Social Media's Threat To Democracy In Australia

Australia is a representative democratic, meaning that all citizens of Australia that are eligible to vote, vote on a Prime Minister that leaders our country, passes laws, and makes decisions on our behalf. We also vote on smaller levels, taking the shape of State and Local government to deal with issues that are particular to different areas of Australia such as Road works, public transport, sport and recreation, public health, and community services (Parliament of New South Wales, ?). These levels of government uphold the Australian people's freedoms and basic human rights, as well as making sure that they make correct decisions to better the country (Trading Economics, 2018). Although Australia is the 13th least corrupt country in the world and hold elections every 3 years, with no more than 2 prime ministerial terms allowed within 1 person's lifetime, the government and democracy is still susceptible to external influence and threats.

Although social media has been around for over a decade, with Facebook turning 15 years old this year, it has started to affect many people's lives and influence large scale, national events such as elections with paid advertisement. This takes the power to vote for their country's leaders away from Australian voter, and gives it to large corporations, as they can effectively affect people's opinion and judgement on certain people or political parties. Social media companies such as Instagram and Facebook have been found to be hosting adverts and accounts that have been promoting certain parties in elections and allowing groups of people from other countries to affect how Australians vote. With increased influence in Australia, overseas governments and organisations can sway voters in specific ways with targeted advertising, depending on which parties they are partnered with, support, or get political help from in Australia. Fergus Hanson, the head of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's International Cyber Policy Centre

Sometimes, foreign influence is tested in certain countries and is used to guide the public to vote for a specific candidate or party, months or even a year, before an election. This not only happens in Australia, but also countries such as America, China, and Russia. Not only does social media advertising and promotions of certain political parties happen in Russia, but they also supported Facebook posts that were accessed by over 126 million Americans during the 2016 Trump election (Solon, 2017). Anonymous people from all over the world can post political propaganda that influence voters decisions, such as when Facebook was required to remove posts from its site after they were found to be distributing false information about the Labour party introducing a 'Death & inheritance' tax into Australia (Jensen, 2019). Even though some companies are trying to make a difference in making social medias threat to democracy smaller, some companies, such as YouTube that make revenue from political adverts, will not remove them because they make approximately 84% of its revenue comes from adverts.

Although there are thousands of different influencing accounts on Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg said "in a democracy, I believe people should decide what is credible, not tech companies". This statement came after his announcement that Facebook would no longer be letting non-political candidates give information, especially misleading information to the public. Although, if political candidates give misinformation to the public, Facebook will not block this so that they do not influence elections in anyway (Hern, 2019). Facebook now pays subcontracting

companies such as ‘Agence France-Presseto’ scan through posts and updates on its app, to flag them to be removed and accounts to be potentially banned. Since Facebook has been banning political adverts in its post, other large social media companies such as Twitter, have been also cutting down on adverts that can influence people’s decisions on votes, especially if it is fake news or is not news given by large media outlets. In the future, large and small social media companies such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram will eventually start using automated programs and bots to filter out any news or accounts that are deemed to be affecting elections and voters’ opinions. On the flip side of this, some social media companies are not filtering these comments or accounts out at all so that the public can see the whole view of everybody, not just the good sides (Lomas, 2019). In the future, I think that only large, respected, and trusted sources of political information should be allowed to post about anything related to elections. Until approximately 1 week before elections, all social media about elections should be stopped at that point forward, to only keep ads on television from the government and at voting centres as the main sources of information, as these are usually the most trusted and correct sources available. Although with this idea, if there were any real scandals, it would be hard to show Australia what happened and it wouldn’t affect decisions at all, even if it should.

Social media has a huge influence on how people vote for Australian elections. For example, if people that just turned 18 and had to vote in an upcoming election saw that famous celebrities were urging people to vote for a specific political party, or were showing them pictures of them doing this, then they could be swayed to vote the same way to look “cooler” or be “more popular”. Though there are safeguard put in place to try and stop these sorts of things from happening, they do still happen. There is no way for social media to be 100% transparent to elections and voting in Australia because by blocking all opinions on politicians and political candidates, they are removing information from the public, but by allowing it, they run the chance of showing fake news or false allegations on their site. Some people say that anything on social media should be allowed to be shown to the public, for them to decide on what is correct and incorrect. Although, Influencing from other countries or non-reliable sources could be shown and sway voters opinions by showing them things that aren’t actually true, or that give power to partners of these social media advertisers, as shown in the 2016 American election when Russia influenced voters via social media in the Donald Trump election (Bogle, 2016). While Facebook have been using approximately 30,000 people to fact-check suspicious posts before the Australian elections, none of these people are based in Australia or are employed by Australian companies.