**Episode 7 – Disinformation 1**

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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 looked into some the most common myths surrounding referendums, and that leads nicely to today’s topic – disinformation. Why it’s important to be aware of it, and what to do if you hear something that you aren’t too sure about, and of course, we wanted our experts back with us again. Good to see you both.

Alex: Hey, good to be back.

Kerry: So, disinformation is a term that gets thrown around a lot these days. What is it?

Meg: Disinformation is a technical term for information that someone deliberately shares despite knowing that it’s incorrect. We’ll also talk about misinformation, that’s false information that’s shared with good intentions - someone might not know that it’s incorrect, but they share it anyway.

Kerry: What are some examples of disinformation in a referendum?

Alex: We’ve already seen some. It hasn’t even been called yet and we’ve already got some on the board. So, we have a disinformation register on the AEC’s website, and it’s already got a few interesting examples on there, including the old favourite - suggestions that we use voting machines to cast a vote (no, we use a pencil or a pen) or all the way up to some strange suggestions that the Constitution itself is not valid. We’ve checked, it is valid. We’re all good.

Kerry: And once you’ve checked that information, and you’ve kind of got the answer, what part does the AEC play in mitigating that disinformation?

Meg: So, I’ll be really clear at the start that we don’t have any role in regulating truth in political advertising. When we’re talking misinformation, when we’re talking disinformation we’re talking about the process, and not about the topic. So, we’ve talked about the disinformation register. So, as Alex said, that’s a one stop shop for us in countering these false narratives. It tells you the claim, and it gives you the source of truth, so that can people be properly informed about these types of things. But, as we all know, and in the realm of social media, information moves fast, and we can’t keep up with everything so that’s why we also run a ‘stop and consider’ campaign encouraging people to quite literally stop and consider the information they are consuming before they take it on board.

Kerry: Is there any kind or specific disinformation that the AEC focuses on?

Alex: So, we’re all about the process. And that’s fair enough because it’s the process that we run. We are Australia’s electoral and referendum experts, and that’s what we focus on. So, if there’s a claim being made about the way that you can cast a vote or where that you can go to vote or even how to fill out a ballot paper and it’s not correct, of course you can expect the AEC to jump in and correct it, because we’re the experts! We in fact have a legal responsibility to educate the public about that and we take that responsibility seriously.

Kerry: Why does the AEC care about disinformation at all, shouldn’t people make up their own minds?

Meg: Well, Kerry, we have a legal role to inform the public about voting. And so, we have a role to play in countering false information about that same process. We’re all for you making up your mind on how you’re going to vote, it’s just that you have the information to vote. In Australia it's really dangerous if this kind of false information about the electoral process like Alex said where you can vote, how are you can vote, runs unchallenged by the AEC. It’s really important that Australians, of course, can trust their process, and we’re the electoral experts - we’re going to provide the right information.

Kerry: I’m really interested in all of this and now, when I’m making the decision about my own vote, how can I spot disinformation in that voting process? What do I need to look for?

Alex: Well, that’s where it gets tricky. Disinformation in referendum or electoral disinformation can honestly look like anything. They’re so good at disguising it! So, it can look like a video, it can be a post to social media. It can be a message in the group chat from your Nan. It can even be a pamphlet in your mailbox, and you don’t know where it’s come from. A good place to start though is to have a look while you’re doing your ‘stop and consider’ - as of course we all should - and look to see if there’s an authorisation message. Like, if you’re seeing a well-produced YouTube video, something that someone’s clearly spent a bit of money on, and there’s no authorisation message at the end of that: red flag. If you’re seeing a professionally produced pamphlet that looks like it’s come out of a proper print shop and there’s no authorisation message at the bottom: red flag. Maybe that means that it’s worth seriously considering whether this is genuine information, or if it’s coming from someone who might be seeking to mislead. Now, the other thing the AEC has, we’ve got this really great resource on our disinformation register now that talks about the sort of tactics that people might use to spread disinformation.

I know we’ll talk about this a bit later, but one thing to keep in front of mind now is if that YouTube video or that pamphlet in your mailbox makes you really angry or really excited about something: red flag. Maybe it’s worth taking a step back, stop and consider, always, and think about whether that’s something you need to be angry about or if that’s something that someone wants you to act on without thinking.

Kerry: So, say I’ve seen something, or I’ve read something, and I have spotted a couple of red flags. I’ve stopped and considered, but I’m still a little bit unsure. Where can I go?

Meg: Well Kerry, you can always come to us at the AEC. We’re very friendly, and we’re on socials all the time. Our username is AUSelectoralcom.

Kerry: Well, expect to see a message from me on your inbox sometime soon.

Meg: I’ll look out for it!

Kerry: On the next episode…

Alex: 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.

Kerry: …we look at more of the ways that the AEC helps you to recognise disinformation. That’s next time, on Your Answer Matters.

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