. And we've seen that survive post-Brexit, where in Hartlepool, which is one of the safest Labour seats in the UK, they just lost in a by election last year because it was staunchly pro-Brexit, whereas a lot of the UK Labour has come to represent, you know, the Remain camp. And so we're seeing this in America as well, where a lot of the Trump ecosystem is not the traditional political and social groupings that we've seen, and we see it in Australia on issues like the pandemic, where you can have far right white nationalists now in alliance with far left hippie health influencers on Instagram because their views align on on vaccine mandates. And so how do you define these as movements? They're not the same as as as previous social political movements. And one of the reasons for their success and the speed of their success is that they've proven to be very flexible and because they're not ideologically driven. So QAnon is the best example of this. QAnon started as a very specific conspiracy theory about Democrats in the US and Hillary Clinton, and it has been able to survive, missing many of the milestones they predicted as part of that conspiracy that Donald Trump was the secret saviour sent on a certain date to arrest all of the democratic elites. And when that didn't happen, QAnon didn't go away. They just changed their beliefs. And they've become this big umbrella movement to incorporate everything from anti-lockdown anti-vaxxers to flat-Earthers to everything in between. A lot of a lot of the very old conspiracy theories around banking elite families and and you name it, and they're not driven by the specific ideas. They're driven by much more human need. And part of the the book is dedicated to psychology and cognitive biases because we can't begin to understand these issues without understanding how our brains work. And it's such a fundamentally important piece to a piece of the puzzle because we're never going to change the ways the way our brains are geared that has built over thousands of years of evolution. But we are living in an era where the megaphone and social media and these these these movements, they are tap tapping into our pre-built cognitive biases. They play into the ways our brain work in a much more comfortable way than, say, progressives

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packaged their content or the way we give facts and think that facts will somehow cure a lot of these falsehoods because our brains don't like that. Our brains don't like the way that we present that type of information to correct people. Our brains, like the a conspiracy. We like the Trump fuelled ecosystem of extreme opinion and shocking, emotive content. Those bits of our brains will win out over the rational parts of our brains any day. So, yeah, it's a big piece of the puzzle.

Ebony Bennett [00:25:50] Pete, I was going to ask you that we have an online social harms enquiry at the moment that might. Does that shed any light on this problem?

Peter Lewis [00:26:00] Well, I've actually handed down their report yesterday and the and I'll put a link to it in the chat. From what I can say, the biggest the strongest recommendation is the platform should do what they said that were going to do which is probably not the full gamut of government regulation here. We do have a situation at the moment where the platforms have signed up to self-regulation. There is a self-regulatory industry code. Most people think it's pretty, you know, well, it's unenforceable and we don't really know what's going on. They also this week met our old Facebook had a big press briefing on what they would be doing for this year's federal election, which again, kind of seemed to me to be. I will put a few people on. They used the term. We're going to have dedicated staff, which I love. That term dedicated is a term. It sounds like they're going to be working, you know, 20 times. And I hate that they've got they've got someone dedicated to taking the calls to the political parties, at least. And one of the issues last time, and it was a much closer to the action that I was, was that when the death tax disinformation started spreading in social, Facebook was really slow to respond. It built a life of its own. You know, if we want to go a bit bigger for this election, so we've got this enquiry, which doesn't really take us too much further except saying that we should have a safety commissioner with more hands on on the harms, which is fine. My concerns still are we've got no truth in political advertising laws. We haven't actually got a regulated or any media regulator with teeth. It's self-regulation to the traditional media where we've got self-regulation for platforms. So we're still this is all operating at democracy and our elections are basically being driven on the basis of trust and also on the basis that the participants are good faith actors. Now there is an argument, for instance, that death tax was the response to Medicare that our side of politics ran in 2016. And I do think there is a sense that I don't know how you build some sort of rules of engagement for the major parties on how they run their elections because powers are really big prise. But I do think that this election, we are going to see the next iteration of a really unhygienic information ecosystem. And then it all comes down to the vote on it's going to be early May. And I think it's going to be a lot of things that happened, that it takes a long time to understand even the role of the big money that a guy like Palmer putting in behind it. Where does that go? And one other thing I'll throw in there and sorry, this is a bit of a slip, but we've got problems with regulation. We've got problems with self-regulation on the platforms. We've also got this sense that the Facebook doesn't even offer academics real access to understand what's going on on the site underneath the code. So if you think about our democracies, this big vehicle that's driving down the road, we've got no idea what makes the engine run. And people are putting a lot of shit in it to just keep it running. And it's not clear, you know, there's no clear air act either side with that. No engine control, no pollution control. I'm not sure the analogy. Sorry, Ed,

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Ebony Bennett [00:29:22] Ed I was going to ask you that reminded me of the bit in the book where you talk about the way that we approach myth busting actually reinforces myths. Do you want to tell us a little bit about that?

Ed Coper [00:29:33] Yeah, absolutely. And this is all related to that election soup and that you outlined there, Peter, too. So we tend to we tend to only address disinformation once the toothpaste is out of the tube. And it's very hard to put the toothpaste back in the tube. And so a lot of the responses to disinformation fail because it's it's far too late and and we go about it all the wrong way. And if you look at if we unpack the example of the death tax disinformation, the way that Labor responded to that in 2019 fell into a couple of common traps. One, they responded by saying, We do not have a death tax. Now, anyone who's worked in communications knows, that's one of the oldest precepts is that you don't negate what the opponent's saying. All everyone hears when you say we don't have something is whatever you whatever you say, you don't have. And the other thing they did was to was to make a really loud song and dance about it and to complain through the media that that Facebook wasn't taking down this disinformation, that they had a death tax. And a lot of people heard about the death tax through that media campaign. And so the net effect of that was was really just amplifying the issue. Now, the way we generally approach disinformation is is usually similar to those types of tactics, and we think if we present a corrective facts. That it will change the mind of someone who who is misinformed. There's no neurological scientific basis for that. In fact, with a lot of political disinformation, it is probably counterproductive because when something is closely aligned to our identity, we see corrective information as threatening. And so we throw up our mental defences and it reinforces our previous idea rather than corrects it. And so that's political disinformation is often often playing into that same kind of minefield. And there's also studies that show when when myth busting appears to have worked, they go away and you ask that person a couple of days later, and they've just reverted back to their mistaken belief. So it can work on the best case scenario. You say you, you survey someone. They said, Yes, I was completely wrong. You know, the sun rises in the east and sets in the West. I believe you. I'm corrected. And then you ask them a couple of days later, and I think it rises in the West and sets in the east. So there's a whole host of reasons why why those standard approaches don't work. Now what would have worked in the death tax example or the Mediscare example, which I will say was not disinformation as someone who was promoting that that information. But but it's not the fact that Labor couldn't come out and say, we don't have a death tax and that would be effective and and the Liberals couldn't have come out and said, We love Medicare. Sorry, you know, we don't we're not going to privatise Medicare. That wouldn't have been effective because they're a much stronger background narratives that people believe about Labor and tax and the Liberals and and public health care that are stronger than any piece of corrective information. So if you want to correct someone who thinks Labor will introduce a death tax, you have to win that overarching narrative about Labor and taxes. And if you want to correct someone who thinks the Liberals will privatise Medicare, then you've got to win that overarching narrative about the Liberals in public health funding. But we don't do that. We tend to focus on the specific disinformation rather than the broader narrative. If people went into the 2019 election believing a really strong Labor narrative about taxes, then they would have been impervious to any death tax disinformation because it would have butted up against an existing fact in their head. But it where it where it aligns with an existing fact in a head or encounters a vacuum because people haven't formed an opinion, then

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that's when disinformation is successful. But we tend to focus on on after the fact and do little on the inoculation before the facts.

Ebony Bennett [00:34:10] And I want to get to solutions in just a second and talk about, yeah, what does work? But just a reminder, if you're on the webinar with us, you can type in questions for Ed and if you like and we'll get to those in just a second. But before we move on to solutions, I was struck by the bit where you do kind of talk about the social media platforms really creating this ecosystem and how important it is to spreading this type of thing. When Donald Trump tried to take his audience offline to his own blog and nothing really happened, can you just tell us about that?

Ed Coper [00:34:49] Yeah, it was like a wonderful experiment that they ran for us. You know, an AB test is, as you call it, where let's take Donald Trump, everything that Donald Trump says. And in one version of the experiment, we'll put it on social media and on the other version, you experiment. Let's just put it on his website without any any algorithmic bias and surprise surprise, he is wildly successful on social media and completely tanked, and nobody read his blog on his website when it was just his stand alone ideas. So the implication there is that without the without the the thumb on the scale that that the social media provides for that sort of partisan political misinformation, it doesn't really go anywhere. So the platforms are key to the solutions here. They really are the driving force. We can't lay all of the responsibility of blame at the feet of any one platform because we've seen that these movements will migrate from platform to platform. When they are taken off Facebook, they will go on to Telegram or form their own censorship free social media platforms like Gab and Parler in the US that Trump supporters have migrated onto. So. Yeah, it's a it's another big piece of the puzzle that we need to understand about how these things aren't successful in a vacuum.

Ebony Bennett [00:36:19] Yeah. So just before we move to questions from the audience, can you talk to us a little bit about how we prevent this from becoming entrenched in Australia and then Pete I might get you to respond to this?

Ed Coper [00:36:30] Yes. And how long do we have this so many solutions because this is a society wide problem and they start at a very big and long term end, which is we need to embed digital media literacy into our curriculum and we need to teach adults those skills, not just students who who are coming through the education system because we are fighting a 21st century problem with 20th century tools and a 20th century understanding. And so we need that's not just about teaching someone how to recognise a fake headline or a true headline that's about just teaching people about the information environment that we live in and how to live in that safely and and truthfully, you know, that's an issue as much for cyberbullying as it is for disinformation. This is just a brave new world that we have to have skills for. And then, you know, there are policy responses that governments have been traditionally quite quite bad at. Offering meaningful solutions because they focus on is a foreign interference, which yes, is a problem we need to address. But that's not going to prevent the Trump style breakdown of our social divisions in Australia. That's a problem of our own domestic making. That's not something that, you know, the Russians and the Chinese

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manufacturing for us. And then there's the platforms themselves who who absolutely can do a much better job of preventing people from being drawn down into these rabbit holes and for the algorithms recommending really harmful behaviours and information to people. And then there's the individual level where our own behaviour as social media citizens can be can be problematic. If we are a vector for disinformation or we are trying to address disinformation in the wrong way. So there are a couple of things that we can all do better ourselves. And one of which is telling better stories. You know, conspiracy theories and disinformation wins, usually because it's a better story. And we we we try to defeat a story like Bill Gates manufactured COVID to control the population. You know, that's a good story, and we try to defeat that with peer reviewed scientific articles, which just aren't as engaging. You know, we got to tell an equally engaging story about the reality of what a triumph it was to to make these vaccines and what an unprecedented feat of collective human scientific achievement that was. But we tend not to tell those stories. So there is a whole gamut of of solutions across the board that that we can do, but most of them are focussed on inoculation and preventing disinformation by far and away. That's that's more easy and effective to do than than addressing any specific disinformation after the fact.

Ebony Bennett [00:39:30] Yeah, I know that's something that you've thought a lot about as well in terms of solutions in this book and others that you've come to. How's Australia going?

Peter Lewis [00:39:44] Look, I think we've accepted there is a problem, like most Western democracies. I think that those the approach is pretty piecemeal and you'll see a specific problem like sexting or kids being bullying, and you try to build the systemic response or Christchurch massacre. And it's almost like. And we were talking about this the other week on burning platforms as well. You know, you tend to build your your system based on the black swan event rather than try to think through the system you want. So you're almost kind of saying, Oh my God, something bad has happened. How do we stop the bad thing happening rather than how do we imagine a system that works? So I do think the platform accountability is really important, but I also think we need to recognise the business models that underpin the platforms will always push them to being really dangerous distribution distributors of information. So anything you do to restrict them is against their business interests, which is why I end up in a space that we need to actually imagine. Alternate networks, alternate ways of connecting. You know, the public square project was try to think that through at least our civic life, how do we design systems that bring out civic discussion allow us to run our democracy in ways which are constructive experiences and not just prise fights? And I just don't think that systems that are built on a business model that is, you know, I aim to is designed to anger and excite and distort gets us there. The second piece, which I'm really interested in, is saying we've got to beat them with better stories. I think we've really got to be mindful on the progressive side about how we engage in our politics. Of course, winning is important, but also understanding that the the. Politics is not just about winning elections, it's also about building habits, windows and building theories of change. I'm not sure. I think it's beyond just saying if we can do better on the platforms to get more people liking us and therefore translating that to votes, there's another great book. So it's often a really good book comes with a series of other things, another one I put in the chat. It's called 'The Story Paradox,' which has just come out by a guy called Jonathan Gottschall, who actually writes even more profound that the history of narrative that you spoke about before and lies are embedded in that, but also the way that we look at the world is, but is in this idea of

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telling stories where there is the hero and the villain. We we make the villain really one dimensional. The hero goes on this journey that sort of face challenges and ultimately triumph. And it's just a line going through so much, not just in our literature, but also the way that we understand the word and culture makes the point. This is actually part of the problem that we've chosen to tell the world and understand the world in stories and stories inherently distort what really happens, which is what a whole bunch of people with different views of the water may try to build a consensus, and the whole notion of storytelling needs to be challenged as well. And I know that's why beyond this election cycle, the next, but I now always if I'm banging out a media release and trying to get sort of a bit of politics going, I make the enemy a bad guy. I ascribe all these negative characteristics to them. I, I turn them into a bully or a villain, and it's so easy to do. It's much harder to find ways of getting purchased in in richer storytelling. So I don't know. Maybe I'm singing Kumbaya by added I, but I thought it's a really good book and I'll share it in the chat.

Ed Coper [00:43:36] I do want to add one thing Ebony just I forgot in the solutions that you know you right about that, Peter is, you know, the platforms were never designed to do this because they're filling a vacuum that was created by the mass extinction events of local and regional and publicly funded news. So, you know, we can't talk about this without saying if we were to reinvest in in in a healthy news landscape, then that would also be probably one of the best things we could do.

Peter Lewis [00:44:02] And also that the news like a part of my thing, the ABC's never made the transition from being a broadcaster to being a network and managing two way communication flows. Currently, the ABC outsources all that crowd stuff to Facebook. Does it got government departments do their community consults? He got it registered of Facebook to actually make a comment like, surely we can do better this? I've got no problem with Facebook if people want to sharing their families and information and their photos and also being sold stuff. If if they know you want a snack or and I send you a snake or I reckon that's fine, that's just when it goes into ideas. That's where I start saying, surely we need to have a better place for us to be gathering and sort of thinking this stuff through.

Ebony Bennett [00:44:46] Yeah, but Ed is right too about that investment in local journalism and news and other countries that have made that a priority. Thinking of needs, public interest journalism, as you know, public good, essentially like sewerage systems that work and a functional defence force, you need a strong local news and public interest journalism system. And other countries have really chosen to invest in that and public broadcasting as a bit of a counter. And so the book again is 'Facts and Other Lies' by Ed Coper. I can say a couple of questions here from the audience. I'm going to start with one from. And now I've. Lost it in the chat, and here it was from Linda, and it was would compulsory critical thinking courses in schools begin to change these problems, such as addressing the way our brain leads us astray and how to check information. Can you tell us a little bit more detail about that Ed?

Ed Coper [00:45:48] Yeah, absolutely. Fantastic question, and it would be a fantastic solution. So one of the things I'd like to talk about because people tend to think when they think of disinformation,

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that there is a group of people over here that are susceptible to it and have bought into it and have been completely sucked in by the disinformation ecosystem. And we might be over here who are fact-based and rational and and truthful, but it's much better to think of us as individuals and that we all have parts of our brain that. Can be led by this information and are emotional and respond to emotive triggers. And we have parts of our brains on a rational and truthful and raise led by reasoned and internally every individual is is is locked into a competition between these competing parts of our brains. Now, the irrational parts of our brains are incredibly powerful and and disinformation piggybacks those in order to be effective. But it's not like there are some rational people and some irrational people. We, we all have the same cognitive processes. And so an education in critical thinking is fundamental for people to understand that and to approach this problem from one that is common to all people, rather than to approach it as a problem that affects a subset of society. And that can lead to us thinking just as much as an us and them or an other mentality about people who are out on the streets protesting really things that that are completely not fact based. And and they treat us as others as well. And that's why they become so hostile to to mainstream, rational fact-based thought. Because because we treat it like that. So critical thinking education is really about making people aware of the information processes that that are part of normal human to cognition and being able to recognise it in ourselves and others. And definitely that would lead us to a place where we're better able to respond to the challenges that that represents.

Ebony Bennett [00:48:10] Mm-Hmm. We've got a question here from Eddie Otto, who is just challenging the idea that political misinformation and disinformation became prominent only in the Trump era and citing things like children overboard here in Australia. I know, I know in the book you do go into kind of the history and that all of that has already been with us. But what's the difference there between acknowledging that lives have always been part of political life to kind of what we've seen happen in the United States?

Ed Coper [00:48:40] Well, I think there's a mainstream narrative in Australia that children overboard was it was a lie that was ultimately exposed and yes, had some consequences. But as a society, we reverted to a truthful man, and that's the traditional way we've approached political lying. Political lying were opportunities to exploit a moment and to gain from that by lying about the presence or the absence of something. And eventually that would be exposed and there may or may not be political consequences to that. That's what we experienced with with children overboard and the difference with the Trump era. And I'm not suggesting that Trump was, you know, different from other politicians and that John Howard was entirely truthful and Donald Trump entirely false. Although I will say that I did count 70 per cent of everything Trump said in 2016 was false. So maybe the volume is there. But but that's not the point. It's just there in different eras. And the effect of Trump's lies were very different from the effect of Howard's laws in Trump in the Trump era. We've never revert to the sensible, truthful mean we don't expose the lies down the track. And that moment for political exploitation has disappeared and there are consequences for it. We're able to fracture into ongoing realities that live parallel to each other, where instead of saying to Trump, our good try, you tried to steal the 2020 election, but now we know it was all it was all a big con. Thank you very much for coming. People continue to inhabit a reality that he won that election, and that's a very big problem because we don't have the shared reality where we can disagree about things

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and debate about the consequences. But instead, we, we we live in completely parallel realities that never intersect.

Ebony Bennett [00:50:32] Peter, is there anything you'd like to add to that one?

Peter Lewis [00:50:34] Let's just go to the next question.

Ebony Bennett [00:50:36] All right. The next question is from John McCann, and he says, how can we anticipate this information maims in order to be ahead and inoculate conversations against them?

Ed Coper [00:50:50] Yeah. Another great question, so we know. You know, we talked a little bit about the upcoming election and you know, one thing we we know is that there's going to be a real competition for this new political constituency that has coalesced around the pandemic. And as we were saying before, it's not traditional party lines. And so there's going to be a real race to the bottom to capture that vote. We know that Craig Kelly and Clive Palmer are doing their darnedest to to be the party that represents that disinformation laden section of of of the the electorate. And a lot of this is going to come through, as you say, these types of names on the internet and, you know, to go back to, you know, the story based campaigning that Peter was talking about before is names are effective because our brain likes taking shortcuts, and they can often be a good way to tell a complex story in a in a very easy way that our brain can make sense of. So the way we inoculate against this kind of social media disinformation during an election is to do a couple of things. One that we've already mentioned is to be out there first on the front foot with a stronger, dominant narrative so that when those things arrive, the audiences are just less impervious to it because it contradicts something they already think. That is absolutely fundamentally what you should be doing in the competition for ideas is being out there with your ideas first. The other thing we can do is to talk about disinformation in general and to warn about disinformation and the sorts of tactics that we will see in the upcoming election. So some of the most promising research has found that when you make people play an online game where the goal is to get the most followers by spreading hypothetical disinformation, and in doing so, you learn about all the tactics that social media spreads disinformation. You try to game the system and get a lot of followers, and it's perfectly innocuous, hypothetical disinformation. But they have found that everyone who has played this game is subsequently much more likely to recognise disinformation when they see it. And much less likely to believe and share disinformation when they say it and they believe it is just working like a vaccine. They are given harmless doses of a deactivated form of the virus. They produce mental antibodies so that when they encounter it encountered in the real world and mental antibodies give them some layer of protection against it. So that's what we need to be doing. Is webinars doing it, you know, just we're talking about the issue and warning people to watch out for it in the upcoming disinformation. To tune our radars to to look out for that has been proven, proven to be very effective.

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Ebony Bennett [00:53:54] Paint, I might send this next one to you first. Maxine Kansas says how politically powerful will Facebook be in the future?

Peter Lewis [00:54:02] Well, they're about to take over the next town, the next frontier, the metaverse. The renaming of matter. Is this the sense that we're all going deeper into the internet, and I think they're right on that. I think we're deeper into the internet. In an event like this, we're in a virtual room. We're sharing ideas. Facebook wants to find that in fact, and they want to normalise the behaviour of having avatars in, in meetings and in social settings. I don't know if people want that, and I know that anyone that's had an Oculus, it's a pretty weird experience at the moment, but their ambitions are huge, right? And the whole model is again extracting the behavioural insights of what we do so that they can not just sell us stuff but shape our behaviour to sell us more stuff. It is why it is essential to start thinking through all 10x and to encourage. I actually believe we've got to encourage people off these platforms not like I'm off them. I probably miss out on information about what some school friend that I haven't seen for 35 years is doing. But I just I just feel that for all of us, we need. It's not just about digital literacy, it's also knowing that if you're in a place that's dangerous, you need to know why you're there. It's why I use DuckDuckGo as my search engine. If I'm really, really wanting to find something, I'll jump onto Google and give up a little bit of my data because it's not as good because he's got his broader insights. But I think we've got to be much more critical in our thinking about this. So we need as a society to build alternate structures and we need to change our behaviour as well because they are so big now that they're not going to. You can't regulate them into good behaviour because their business model works the opposite way. You can't wish them away. They're there and we've got to find. The alternative and a viable alternative is just not enough that they should have been doing the same thing. There is going to be much more radical the thinking that goes on behind this.

Ebony Bennett [00:55:58] Yeah, and I might come to you on that as well. Obviously, the hugely powerful. How successful have governments been in attempts to regulate them?

Ed Coper [00:56:10] Oh, terribly unsuccessful so far. You know, the the Facebook is much more sophisticated at getting ahead of government regulation and governments are regulating it. And in fact, I don't think a lot of governments realise Facebook uses regulation as a weapon to be anti-competitive by creating, by controlling the regulation and working with governments to control the regulation they have. It prevents any competitors from entering the market because they've built a regulatory moat around themselves that is so cost prohibitive that no player could ever come and compete against Facebook. So I don't think governments understand it a bit of an unwilling, unwitting pawn in that process. We haven't got a good, a good job because we've taken the the public square and put it behind this private gated community. Far, as you know, Pete was talking about and has written about as well that we used to give that power to the traditional media companies and we asked a lot in return. We set very strict parameters. We said you can have access to Australians hearts and minds and brains, and you will be responsible for giving them information. But that comes with a with a trade-off. There's a quid pro quo. It needs to be truthful. You need to follow certain journalistic and ethical standards and and we will regulate that. And when we move that function behind these, the social media company paywalls, we never ask for the same in return.

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And as Pete said, the problem with doing that is these are these are private companies that have shareholder returns as their as their prime motivating factor and their and their responsibility. So it's it's very hard to for governments to keep pace with technological developments. It's a very fast-moving landscape and governments are slow moving and there's very good reasons for that. And so there's a bit of a mismatch there in terms of the control that technology platforms and companies have over our lives with the the regulatory framework that governments have to to set parameters around that.

Ebony Bennett [00:58:42] Well, we're going to have to wrap it up there. Thanks very much, everyone, for your time today. The book again is 'Facts and Other Lies' by Ed Coper. You find it in all good bookstores. It's a cracking read, definitely worth your while before the election. At least inoculate yourselves against disinformation, for sure. Congratulations on the book and thanks for joining us. Hey, everyone, if you're interested in this type of topic, please join us again. And the Centre for Responsible Technology on Friday at 1:00 p.m. For our regular Burning Platforms event, you can find that on the Centre for Responsible Technology website, and I think Pete posted a link to it earlier in the chat. But thank you so much for your wonderful questions. I'm sorry we couldn't get to them all, but hopefully this leaves you all a little bit better as we head into the next election. Thanks so much again and thanks everyone, and we'll see you soon.

Ed Coper [00:59:33] Thanks, everyone. All right, bye.