Select Committee on Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

9 September 2025

Submission to the Select Committee on Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on behalf of Geelong Sustainability to the Select Committee on Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy.

About Geelong Sustainability

Geelong Sustainability is a for-purpose community organisation and registered charity that exists to build a powerful community movement for a just transition to a net zero future. Our vision is a thriving and resilient community taking urgent action on climate change together.

Since our establishment in 2007, Geelong Sustainability has become the region's leading sustainability group with over 20,000 supporters as well as extensive networks in community, government and business throughout Geelong and the Barwon region. We have 147 members, over 50 active volunteers, and over 20,000 supporters throughout the region.

We are recognised for our evidence-based innovative projects, which educate and support our community's transition to a net zero future.

Geelong Sustainability is committed to working towards - and advocating for - urgent climate action to meet our net zero commitments and protect future generations. We seek ambitious renewable energy, electrification, energy efficiency, and demand

management as ethical and effective responses to our current climate emergency and potential gas shortages.

Responses to the Terms of Reference

We draw upon both our organisational and personal experiences in responding to the Terms of Reference, as well as a deep and compelling body of evidence.

(a) the prevalence of, motivations behind and impacts of misinformation and disinformation related to climate change and energy.

Misinformation and disinformation (hereafter 'mis/disinformation') on climate change and the energy transition have contributed to poor policy development, slowed climate action and created confusion within the Australian public and business community. The high prevalence of this is evident through numerous examples and respondents in the report of the 2021 [Senate Environment and Communications Reference Committee's Inquiry into Media Diversity](#).

The impacts of mis/disinformation have been severe, and we know there are much worse impacts to come. For the second year running, The [World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2025 ranks](#) 'misinformation and disinformation' as the top-ranked short- to medium-term concern across all risk categories. For several years running, climate-related risks have dominated the highest risks over the next 10 years. Inequality and social polarisation rank highly on both timescales. Clearly, by not addressing mis/disinformation, we exacerbate the already unacceptable risks to society from climate change.

Unless greater efforts and resources are dedicated to countering mis/disinformation then the risks from climate change will be amplified and, with that, the chances of tackling most of society's other major challenges will be well out of reach.

The motivations are explored in our next response.

(b) how misinformation and disinformation related to climate change and energy is financed, produced and disseminated, including, but not limited to, understanding its impact on:

(i) Australian politics,

(ii) domestic and international media narratives, and

(iii) Australian public policy debate and outcomes.

In '[The Carbon Club: How a network of influential climate sceptics, politicians and business leaders fought to control Australia's climate policy](#)', Marian Wilkinson explains why successive Australian governments have failed to deal with the challenge of climate change: "It's the story of how a loose confederation of influential climate-science sceptics, politicians and business leaders sought to control Australia's response to the climate crisis."

Perhaps the most significant (and well-documented) motivations that sit behind climate and energy related mis/disinformation in Australia are:
- Protecting incumbent fossil-fuel profits & delaying policy change
- Electoral & ideological politics, e.g. culture-war framing
- Attention economics in media and platforms, e.g. ad-driven business models reward sensational, emotive content, and
- Local fear, uncertainty & perceived costs of the energy transition, e.g. "renewables drive up costs", "nuclear energy is a lower cost option".

Measures to counter these problems include:
- Strengthening enforcement under ASIC and ACCC to stop misleading climate/energy claims in advertising, corporate reports, and lobbying

- Accelerating adoption of climate-related financial disclosures so companies can't obscure transition risks, and
- Requiring industry associations to disclose lobbying positions and spending on influencing climate and energy policy, including indirectly through think tanks.

(c) the origins, growth and prevalence of 'astroturfing' and its impact on public policy and debate.

Anti-carbon-pricing mobilisation and anti-wind 'playbooks' have featured in fake-grassroots campaigns. The Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications inquired into the [offshore wind industry consultation process](#) and, in June 2025, reported: "The committee is concerned by the role of misinformation and disinformation and deliberate amplification of this by bad faith actors throughout the consultation process. The committee considers the Australian Government must play a role combatting these threats, including through early engagement and localised information."

An important measure to counter these issues would be for the Australian Government to urgently fund a [network of Local Energy Hubs across Australia](#). These hubs would be outreach centres staffed by trusted locals where people could go to understand more about why the clean energy transition is urgent and critical. They could learn about major energy projects in their region, what the benefits flowing into the region could look like, and how to access those benefits to cut power bills in their own homes, farms and businesses. As of late August, more than 50 organisations from community groups to peak environment and industry bodies are supporting this initiative.

(d) connections between Australian organisations and international think tank and influence networks associated with the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation related to matters of public policy.

The framing from several U.S. conservative think tanks, such as "carbon taxes kill jobs" and "renewables are unreliable/too expensive", have been recycled for many years in Australian commentary, op-eds, and broadcast segments. They are often sourced from, or aligned with, organisations like The Heartland Institute and The Cato Institute. Australia's Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) has been documented as a co-sponsor of Heartland's International Conference on Climate Change events and as a supporter/promoter of prominent Australian climate change deniers.

[Renew Economy's Michael Mazengarb](#) reports on how groups like the IPA, the Centre for Independent Studies, the Menzies Research Group and Advance Australia have recently 'ramped-up' their pro-nuclear, anti-renewables campaigns.

The US Federal Government exiting the Paris Agreement was a sign of strengthening climate change denial. [Reuters reports on the response from 85 climate scientists refuting a US Department of Energy (DoE) report](#) downplaying climate change and its impacts: "Our review reveals that the DoE report's key assertions—including claims of no trends in extreme weather and the supposed broad benefits of carbon dioxide—are either misleading or fundamentally incorrect."

Given the history of climate change denial, it would be unsurprising to see further attempts of scientific distortion occur in Australia. Our governments underplaying these risks will likely make us more vulnerable to mis/disinformation.

(e) the role of social media, including the coordinated use of bots and trolls, messaging apps and generative artificial intelligence in facilitating the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

A 2024 report by the [International Panel on the Information Environment](#) found experts, globally, are most worried about "threats to the information environment posed by the owners of social media platforms".

Attention on mis/disinformation has been minor in comparison to the focus on the multitude of other harms inflicted on social media users – particularly on young users. Artificial intelligence is very likely to exacerbate the already weak controls over the spread of mis/disinformation, despite these risks being the globe's most concerning for the last two years .

(f) the efficacy of different parliamentary and regulatory approaches in combating misinformation and disinformation, what evidence exists and where further research is required, including through gathering global evidence.

For many of the reasons already discussed, the efficacy of approaches in combating mis/disinformation is low in Australia.

[Transparency International Australia](#) reports that, since 2001, almost every federal Resources Minister has gone to work in the fossil fuel sector shortly after leaving parliament. The situation in Western Australia is perhaps more acute, especially with Woodside's enormous gas export ambitions and their support from successive state governments and the media.

[Senator David Pocock](#) has raised serious concerns about the role of lobbyists: "Thanks to this unjustifiably narrow definition of a 'lobbyist', 80 per cent of those operating in Canberra aren't covered by what is already a weak code of conduct – the vast majority of influence happens in the shadows … Other democracies, including the United States and New Zealand, publish lists of [sponsored] passholders [granting all areas access to parliamentary premises] – Australia should too."

We agree with the recommendations from Senator Pocock in proposing important measures to counter these concerns:
- Expanding the definition of 'lobbyist' to include in-house lobbyists, industry associations and consultants with access to decision-makers
- Creating a comprehensive register of lobbyists, including those working in-house for major companies, whether they have a pass and, if so, details of how it was accessed
- Bounding all lobbyists to a code of conduct far stronger than the one we have now and seeing serious consequences for those who breach it
- Provide greater transparency, including through publishing quarterly online reports showing who lobbyists are meeting with, for how long, and why – and extending this to the publication of ministerial diaries, and
- Banning ministers and senior staff from lobbying for three years after leaving office.

Media regulation of mis/disinformation is also low. We agree with The 2021 [Senate Environment and Communications Reference Committee's Inquiry into Media Diversity](#) recommendation for a judicial inquiry, with the powers of a royal commission, to determine whether the existing system of media regulation is fit-for-purpose and to investigate the concentration of media ownership in Australia.

(g) the role that could be played by media literacy education, including in the school curriculum, in combating misinformation and disinformation.

We agree with strengthening media literacy education but the evidence shows that the vested interests of large media corporations, and their fossil fuel industry sponsors, comprise the greatest climate change related mis/disinformation.

Educating the public on climate science and the energy transition is very important and, as discussed above, would be best achieved through funding existing trusted community organisations through the Local Energy Hub concept.

(h) any other related matters.

Further measures to consider in addressing mis/disinformation include:
- Banning paid advertisements that misrepresent climate science or energy systems - similar to tobacco or political advertising rules
- Requiring social media platforms to report how their recommendation systems amplify misleading or inaccurate climate content, and
- Prior and during elections:
  - 'Pre-bunking' campaigns, i.e. fact-based public information before elections, explaining common myths and giving citizens accurate context
  - Ensuring the AEC and public broadcasters resource fact-checks during election cycles.

Yours sincerely,

David Spear

David Spear
Chair
Geelong Sustainability
P. 0427 524 215
E. david@geelongsustainability.org.au

Jane Spence
CEO
Geelong Sustainability
P. 0447 450 271
E. jane@geelongsustainability.org.au