

Why media literacy has never been more important

By Bryce Corbett

It's been a big few weeks in the news cycle. Between the awful events at Sydney's Bondi Westfield, the riots that took place at a church in Wakeley, and the subsequent stoush between the Federal Government and Elon Musk about his refusal to remove inflammatory content from his social media platform X - it's been tempting to tune out and look away.

But if these events have taught us anything - it's that we need to double down on our efforts to produce a media literate populace.

The common denominator in both awful events at Bondi and Wakeley was the frightening speed at which misinformation and disinformation was created and spread on social media in their wake. Wrongly identifying a killer, in the case of Bondi, and inflaming an already febrile situation in the case of Wakeley.

Social media commentators with hundreds of thousands of followers as far away as the United Kingdom were floating unfounded theories on the motivation of the Bondi Westfield killer barely minutes after the news had broken. At Wakeley, inflammatory social media posts made a bad situation infinitely worse within minutes.

Misinformation is the act of unwittingly spreading a falsehood without meaning to do harm.

Disinformation is the creation of a lie with the express intention of creating confusion and chaos - and for obvious reasons, the much more sinister of the two. Both are pernicious and both are becoming increasingly common.

We've all been guilty of falling for and inadvertently spreading misinformation. We've all pressed 'Like' or 'Share' on a Facebook, Instagram or TikTok post without checking its veracity. If social media has taught us anything, it's that people will always incline towards views that reinforce their prejudices.

The recent decision by Meta to withdraw from the Australian news bargaining code will have a chilling effect, increasing significantly the amount of mis- and disinformation circulating on social media. You only have to look at what happened in Canada when Facebook removed news from its users' feeds to see how, in the vacuum left by credible information, mis- and disinformation flourished.

Much has already been said, and will continue to be said about the role governments can and should play regulating social media platforms.

Federal Communications Minister Michelle Rowland took to ABC Radio to assure the Australian public that in the wake of Bondi and Wakeley, legislation was in the offing that would penalise social media platforms that allowed disinformation to be published unchecked.

And while that's certainly an important part of the response required, education is arguably even more important.

Last November, California became the latest international jurisdiction to introduce [mandatory media literacy education in all public schools](#). In the United Kingdom, the recently passed [Online Safety Bill](#) includes consideration for compulsory media literacy education for primary school kids. And [Estonia](#) and [Finland](#) - whose proximity to Russia and its renowned disinformation

farms has seen them rally to arms sooner than most - are at the forefront of global efforts to ensure children are taught to spot fake news.

Closer to home, [Newshounds](#), the free media literacy program for primary school children produced by Squiz Kids - Australia's premier daily news podcast for kids - has had more than 2,200 classrooms sign-up since its launch 18 months ago. Proof positive that teachers and parents alike recognise the looming crisis we have on our hands.

Newshounds teaches kids to spot misinformation when they come across it online. Its protagonist, an animated detective dog called Squiz-E, teaches kids to 'stop, think and check' whenever they come across a piece of information on the internet.

It works on the theory - supported by international research - that kids today have more information coming at them than at any other time in history, and if you don't teach them these skills before they get a smart-phone in their hands and disappear into the social media vortex, you're closing the virtual gate after the disinformation horse has bolted.

Make no mistake: as we hurtle towards an AI-enabled future, being able to discern online fact from fiction will become as vital a part of a child's education as reading, writing and arithmetic. Later this year, I will travel overseas as part of a Churchill Fellowship to study how other countries are inoculating their populations against mis- and disinformation. Especially important in a year where, globally, some 64 national elections will take place, given the increasingly destructive role disinformation is playing in the democratic process.

'Doing nothing is not an option' Michelle Rowland opined on ABC Radio. And on that count at least, she is right. Either we sit back and sleepwalk our way into a dystopian future where democracies crumble thanks to a media illiterate citizenry - or we wake up and do something about it.

**Bryce Corbett is the Director of Squiz Kids - a daily news podcast for kids - and co-creator of Newshounds, a free media literacy programme for primary school kids.
www.squizkids.com.au**