



# Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Artificial Intelligence

Date: 14 September 2026



**DEMOCRACY  
COUNTS**

POWERED BY MCKINNON



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14 September 2026

Committee Secretary  
Joint Select Committee on Artificial Intelligence  
PO Box 6100 Parliament House Canberra ACT 2600  
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Dear Sir or Madam,

The Democracy Counts Campaign notes that the Joint Select Committee on Artificial Intelligence was appointed by resolution of the House of Representatives and resolution of the Senate on 20 August 2026.

We thank the Committee for this opportunity to provide input into the establishment of the Committee and the Terms of Reference. Please accept this document as a public submission.

Yours sincerely,

**TOM MOONEY**  
**Campaign Director**  
**Democracy Counts**



## 1. OVERVIEW OF THE DEMOCRACY COUNTS CAMPAIGN

Democracy Counts is a growing alliance of organisations, civic leaders and Australians who care about protecting Australia's democracy. It is powered by McKinnon, an independent, non-partisan, not-for-profit organisation.

McKinnon was established in 2015 by Dr Sophie Oh and Mr Grant Rule. Its mission is to empower better governments for a stronger Australia. McKinnon believes that real change is possible - but only if we take a long-term view in facilitating the development of political leadership, increasing public sector productivity, creating a thriving democracy, and accelerating policy innovation.

Democracy Counts is campaigning on common-sense, practical, reforms across six priority areas:

1. Civics education and media/digital literacy;
2. Increasing investment into public interest journalism;
3. Regulating social media;
4. Lobbying reform;
5. Electoral funding reform; and
6. Ensuring an impartial and independent public service.

Democracy Counts exists to support Australians and civil society organisations, practitioners, academics and policy makers already active in the democracy 'ecosystem' to achieve reform to renew Australia's democracy by:

- building and supporting an alliance of organisations and Australians who care about Australia's democracy;
- leading public debate and harnessing appetite for the rules around politics and media to be renewed to ensure Australians remain in charge of the decisions that affect them; and
- developing consensus around strategic and implementable policy reforms that will help address the challenges our democracy is facing.

In so doing, Democracy Counts presents policymakers with policy options that are evidence-based, strategic and implementable.

For further information, please visit <https://democracycounts.org.au/> regarding Democracy Counts and [www.mckinnon.co](http://www.mckinnon.co) regarding McKinnon.

## 2. RECOMMENDATIONS

An inquiry into the impacts of and opportunities for Artificial Intelligence (AI) on Australia is welcome. We encourage the Committee to ensure the Inquiry has an explicit focus on the implications of AI for Australia's democracy and democratic institutions, including:

- the role of AI in increasing democratic participation and public administration;
- the role of AI in supporting the opportunity for all Australians to access civics and digital literacy initiatives, including across suburbs and regions;
- expanding civics and digital literacy education to enable Australians to successfully navigate the impacts of AI as engaged citizens;
- the impact of AI on public interest journalism, particularly to enable local communities in suburbs and towns across Australia to access trusted sources of local news;
- the role of AI in foreign interference in Australian elections and in the generation and distribution of political mis- and disinformation which seek to undermine democracy;
- the adequacy of Australia's existing laws and regulatory frameworks relating to electoral processes and democratic institutions, as they apply to AI; and
- digital platform regulation - to address the risks and harms arising from AI.



The Committee may also wish to consider related areas of government inquiry, regulation and reform, including:

- proposals for a Digital Duty of Care;
- the under 16's social media ban;
- reforms to the *Privacy Act 1988*; and
- recommendations regarding automated-decision making, transparency and the public sector arising from the Robodebt Royal Commission.

### 3. BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH

#### AI and Democracy

Along with opportunity, AI presents several known challenges to Australia's democracy and democratic institutions. Artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping Australia's economy, institutions and information environment. While AI offers opportunities to improve democratic participation and public administration, including by making disparate evidence and large data sets easier to interrogate, it is also likely to accelerate many of the challenges Australia's democracy already faces. AI increases the scale and sophistication of misinformation, disrupts the foundations of public-interest journalism, and intensifies power imbalances by concentrating influence in the hands of a small number of foreign technology companies. These changes are occurring at a time when civics and media literacy are at record lows, and public trust in political institutions is facing increasing pressure.

#### Civics Education and Digital Media Literacy

Since 2023, McKinnon has undertaken exploratory research and engagement focused on strengthening young people's civic participation, with the aim of ensuring younger generations are well informed and active in our democracy and communities. There are possibilities for well-regulated AI to enable and expand civics education in Australia, including in harder to reach regional areas and suburbs. However, AI makes it increasingly difficult for citizens to distinguish reliable information from AI-generated, manipulated, or misleading content. Civics, media and AI literacy should be treated as connected capabilities, equipping Australians to understand democratic institutions, assess sources, recognise AI-generated material and verify claims.

A core contributor to a strong democracy is investment into civics education and digital media literacy that will equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to support their current and future civic participation in the context of AI. This goes beyond a general understanding of civics education as incorporating civics knowledge, skills, and attitudes, to proven practices for high-quality civics education, including:

1. Classroom instruction in civics, government, history, law, economics and geography;
2. Discussion of current events;
3. Service learning;
4. Extra-curricular activities;
5. Student participation in school governance;
6. Simulations of democratic processes and procedures;
7. News media literacy;
8. Action civics;
9. Social-emotional learning; and
10. School climate reform.

High-quality civics education needs to go beyond building civics knowledge through traditional classroom-based instruction, to teaching students what civic participation looks like in practice and how citizens can engage in their communities through interactive participation and engagement.



There is strong support for civics education: McKinnon's [The State of Democracy](#) report noted that 85% of Australian's want more civics education.

## AI and public interest journalism

AI is destabilising the economic model of an industry already under severe pressure. AI extracts and manipulates news content, accelerations the generation and distribution of misleading content presenting as news, diverts audiences and revenues, and threatens the trusted independent news on which voters depend to make informed decisions. While AI provides opportunities for efficiencies in the media and journalism sectors, it also generates additional burdens for journalists to verify and fact-check information.

Continuous investment in public interest journalism and protecting small independent newsrooms is critically important in the context of AI. In August 2026, the *News Media Bargaining Charge Bill 2026* and associated *News Journalism Payments Bill 2026* passed the Senate. Democracy Counts and partners successfully pushed for some changes to encourage the benefits flow beyond the big digital media companies. However, more can be done to strengthen media diversity and ensure investment into public interest journalism and recognition of its role in a healthy democracy. Investment in public interest journalism enables local communities in suburbs and towns across Australia to access trusted sources of local news.

Independent news publishers should have a pathway to voluntary licensing and remuneration for the use of their content by developers, for both training of AI and output/Retrieval Augmented Grounding (RAG). Democracy Counts welcomes the government's position against an exemption for text and data mining, and encourages strengthening transparency requirements and enforcement so that copyright owners alone do not shoulder the burden of monitoring and seeking payment for use of their content.

## Preventing the generation and distribution of political mis- and disinformation

Generative AI increases the speed, scale, and sophistication of misinformation, foreign interference, fake accounts, and deceptive political content. AI-powered searches, recommendations and responses are also increasingly being manipulated by bad actors, with limited transparency around how responses are controlled and generated. Stronger regulation and intervention in this early era of AI is essential for getting ahead of misinformation becoming unmanageable.

AI can dramatically increase the scale of political content, including deceptive advertising, deepfakes, impersonation, and highly-targeted campaigning. Electoral rules, in particular truth in political advertising, must be established to manage AI-generated political material and hold political actors accountable for the content they produce and distribute.

AI-generated disinformation presents a significant risk to the integrity of Australia's democracy and to the public's trust in democratic institutions. In 2024, McKinnon commissioned the report '[Truth in Political Advertising Laws Operation and Effectiveness](#)', which included the recommendation that:

*"TIPA [Truth in Political Advertising] laws should be clearly expressed to apply to both traditional and online media, and be extended to generative AI.*

*Other regulatory measures should be taken to more broadly combat disinformation in elections, such as bans on deceptive deepfakes and transparency measures for generative AI and deepfakes."*

## Digital Platform Regulation and better internet

In July 2026, Democracy Counts made a public submission to the review of the *Online Safety Amendment (Strengthening Social Media Minimum) Age Bill 2026*, including recommendations that a long-term, decade long policy vision is needed to safeguard from future digital threats that extend across three key areas



including AI. Better rules for social media platforms can create a better internet for everyone. Democracy Counts's submission also outlined that in 2026, international policy discussion around preventing harms to social media users should include guardrails on chatbots and Gen AI creating extremist content.

### Related Inquiries and Reform

The Committee should also ensure that the Inquiry considers related areas of government inquiry, regulation and reform, including:

- proposals for a Digital Duty of Care;
- the *Online Safety Amendment (Strengthening Social Media Minimum) Age Bill 2026*;
- reforms to the *Privacy Act 1988*; and
- recommendations regarding automated-decision making, transparency and the public sector arising from the Robodebt Royal Commission.

While these reforms and inquiries are not solely AI focussed, AI is a 'disrupter' across all these areas of reform. In considering these related developments in a holistic manner, the Committee should consider how to ensure a clear focus on implications for Australia's democracy and democratic institutions.

### Review mechanism

Significant reforms generally benefit from review, as reviews can consider issues such as whether the reforms are operating as intended, whether there are unintended consequences, and whether the reforms require amendment. The Committee should consider an appropriate review mechanism, including ongoing inquiry, to ensure decisions made regarding AI are based on up-to-date research and are fit-for-purpose.