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AQ

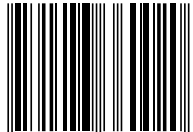
AUSTRALIAN QUARTERLY



Follow the Desire Lines Remaking Australia

INCLUDING: PROF RAFAEL CALVO | DR JOHAN LIBBERG | DR KEN GANNICOTT | DR ZAREH GHAZARIAN & MORE

ISSN 1443-3605



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**THE DISTORTION OF
THE PUBLIC SPHERE:**
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- Invest in a scientifically inspired, literate and skilled Australia that contributes to local and global challenges

AQ: Australian Quarterly is an important public and independent platform to increase public participation towards these objectives.

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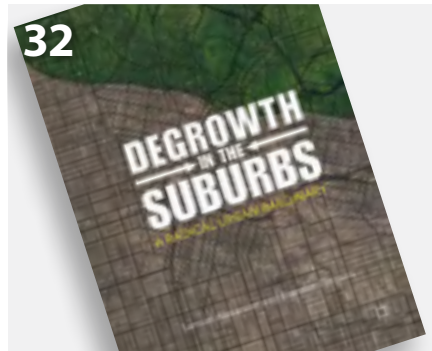


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A WORD

If there is a nobility within the capitalist project, it is that the whole edifice is built on aspiration. It teaches that the aspirations of the individual will benefit the majority; the greatest benefit arises from everyone striving for themselves.

Yet it teaches us nothing about hope. In fact, hope seems incompatible with this model – it is a pale flicker on its own.

Hope is not aspiration, nor is it optimism. Optimism deals with possible realities; it is the light of our everyday. Hope, by contrast, exceeds all rationale, it is buoyant in the face of history or circumstance, it enables us to see into the future and to envision the impossible.

Other than this loss of long-term vision, there is another problem with aspiration being the underpinning human driver of our economies. If we become focused on the achievement of short-term advances in our material or social status, we also become subservient to their counterpoints – having something taken away, being reduced.

This is why so many political fear tactics relate to having something stolen; jobs, culture, your hard-earned taxes.

The transformative power of hope so rarely bares its head in our polity anymore – the election of Obama, and before that Kevin '07 being among the rare examples. And, as so many people wake up to the illusion that aspiration does not automatically equal success and happiness, this attendant lack of hope leads to disenchantment with the political system, and social systems at large...

This is a very forward-focused *AQ*. We look at how we can restore hope and refresh trust in the systems we rely on, whether it's the media, the government or the education system.

Leading the charge, Louise Tarrant asks the question, 'If you woke up in the Australia of your dreams, what would it look like?' – and finds that hope doesn't lie too far below the surface.

We also look at modern civics education and the issues around lowering the voting age, and how we can best prepare young Australians to engage with their democracy.

We explore the setting of ethical frameworks around the technologies of the future, the effect of media concentration on our lives, and the need for evidence-based decisions in education reform.

I hope you enjoy.

Grant Mills
Editor-at-large

NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

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Follow the Desire Lines

Remaking Australia

We live in an extraordinary moment. In the face of potentially massive environmental and social crisis lies opportunity for reinvention and transformation. Like falling dominoes, segments of our society are admitting that business as usual is no longer the answer.

A new Australian story is waiting to be told but whose story will it be, and what will it look like?

ARTICLE BY: LOUISE TARRANT

The key to our future will lie in our capacity to envision this shared future. Visionary thinking – the imagination and expression of the possible – provides a vehicle to engage, explore, critique and discover. These visions help us create new stories about who we want to be.

This article canvases some of the barriers that have held back this conversation in Australia but also highlights two new visions coming from within our civic core that seek to rewrite that story.

IMAGE: © Alex Proimos-Wiki

Desire Lines are variously known as **social trails, pathways of desire, renegade passages or pirate paths.**

Desire Lines discovered

It's Friday night

The crowd tumbles out of Sydney's football stadium

Friends and strangers rub shoulders

Soft murmurs permeate the night air – goals re-lived, near misses critiqued

To the left of the Exit sits a lonely folly – an aesthetically beautiful but empty pedestrian bridge

Testament to a planned environment devoid of common sense

Instead, to a person, fans turn right – to tread the well-honed desire line stretching across the grass

With a shared wry smile as we step onto this communally created path, we join the mini rebellion forged by thousands before us.

Desire Lines are variously known as social trails, pathways of desire, renegade passages or pirate paths. They are the tracks honed into the landscape by people voting with their feet to create an alternate path to their desired destination. A lovely metaphor for the expression of untrammelled public will.

They tell us much about human behaviour, practical living and communal preferences. As Jane Jacobs, a leading campaigner for people-centred urban planning, wrote in 1958: “[t]here is no logic that can be superimposed on the city; people make it, and it is to them, not buildings, that we must fit our plans.”¹

This was, in its day, a radical notion and if you were to substitute ‘society’ for city and ‘markets’ for buildings, or transpose First Nations having a Voice over their own lives, it is just as apt today.

Desire Lines mapped

Engaging people in discussions about their concerns and aspirations – a mapping of the desire lines – enables new and old ambitions to emerge. The power and honesty of such stories, rooted as they are in people’s lived experience and deepest desires, cannot be underestimated.

Australia reMADE

In a neoliberal context – where people’s humanity is constrained to being market actors, whose life choices require us to ‘maximise our utility’ and where the exercise of citizenry is said to be through consumer choice – it seems highly subversive yet liberating to instead solicit, acknowledge and give voice to people’s desires.

This is the backdrop to the development of a story that rejects that “competition is the only legitimate organising principle for human activity.”² This story instead advocates for an Australia where love, respect and compassion is central – a place where people and planet come first. It has been through mapping the desire lines of a diverse cross section of Australians that the vision, *Australia reMADE: Creating the Best Version of Us*, has emerged.³

The roots of this project began 3 years ago⁴ when a loose grouping of civil society leaders and activists came together to start a conversation about



IMAGE: © Alex Proimos-Wiki

IMAGE: © hiroaki maeda-Flickr



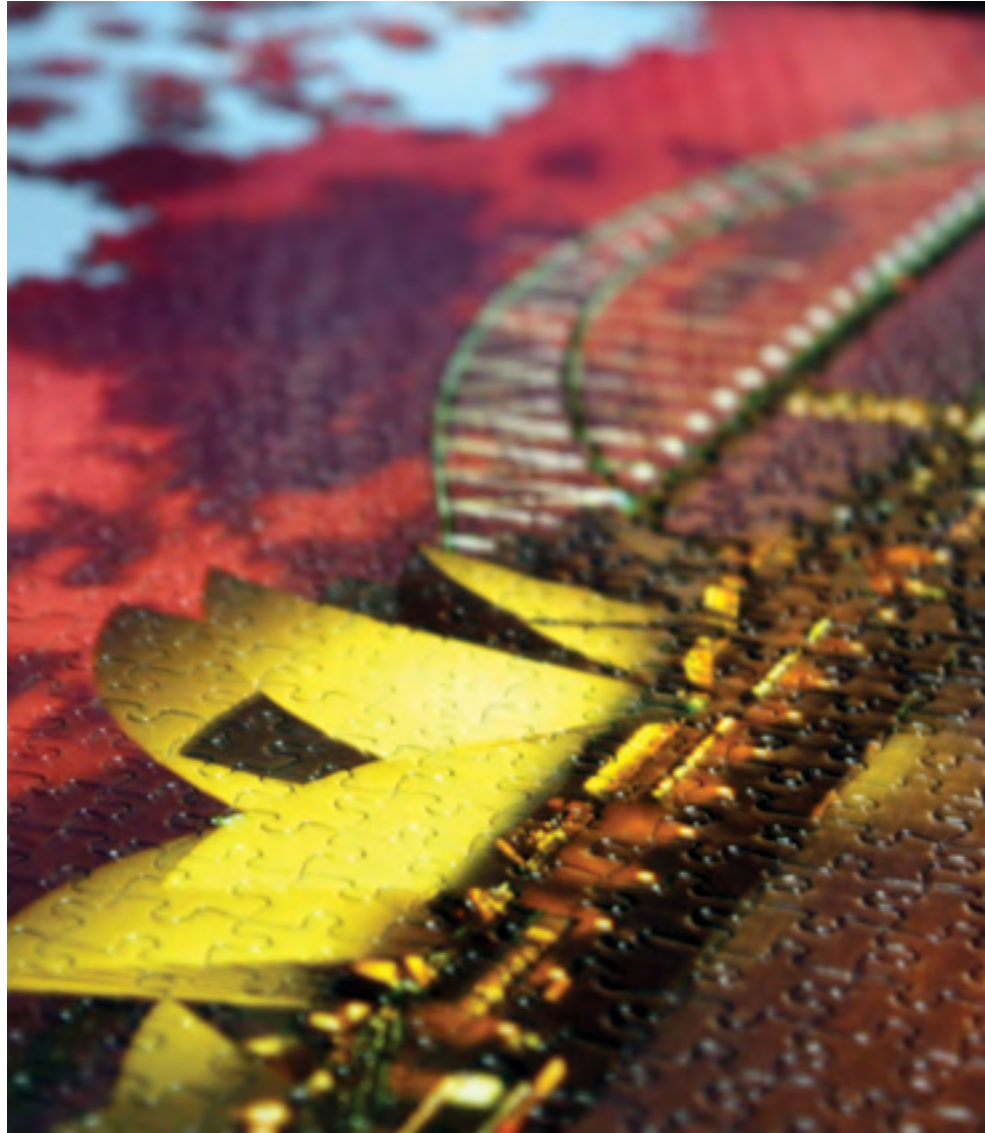
the future. We recognised the truth in Naomi Klein’s urging “to do more than draw a line in the sand and say ‘no more’”.⁵ We had to move from sitting in resistance to embracing transformation.

We also understood that this needed to be a shared and inclusive endeavour.

In 2017 we embarked upon an engagement project⁶ to test the ideas and sentiments that kept recurring in our gatherings and to hear what else might be missing. We had conversations with over 200 organisations, communities and individuals, asking them, ‘Imagine you have woken up in the Australia of your dreams. What is it like?’

The invitation to talk was met with both excitement and some trepidation. This felt like a long overdue invitation – where people had just been waiting... waiting for the opportunity to be part of a conversation about the future. At first people struggled to find the words to describe their desires and concerns, yet in the course of conversation they invariably grew in confidence and excitement. It felt like hope was just sitting below the surface – just waiting to be primed.

What emerged was an amazing convergence of thoughts and feelings across circumstance and geography. This wasn’t a conventional political narrative – it was warm and human, resilient and rebellious, grand and everyday. Rooted in lived experiences but lit with possibility.



Imagine you have woken up in the Australia of your dreams. **What is it like?**

The Uluru Statement from the Heart emerged from that Convention at Uluru. It is an extraordinary document – full of beauty, pain, grace and conviction.



The resulting vision rests upon nine equally important and connected pillars:

1. A First People celebrated at the very heart of what it means to be Australian
2. A natural world for now and the future
3. An economy for the people
4. A society where all contributions count and every job has dignity
5. A diversity of people living side-by-side
6. A country of flourishing communities
7. A new dawn for women
8. A thriving democracy
9. A proud contributor to a just world

The Uluru Statement from the Heart

Over the course of 2016-17, the Referendum Council⁷ conducted 13 regional dialogues with First Nations

people. This was a truly remarkable exercise. Spanning geographies, languages, cultures and histories this process sought to find common ground.

It represented a critical turning point for First Nations people in developing their own agreed agenda and path forward. This culminated in the first Australian First Nations Constitutional Convention in May 2017 – the 50th anniversary of the 1967 constitutional referendum.

It was time for something very different. It came off years of being spoken for, of undelivered promises, of empty symbolic gestures. As Megan Davis summed it up: “our people are getting old. Too many bark petitions, too many statements.”⁸

The Uluru Statement from the Heart⁹ emerged from that Convention at Uluru. It is an extraordinary document – full of beauty, pain, grace and conviction. It is an invitation from First Nations people to non-indigenous Australians to listen, hear and walk with them in their quest for Voice, Treaty, Truth.

It calls for a First Nations Voice to the Australia Parliament, enshrined in the Constitution. A Makarrata Commission – a ‘peace making process’ for truth telling and agreement making. And ultimately, keeping faith with the theme of the statement, “a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination”.

When Desire Lines converge

“The expression of the desire for a better way of being or of living”¹⁰ is known as utopian thinking. It has a long and honoured tradition, reaching back to Plato’s *Republic* (c.380BC) and Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516). But regardless of genre or period, utopian thought has variously tried to grapple with the big questions:

- What constitutes a good life?
- What does a better world look like?
- How best do we live in harmony with each other and the planet?

Times of rupture, transition or instability tend to elicit, or sharpen, a conversation about the future and about alternatives. These alternatives might be incremental in scope or transformational in the systemic change sought. Much depends on the level of entrenched control exercised by those supporting the status quo and the level of organisation, momentum and ambition of those seeking change. It is about both the power of ideas and the power behind the ideas.

Utopian representations of ‘other worlds and other ways’ seemed to reach their zenith in the latter part of the 1800s as major industrial and economic changes in the western world generated significant upheaval, and in turn, major unrest and ideological debate. For example, *Looking Backwards 2000-1887*¹¹, probably the

IMAGE: © Michael Coghlan-Flickr

IMAGE: © Sam Hood

most prominent socialist utopian novel in the US in the late 1800s, sold 1 million copies in multiple countries and languages and is said to have spawned some 40 alternate 'utopias' in response.

In Australia in the 1890s, a prominent group of Victorian radicals coalesced around the labour newspaper, *Tocsin*. They developed a magnificent political agenda that, amongst its 74 points, curiously called for "65. A Free Hansard" in addition to "26. Abolition of Laws which place Women... at a disadvantage as compared with the Man"; "61. To Bring People Nearer to Art and Art Nearer to the People" and "68. Abolition of Class Privilege".¹²

This paper eventually morphed into the newspaper of the Victorian Labor Party.

Reflecting a significant diminution in the contest of ideas, and the growing climate crisis confronting civilisation, it is notable that the later years of the 20th century saw a dearth of utopian proposals compared with the slew of dystopian futures featured in film, art and literature.

British Sociologist Krishan Kumar writing in 2010 bemoaned this circumstance: "The loss of utopia – if only for the time being – must nevertheless be a cause for regret. For over four hundred years it was one of the main vehicles for the expression of hopes, aspirations and schemes of humanity. It was a principal way of attempting to tame the future."¹³

Desire Lines unpacked

Anti-utopians argue that utopias, particularly blueprint utopias, invariably lead to totalitarianism whilst others relegate utopias to being 'wishful thinking' or 'castles in the clouds'.

Often the opposition to utopian thought comes from more conservative forces and those with most to lose if any change to the status quo were to occur. But the derisory or dismissive stance on big vision thinking can come also from within the ranks of those seeking change. For them, the pressure to focus on the immediate and tangible seems too overwhelming.

Yet as Ernst Bloch in his famous *The Principle of Hope* trilogy (1954-9) reminds us, "all freedom movements are guided by utopian aspirations."¹⁴

But visions are more than one-dimensional documents – they are as much method as they are plan – they are vehicles of, and for, social change. Visions can inspire, educate, critique, motivate and unify.

When Desire Lines are muted

So if visions are so important why has there been such a dearth of them in Australia until now?

A large part of it has to do with the times in which we live. TINA – There Is No Alternative – has been the overarching political narrative for the last forty years. Its dominance has



Times of rupture, transition or instability tend to elicit, or sharpen, a conversation about the future and about alternatives.

The derisory or dismissive stance on big vision thinking can come also from within the ranks of those seeking change. For them, the pressure to focus on the immediate and tangible seems too overwhelming.



Australia reMADE

A24 has auspiced the *Australia reMADE* project. Secretariat members are: Cassandra Goldie (ACOSS), David Ritter (Greenpeace), Kelly OShanassy (ACF), Paul Oosting (GetUp!), Ann Porcino (RPR Consulting), Archie Law (Sydney Peace Foundation) and Louise Tarrant (Chair). Engagement Co-ordinator is Millie Rooney.

During 2018 UTS student interns Aphroditi Zafropoulos, Emilia Wynn and Hollie Cheung undertook background research for A24 on matters relevant to *Australia reMADE* including research on utopian thought and hope.

Show your support for the Vision by reading and endorsing it at:

WWW.AUSTRALIAREMADE.ORG

been strengthened by the demise of communist states and the discrediting of a socialist alternative; the internalisation of the neoliberal politic by social democratic parties; the pace of global economic restructuring; and the centrality of fear, crisis or loss in many social movement responses.

In addition, there has been a clear agenda prosecuted by the wealthy and 'big end of town' pursuing economic self-interest to undermine and silence opposition. Political capture has been key to its success.

Consequently, dissent has been characterised variously as thuggery or elitism. Workers and their unions are demonised, attacked and circumscribed while civil society's right to advocate

is constantly challenged. Cultural leaders and intellectuals are demonised and marginalised. History is ignored or re-written – à la the culture wars and John Howard's black armband of history. The media has provided the cheer squad, thought police, and at times, firing squad for much of this silencing.

As activist journalist Laurie Penny vividly reminds us: "It is difficult to think clearly about a better world when you're trying to protect your soft parts from heavy boots."¹⁵

New Desire Lines forged

However, the whole point of desire lines is that they emerge unexpectedly and often against the dictates of formal

structures and processes around them.

Leonard Cohen reminds us in his seminal work, Anthem:

*Ring the bells
(ring the bells)
that still can ring*

*Forget your
perfect offering*

*There is a crack
in everything
(there is a crack
in everything)*

*That's how the
light gets in¹⁶*

Despite the seeming omnipresence of TINA, the cracks in neoliberalism and attendant conservative politics have begun to show. Indeed, the Great Recession of 2008 wasn't just a crack but rather a rupture in people's faith in market-first economics. But as Milton Friedman, one of the key architects of the neoliberal project, was wont to say: "when the time came that you had to change" as it did in the 1970s "there was an alternative [neoliberalism] ready there to be picked up."¹⁷

Unfortunately, in 2008 an alternative wasn't honed and ready. But since then some confluence of factors

has shifted. Growing inequality in economic security and political power, and the ever-looming impacts of devastating climate change, are biting

hard into public consciousness. Community frustration at the failure of political leaders to engage honestly and boldly with them about the future is deepening.

Overseas, Occupy, Sanders, Corby, Podemos, even Brexit and Trump herald a departure. Sacred cows no longer seem so sacred.

Orthodoxies are being challenged and alternative views and visions are being promulgated.

Suddenly the future is being contested.

In Australia, a failure of political leadership to indeed listen, learn and lead on the big issues of the day has required people to step up and begin their own conversations and begin to create new shared desire lines rooted in community.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart is a perfect example of First Nations people giving up on politicians and

***There is a
crack in
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(there is a
crack in
everything)
That's how the
light gets in***



The Uluru Statement from the Heart is a perfect example of First Nations people giving up on politicians and forging their own preferred pathway.



What is emerging
are desire lines
outside the
formal political
channels.

forging their own preferred pathway. As Megan David described it, “[c]ontemporary democracies like ours are inept at producing meaningful processes of public will formation beyond the ballot box. When confronted with genuinely deliberative processes, especially those that threaten the status quo, those inured to the system are often baffled and dismissive.”¹⁸

Unfortunate but true.

Despite the fact that in a most historic act our First Nations people stood together and spoke with one voice, their call for Voice Treaty Truth was immediately closed down by conservative political leaders. Yet we also know from polling more than 60% of Australians are supportive of the initiative¹⁹ – even with a hostile prime minister.

A historic moment of possibility was missed but given that the Uluru

Statement from the Heart is addressed to the Australian people, rather than political leaders, it is now up to a united community to champion this call.

The same dissonance between community desires and political leadership also underpins the *Australia reMADE* statement. Here, community consensus underlying this statement puts ‘people and planet’ before the political orthodoxy of ‘economy first’.

This is entirely consistent with Rebeca Huntley’s research findings in her recent book *Still Lucky: Why you should feel optimistic about Australia and its people*, which found “[w]e remain a society where the values of egalitarianism, ‘the fair go’, still mean something”²⁰ and that Australians still see “the economy is a means to an end... and the end is wellbeing.”²¹

What is emerging are desire lines outside the formal political channels.

When Desire Lines become orthodoxy

The question is: can such visions take root and create new orthodoxies?

Twice, major changes have occurred in Australia’s settings in the last fifty years.

The first came when Gough Whitlam magisterially declared in 1972: “Men and women of Australia! The decision we will make for our country on December 2 is a choice between the past and the

IMAGE: © roawrzz-DeviantArt

The challenge is to build ‘the traffic’ along those desire lines such that they become embedded in new formal structures and ways of working – **a new common sense.**

future, between the habits and fears of the past and the demands of the future. There are moments in history when the whole fate and future of nations can be decided by a single decision. For Australia, this is such a time. It’s time.”²²

Memorable words and an election manifesto spanning 47 pages and 200 promises – from soaring emotional appeal to bringing sewage to the 60% of suburbs without. All with the purpose “to recreate this nation.”²³

Bizarrely, one of the best testaments to this ambition and legacy comes from the radical right think tank, IPA whose website attests:

“No prime minister changed Australia more than Gough Whitlam. . . . He enacted an ambitious cultural agenda that continues to shape Australia to this day.”

The other example is the Neoliberal project itself. Although it didn’t begin life as a public facing vision intended to inspire mass movements, it was nonetheless a vision with a purpose – and powerful big-money backing. Rutger

Bregman likens its rise to a relay race “with think tanks passing the baton to journalists, who handed it off to politicians. Running the anchor leg were



two of the most powerful leaders in the western World, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.”²⁴ And changed the world it has.

Both these aspirants waited in the

wings for a long time – honing their ideas, building the capacities required to win, keeping unity and focus on their ambition and not losing faith that change was possible.

So the release of these two wonderful visions, the Uluru Statement from the Heart and *Australia reMADE*, do not mean job done! The challenge is to build ‘the traffic’ along those desire lines such that they become embedded in new formal structures and ways of working – a new common sense.

At stake is the future of our country and whether it will be one borne in justice and self-determination for our First Nations and whether people and planet reside at its core. At this point, people are forging these desire lines across the community waiting for formal politics to catch-on and catch-up that a new future is required. A future (as foreseen in *Australia reMADE*) where “we are unified and uplifted as a nation, we are compassionate, we make sure we all have a place.”

Let’s hope they don’t take too long. 



AUTHOR:

Louise Tarrant is Chair of the A24 Secretariat. A lifelong unionist, Louise was formerly National Secretary of the union United Voice and currently serves on the Board of Greenpeace Australia Pacific and CANA (Climate Action Network Australia).



The distortion of the Australian public sphere:

Media ownership concentration in Australia

They say News Corp staff can feel when Rupert Murdoch is in town. The 88-year-old chairman of News Corp has achieved a mythical status in Australia and around the globe. He is the maker and breaker of prime ministers, his latest scalp that of Malcolm Turnbull. His company also embodies the societal problem with media ownership concentration.

ARTICLE BY: **ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
JOHAN LIBBERG**

This article will not resort to News Corp bashing, because the problem is far greater than just one company. But there are a few useful case studies emanating from News Corp that I'll return to. The wider

IMAGE: © EdSteink.com



Australian politicians, from both major parties, have yet again **failed to play the role of the honest broker between market forces and the public interest.**

problem is a structural and regulatory issue where Australian politicians, from both major parties, have yet again failed to play the role of the honest broker between market forces and the public interest.

Australia is not alone in having a concentrated media market. We can see similar patterns emerging both in the US and in some parts of Europe.¹ But Australia stands out as one of the most concentrated media markets in the world and this increasing concentration has been happening for some time.² Then there is the question of why it also appears to be speeding up.

Background

We could program our Tardis to revisit various technological disruptions that have led to, first, media expansion and then concentration, eg. offset printing,

WHAT WERE THE LEGACY MEDIA COMPANIES THINKING WHEN OFFERING THEIR QUITE EXPENSIVELY PRODUCED CONTENT FOR FREE? PROBABLY THAT THE WWW WAS A BIT OF PASSING FAD.

the birth of radio followed by TV, but they all pale in comparison with the birth of the internet within which the world wide web (www) exists. The online/digital disruption was, and still is, immense and it caught most legacy media companies off guard.

I saw my first web page in 1992. It is forever burned into my memory. It was the official web page of the US White House. The second page my early technology adopter colleague showed me was a fake US White House page – an ominous sign of what the www would offer in the future.

It took until the mid-to-end 1990s until media companies started to explore the potential of publishing online. Here we find pivotal moment one: most publishers made news available for free. Possibly the dumbest business decision since (a quick internet search later) Western Union passed on the offer of buying the telephone patent in 1876 for US\$ 100,000.

What were the legacy media companies thinking when offering their quite expensively produced content for free? Probably that the www was a bit of passing fad and that in a best-case scenario publishing online would attract audiences to the real stories printed with ink on paper in huge printing presses that rumbled in the basements of newspaper houses.

In Australia, we have our own worst media business decision. Fairfax,

publisher of *The Age*, was a leader in online news in the early 2000s. They had a clear edge compared to their competitors and the choice of embracing online. Eric Beecher, then a senior editor at Fairfax, was commissioned by the Fairfax board to look into the future. The future Beecher saw was online and digital. Yet, in spite of his advice, the Fairfax board decided to stay with and prioritise the hard copy newspaper.³ The rest is history.

For Australia the second pivotal moment arrived in 2006. The then-communications minister, Helen Coonan (Liberal), engineered (heavily lobbied by the big media owners) media regulation ownership reforms that allowed for increased ownership across media platforms. Blogs were the flavour of the day and one of her driving arguments for the reforms was that the internet allowed citizen journalists, for instance via blogs, to publish and contribute to media diversity.

That argument was as flawed then as it is today. Here is the reason: producing independent public interest journalism that meaningfully holds power to account is time consuming and expensive. Citizen journalists have day jobs. Very few of them contribute original reporting to the public sphere. This is not a critique of citizen journalists (CJ), there are some really good things with CJs – like diminishing the publication gate-keeping role of legacy

This takes us to where we are today with the Nine – Fairfax merger (or more correctly takeover, as the Fairfax name will disappear).

media, but they do not add to media plurality in a meaningful way.

Fast forward to October 2017, and the then-Turnbull government re-hashes Coonan's, still flawed, arguments for loosening media ownership restrictions further allowing for ownership across all media platforms by the same company.

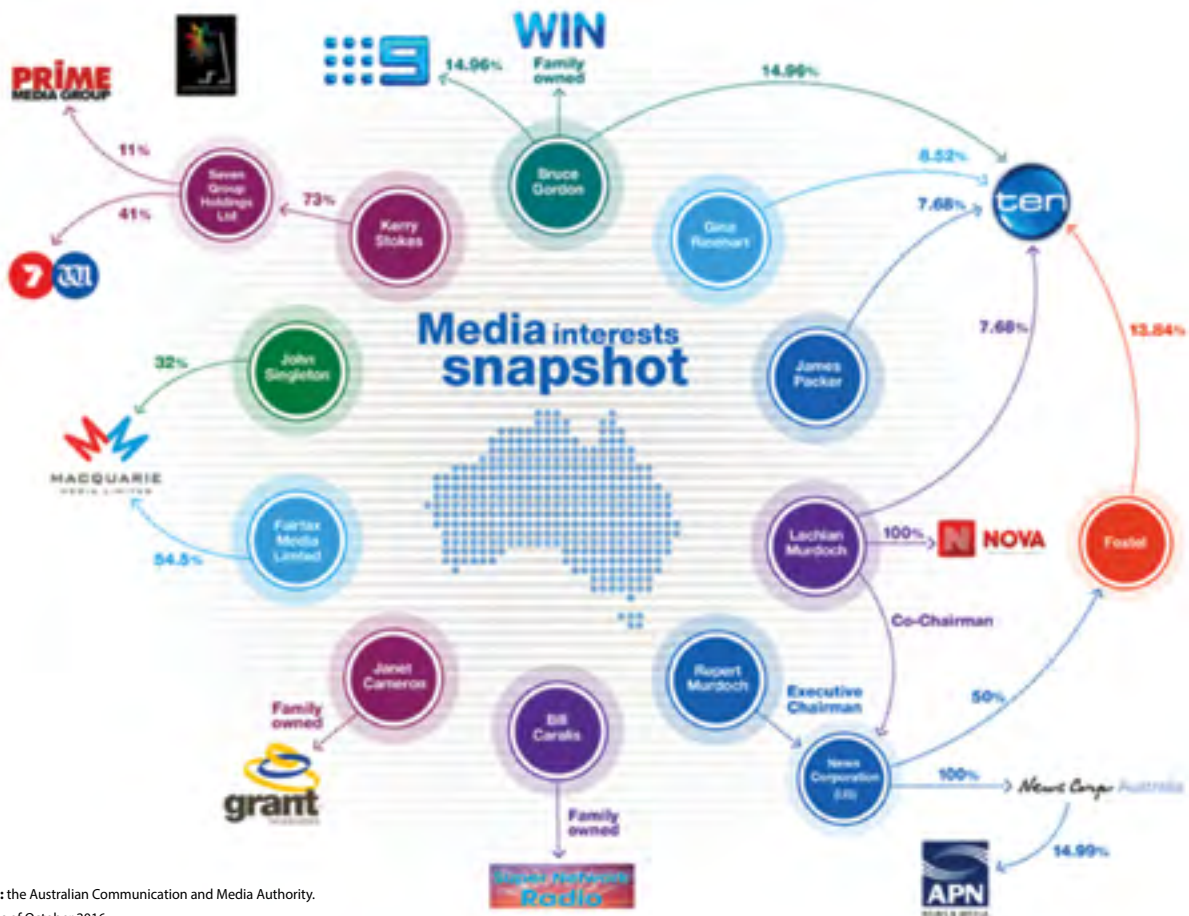
This takes us to where we are today with the Nine – Fairfax merger (or more correctly takeover, as the Fairfax name will disappear). The

Australian Consumer and Competition Commission (ACCC) recently waived through the deal acknowledging that it would lead to less competition. But not significantly less, which means the takeover can go ahead.

Disappointingly, the ACCC also fell into the flawed Coonan argument trap, displaying a surprising naïvety about how the Australian media market works.⁴ One major issue is that the new players, such as Crikey and The New

Daily do not have the resources to fight defamation battles or challenge court suppression orders. They do good journalism, but don't have the funding clout needed to be a proper complement to the remaining big four media companies. It is highly likely we'll see more mergers and takeovers after this ruling.

The diagram below illustrates how a handful of owners dominate the Australian media market before the



SOURCE: the Australian Communication and Media Authority. Current as of October 2016.



Nine – Fairfax deal.

Multiple studies have clearly shown that Australia has one of the most concentrated media markets in the world. This is most aptly illustrated by the fact that the four major commercial media players, News Corp Australia, Fairfax Media, Seven West Media and APN News and Media accounted for more than 90 per cent of the revenue in the industry in the 2015-16 financial year.⁵

The third watershed moment is the rise, rise and rise of the big three: Facebook, Google and Amazon. Not in recorded history have we seen such global dominance of any company in the media sector, or any sector for that matter. You only have to look once at the advertisement revenue charts, the profits of the big three, and how they have spread around the world, to realise that this is where the future big issue lies in terms of concentration.

News Corp shrinks into an ant compared to the three. How on earth did we let this happen? Well, again, our elected representatives were asleep at the wheel or did not understand the potential market power of the three. Culpable too are people like me and my colleagues, we could have been clearer on where things were going and focused our research more on this to sound the alarm.

Consider one chilling example (apart from the Cambridge Analytica

and Facebook debacle, and Google being part of the global mass surveillance dragnet): Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg wants to connect the world to make it a better place. So, Facebook is helping African countries to connect

to the internet via satellite and wifi technology, bypassing more expensive fibre and cable roll outs. Sounds like a win-win.

The problem is: the citizens in these countries, to a great extent, access the internet via one interface – Facebook. They get the www according to Zuckerberg.

Consequences

This is where it gets a bit dystopian. But fear not, there is light at the bottom of the rabbit hole, depending on if we

chose the red or the blue pill.

Remember the German political philosopher Jurgen Habermas? His main contributions to public discourse are his thoughts on the public sphere. In a nutshell, Habermas defined the

public sphere as part of social life where citizens come together voluntarily (freely) to discuss the issues of the day in order to influence policy and politics. We would probably call it public political participation today.

In order for the public sphere to function

effectively its participants need to have equal access to quality, unspun information and facts. This is of course a utopian notion even at the best of times (and there are a lot of other

NEWS CORP AUSTRALIA, FAIRFAX MEDIA, SEVEN WEST MEDIA AND APN NEWS AND MEDIA ACCOUNTED FOR MORE THAN 90 PER CENT OF THE REVENUE IN THE INDUSTRY.

This is where it gets a bit dystopian. But fear not, there is light at the bottom of the rabbit hole, depending on if we chose the red or the blue pill.

The Murdoch editor clones can then be trusted to run lobbying campaigns like the ones on weaker and weaker media ownership regulations.



critiques of public sphere theory that I cannot fit into this piece), but it is nonetheless a model that allows us to analyse the consequences of media ownership concentration.

Media and journalism play a vital role in supplying the public sphere with the fuel it needs: information that is in the public interest in order for citizens to be self-governing. For this to work, events need to be reported as fairly and neutrally as far as possible. Some refer to this as a sort of social contract between media/journalism audiences and the media owners.⁶

You – the publishers – deliver independent and integrity-strong stories holding power to account and we – the audience – buy your product and back you up when you are under pressure from the powers we have asked you to hold to account (politics, the corporate

sector, indeed all actors in society that exercise power). Media ownership concentration threatens this contract and its delicate balance.

Let us use News Corp as a case study. There have been several studies done on the way Rupert Murdoch influences his editors. One of the most powerful research projects is by David McKnight.⁷ He synthesised Murdoch's influence and access to political leaders in Australia, the UK and the US. There are two main takeaways from this study.

1) Murdoch uses journalism to gain commercial advantages. This is done via hiring editors who think like him, meaning that there is no need for explicit instructions regarding content and editorial direction. If an editor loses the ability to think like Murdoch, he/she is replaced. The Murdoch editor clones can then be

trusted to run lobbying campaigns like the ones on weaker and weaker media ownership regulations, which is lucrative for News Corp as it allows the company to expand and buy more and more of the Australian and global news media market.

2) When all News Corp's outlets in multiple countries run the same editorial and news reporting line, their influence is immense. One potent example of this was the lead up to the 2003 Iraq war when all Murdoch media spoke as one in support of the war. When the case for war proved to be null and void as no weapons of mass destructions were found, some media companies, like the *New York Times*, apologised to the public for its lack of critical reporting.⁸ Not so News Corp. The second example is the ongoing



The sensible political middle is increasingly empty as citizens desert it for the partisan trenches. It may sound boring, **but the middle is where we make progress.**

issue of climate change. In spite of repeated and overwhelming global scientific consensus on man-made climate change, the Murdoch media continues to publish misinformation, half-truths and sometimes outright lies on the issue. A prominent case in point here is the News Corp coverage of the coral bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef.⁹

The above examples have caused a serious and lasting distortion of the public sphere in Australia. This has led to the bitter divisions between progressives that desperately want to act on climate change and that overwhelmingly voted for same sex marriage, being opposed by a small, but very loud, conservative faction amplified by News Corp media.

This is exemplified by the attempt to turn Sky News into a version of Fox News in Australia. This is very serious because it means that the sensible political middle is increasingly empty as citizens desert it for the partisan trenches. It may sound boring, but the middle is where we make progress via

compromises and mutual respect for different points of view.

One of the elements of journalism, according to Kovach and Rosenstiel, is that 'it must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise'.¹⁰ At the moment, the hyper-partisan, mainly opinion-driven, journalism produced by some sections of the Australian media is

failing this element completely and thus fuelling partisan and at times hate and fear-driven politics.

Agreeing to disagree and respecting other points of view, while in good faith striving for workable compromises to form policies is the hallmark of mature liberal

democracies. The ideological trench-like political warfare we are currently witnessing in the USA, and to a lesser extent in Australia, is the polar opposite to mature democratic behaviour.

Part of the blame for this situation must be squarely put on some media outlets producing journalism that is, in effect, anti-mature democratic behaviour. I keep asking myself – where does all the ill will and hate come from

**SO, WHAT CAN
AND SHOULD BE
DONE? WELL, IT
AIN'T ROCKET
SCIENCE.**



in this partisan ideological war?

This leads to the core consequence of media ownership concentration – the risk is greater for partisan ideological divides to form in society when fuelled by media outlets that have made it part of their business model to publish heavily opinionated content instead of striving for compromise via respectful democratic behaviour.

The way ahead

So, what can and should be done? Well, it ain't rocket science. Most of the solutions have already been suggested to, and canvassed by, the 2017 Senate Inquiry into the Future of Public Interest Journalism.¹¹ Below I cover, in my assessment, the most viable and urgent proposals. In the interest of transparency and disclosure, I co-wrote and edited one of the submissions to the inquiry.

The total ABC funding has been lowered by \$254 million since 2014 – a **25 per cent cut of the total ABC budget.**



Public broadcasting

While commercial media is figuring out the future business models for journalism (and it will be a combination of models), public broadcasters are the most important repository for public interest, in-depth journalism. It is therefore crucial that they are properly funded to do their job. Under the current and previous government in Australia the opposite is true.

In spite of former prime minister Tony Abbott promising no cuts to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) or Special Broadcasting Services (SBS) on election eve 2013¹², two consecutive coalition government have cut \$101 million dollars per year in ABC funding since 2014¹³.

In the last 2018-19 federal budget a further \$84 million was cut and if you include not-renewed targeted grants, such as one for news gathering, the total ABC funding has been lowered by \$254 million¹⁴ since 2014 – a 25 per cent cut of the total ABC budget.

This should be restored as soon as possible and funding should again be coupled to the consumer price index. Re-funding the ABC is the most powerful antidote to the distortion of the Australian public sphere as the ABC is bound by its charter to offer national forums for respectful public debate – the opposite to Sky News after 6 pm.¹⁵

This should not be a difficult political



The fate of the ABC is not only a matter for Australia. Across the globe there are currently only between 11-15 independent (from government and the corporate sector) properly funded public broadcasters.

decision to make. Opinion polling unequivocally shows that while public trust in other media outlets is falling, the ABC still enjoys very high trust levels.¹⁶

The ABC board and the appointment process of board members needs to be (as it once was) removed from government and handled by a neutral body. The recent debacles exposing the former chair person Justin Milne as doing the bidding of the government trying to influence editorial decisions and the sacking of journalists, clearly illustrates why this is an urgent change.

Furthermore, the fate of the ABC is not only a matter for Australia. Across the globe there are currently only between 11-15 independent (from government and the corporate sector) properly funded public broadcasters. The total number varies depending on what you classify as proper funding. But if we use the ABC as a benchmark, it is closer to 11 than 15.¹⁷

Given these low numbers, if an entity like the ABC is diminished, so is independent in-depth journalism globally.

Government support for public interest media

Following on from the ABC funding flows the argument that if we fund public broadcasters with tax money, why not other media outlets as well? A good question that was thoroughly canvassed in the senate inquiry into the future of public interest journalism.

There are already models that could be adapted for Australian purposes.

Several European countries have various forms of taxpayer funding for media outlets, predominantly newspapers, to avoid the one-paper town scenarios that is the unfortunate case in several Australian cities. These funding schemes have been around for a long time and are now more needed than ever. So there is no need to re-invent the wheel – assess the existing models and adapt versions that work in the Australian media landscape.¹⁸

Re-regulate media ownership

The market and its inherent competition is, in most cases, a force for good and drives innovation. But in certain areas leaving it to the market is a really bad idea. Heavy public utilities such as power grids, natural gas infrastructure and water infrastructure are some examples.

In the case of privatising utilities, the private operators drove each other out of the market until there were one or two operators left – close to the same as was the case when they were state owned. Then they didn't spend enough on maintenance to increase profit margins.

We're seeing a similar scenario in domestic and global media companies. They compete, buy or merge to increase their margins. Profit is the driver, not delivering public interest

journalism. Therefore, if we leave it only to the market, media diversity will keep shrinking until we only have a handful, if that, of owners and publishers left. Such is the logic of the media market, and therefore ownership needs to be re-regulated to protect public interest journalism long-term.

There are several other sources of income for media companies. We are seeing an increase in subscriptions for publications such as The Guardian (and Guardian Australia), The New York Times



Another suggestion that is getting increased traction is for Facebook and Google to pay for stories from media outlets that are shared and published on their platforms.

The Junction is published by the Journalism Education and Research Association Australia and features the best stories from journalism students across Australia.

(and the NYT Australian edition). This in combination with crowd sourcing funding for major reporting themes could be one potent future business model for journalism.

Another suggestion that is getting increased traction is for Facebook and Google to pay for stories from media outlets that are shared and published on their platforms. How this can be done is unclear. But there is no doubt that publishers need to think carefully before they put all their eggs in one basket and abandon their own publication vehicles to publish only on social media platforms that they do not control. We have already seen what small changes to the Facebook and Google algorithms can do to traffic and advertising revenue.¹⁹

A role for universities

Submissions to the senate inquiry raised possible roles for universities in countering media concentration. The reasoning went that universities are independent from faction as far as possible and could therefore serve as a base for independent journalists. This would be connected to altruistic funding from the private sector. This funding avenue is not well established in Australia, but it is worth exploring.


Investigative journalists could, for instance, be seconded to journalism

programs to both produce stories and collaborate with and teach journalism students. Several submissions to the senate inquiry suggested that altruistic funding of public interest journalism should be tax exempt. That makes a lot of sense. It certainly works in the US.

The other role for universities is already, I am very pleased to report, happening. On October 24, 2018 a new online nationwide publication was launched. *The Junction*²⁰ is published by the Journalism Education and Research Association Australia and features the best stories from journalism students across Australia.

The founding universities are eleven, but we know from the project UniPollWatch (UPW), which covered the 2016 federal election, that many more will join. The UPW 2016 project involved 26 universities, close to 600 students and produced almost 800 stories from most federal electorates.

The main value add of UPW is that it covers the electorates down to a very local level in a way that legacy media don't have the resources or will to do. In 2018, *The Junction* hosted the UPW VIC state election. The adventure continues.

So, there is hope. And here's a thought. Chip in. Subscribe to as many quality media outlets as possible. From little things... 



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Gonski 2.0: A controlled flight into terrain

There are many reasons why aircraft crash and burn. Often the explanation lies in a combination of mechanical problem and response by the flight crew. One of the most baffling types of crash is a *controlled flight into terrain*. This occurs when an aircraft not experiencing any mechanical problem, and under complete control by the pilot, is flown into the ground. The latest Gonski Report (*Through Growth to Achievement, Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, and inevitably christened Gonski 2.0) provides a spectacular example of a crash and burn after flying straight into terrain.

ARTICLE BY: **DR KEN GANNICOTT**

The release of the Gonski 2.0 report in early 2018 provoked a chorus of criticism, much of it derisive, itemising the reliance on platitudes and clichés and its failure to address the terms of reference in any meaningful way.

Particularly baffling is that the Review was established with everything in working order. It had just one job, which was to provide advice on how funding should be used to improve



Australia's poor academic achievement is neither fake news nor mere politicking over funding.

student achievement. It was in the blissful position of not needing to argue the case for extra funding because \$24.5 billion over ten years had already been committed by government. The 'pilot' enjoyed enviable public esteem. And, not least, there is now an extensive literature, drawing on evidence from high-performing countries, on the policies required for improved educational performance.

What, as they say, could possibly go wrong?

Then-Minister Simon Birmingham promised that the Gonski recommendations would be implemented. Little of substance has happened since then,

but it would be rash to conclude that Gonski 2.0 has been shelved and can be safely left to collect dust.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) has started work on a proposed new curriculum that appears heavily influenced by Gonski 2.0. Agreement on a new method of funding Catholic and independent schools has prompted Opposition promises of an additional \$15 billion for public schools, but these 'funding wars' have been unaccompanied by any evidence that the money will promote better performance.

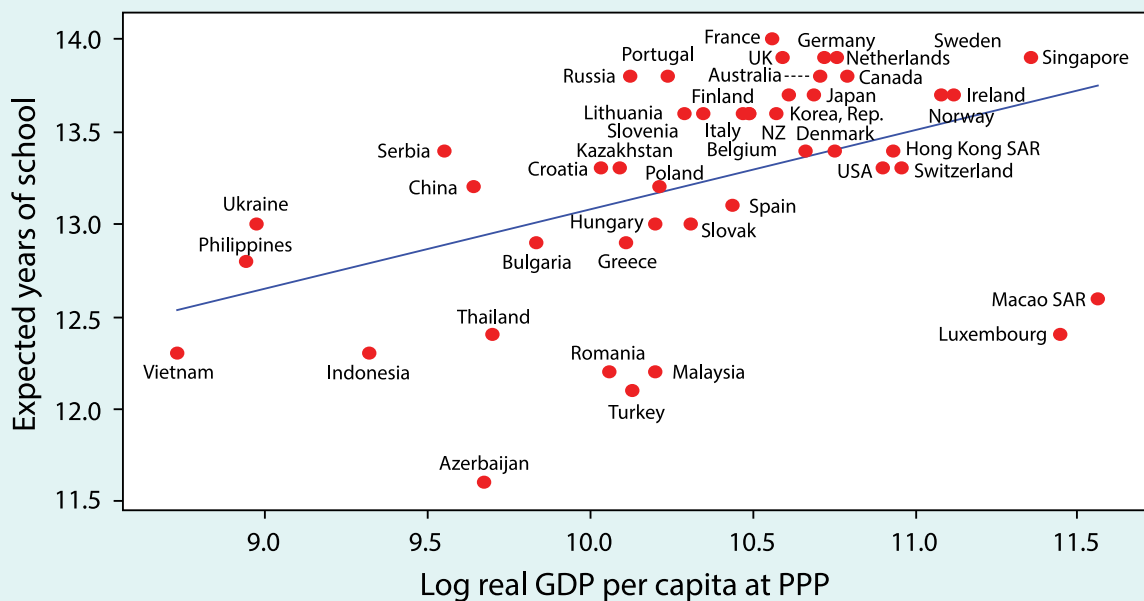
These developments provide

renewed impetus for checking whether Gonski 2.0 was on the right track for improved achievement by our schools. We start by summarising the worrisome levels of student performance that provided the rationale for Gonski 2.0. We then review the international evidence on school performance and follow this by asking whether Gonski 2.0 was consistent with that evidence.

Australia's school performance: same old story but a fresh perspective

Australia's poor academic achievement is neither fake news nor

FIG 1: Years of schooling: How does Australia compare?



SOURCE: Calculated from data in World Bank, The Human Capital Project, Table A.1.

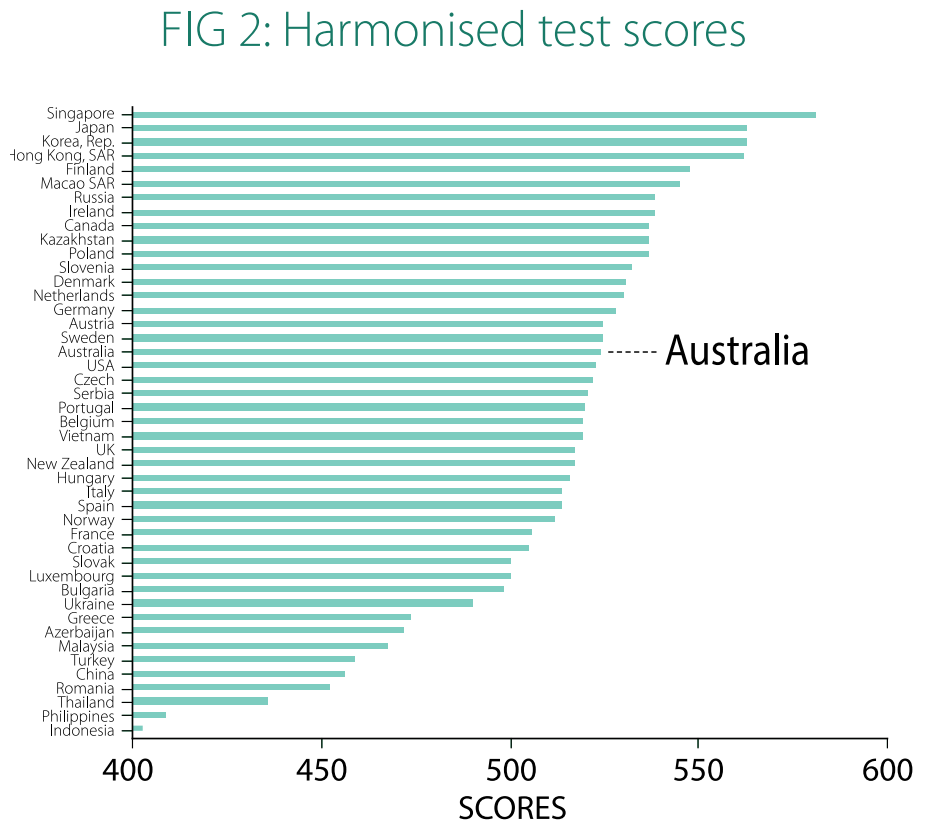
mere politicking over funding. It is a well-known story that has been given fresh and dramatic reinforcement in new work from the World Bank.¹ We see from Figure 1 that in quantitative terms Australia is performing well. An Australian child can expect to complete 13.8 years of schooling by his/her eighteenth birthday. This quantity of schooling is higher than would be predicted for our income level and it puts us well into the top rank of countries.

The story becomes less benign when we turn to the issue of how much our children learn in school. A major feature of the World Bank's recent work is the production of a globally comparable database of learning outcomes.

Conversion factors are used to put the considerable number of international and regional assessment tests on a common, or harmonised, scale.² Figure 2 shows these harmonised scores for the same sample as Figure 1.

We can see that, in contrast to its high quantitative rank, Australia's performance in the quality of learning puts it scarcely better than middle of the pack.

Australia's position in a league table of assessment scores may be of no great importance in itself. No one suggests that standardised assessments such as PISA fully measure the multiple aspects of learning outcomes. Psychometrically-designed achievement tests have, however, become very sophisticated



SOURCE: World Bank, The Human Capital Project, Table A.1.

and can reasonably be regarded as a proxy for learning outcomes.

Whether we look at learning in mainly educational, social or economic terms of human capital and future productivity, there is not much point in sitting behind a school desk if learning falls short. We can directly measure this by combining Figures 1 and 2 to estimate *expected years of learning-adjusted school*.

From Figure 1, children in Australia can expect to complete 13.8 years of schooling. When adjusted for relative performance on international

achievement tests, the amount of effective schooling drops to only 11.6 years, a learning gap of 2.2 years. This is equivalent to saying that Australian students lose more than 2 years of learning due to the inadequate quality of their schooling, effectively learning less than students in Asia and Europe, despite similar years of education.

Severe practical consequences follow from the disparity between our quantitative and qualitative performance. There is clear evidence that learning outcomes, as measured by such tests,

Australian students lose more than 2 years of learning due to the inadequate quality of their schooling.



matter substantially for economic well-being.³

The sources of performance improvement

There is no mystery about the factors conducive to better educational performance. Since the 'effective schools' literature of the 1980s, there has been a steady accumulation of evidence drawing upon international experience of "what works". There is no uniquely correct recipe, but a core of agreed performance evidence has emerged.

This evidence is widely accessible, whether it is pathbreaking academic work on the importance of cognitive skills by Hanushek and Woessmann, management insights from consultants McKinsey & Co, or the OECD's statistical

analysis drawing upon the massive PISA database. Six key issues make up this core evidence.

1. Effective teachers. Teachers are the most important factor by which policy makers can directly improve student achievement. Today, all teachers in OECD countries are qualified, but just like any other occupational group there is a distribution of effectiveness. The difference between good and bad teachers is very large. On UK evidence, during one year with a very effective maths teacher, pupils gain 40% more in their learning than they would with a poorly performing teacher.⁵ The effects of high-quality teaching are especially significant for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Over a school year, these pupils gain 1.5 years' worth of

learning with very effective teachers, compared with 0.5 years with poorly performing teachers. In short, for pupils from a low socio-economic background the difference between a good teacher and a bad teacher is a whole year's learning.

2. Adaptive Instruction. Terminology varies, but the basic concept is *direct instruction*, sometimes called explicit teaching. With explicit teaching, the teacher shows students what to do and how to do it. Recognising that learning is a cumulative and systematic process, it decides the learning intentions and success criteria, demonstrates them, and evaluates if students understand what they have been told. To this basic concept must be added *whole class teaching*, which self-evidently means

For pupils from a low socio-economic background the difference between a good teacher and a bad teacher is a whole year's learning.

IMAGE: © Simon Fraser University

Collaborative practices between teachers within and across schools are important features of many high-performing schooling systems.

that a teacher teaches an entire class of children at one and the same time. Whole class teaching is typically delivered through direct instruction. *Adaptive instruction* describes the process of incorporating individual help into explicit/whole class teaching when a student has difficulties understanding a topic or task. Kirschner, Sweller and Clark insist that “the empirical research [supporting explicit teaching is] overwhelming and unambiguous.”⁶ This conclusion is confirmed in OECD’s list of 38 factors associated with science performance on the 2015 PISA tests: adaptive instruction and direct instruction rank second and third on that list.

3. The importance of cognitive skills.

Parents have always known that basic skills are crucial, and economists have long known that a country’s development is connected to the skills of its workers. The problem is that we did not have research-based evidence about the contribution of basic cognitive skills. There was, understandably, a tendency to think that raising enrolment rates or keeping children in school for longer would be sufficient. Recent research has filled that gap. Evidence from Hanushek and Woessmann (a precursor to the World Bank’s work on the Human Capital Index cited earlier) is both clear and highly influential.⁷ From East Asia,

with high educational performance and high economic growth, down to sub-Saharan Africa with low scores on each measure, there is a clear and consistent correlation between mastery of basic cognitive skills and educational/economic performance.

4. High expectations: High expectations are linked with higher performance. Most teachers would assert that they already have high expectations of their students, but research demonstrates that in practice there is a wide range of attitudes. A persistent research finding is that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may achieve less than their potential due to low expectations of their ability.

5. Measurement of effective learning and feedback: Continuing data-driven analysis, assessment and evaluation often underpin school performance. They are critical in monitoring the impact of policy and they provide a basis for teacher

feedback (formative assessment) to the student.

6. Collaboration: Collaborative practices between teachers within and across schools are important features of many high-performing schooling systems. In countries such as Finland and Japan teachers are encouraged to work together, through joint lesson planning, observing each other’s lessons, and helping each other improve. In China, teaching and development teams, or *JiaoYanZu*, work together within and across schools to plan how the curriculum will be taught, to share learning, and observe each other’s practice.

Performance evidence in a nutshell

These core factors are not separate items on a shopping list: they overlap and reinforce each other. The NSW Centre for Education Statistics and



The core performance factors and their interaction should have provided baseline evidence for Gonski 2.0, **but virtually no such evidence appears in the report.**

Evaluation points out that providing timely and effective feedback to students (item 5 above) is another element of explicit teaching (item 2). Focusing students' attention on the task at hand and the way they are processing that task are two effective types of direct feedback.

Similarly, being explicit about the learning goals of a lesson and the criteria for success (item 2) gives high expectations (item 4) a concrete form that students can understand and aim for. As a further example, the literature indicates that teachers are more likely to

integrated and coherent model of education. It is a model consisting of objective achievement standards, high expectations of all students, a focus on cognitive skills, and explicit teaching by effective and collaborating teachers using direct and adaptive instruction. It is a model grounded in the international evidence and experience.

Performance evidence and the Gonski approach

The core performance factors and their interaction should have provided baseline evidence for Gonski 2.0, but virtually no such evidence appears in the report. Instead of at least reviewing the evidence, Gonski makes the extraordinary claim (page ix) that there is "a



make effective use of student data (item 5) when working collaboratively (item 6) than when working alone.

No doubt, some highly effective teachers (item 1) are born teachers, but many more can be trained to become effective by adopting better pedagogical practices (item 2) or learning from their colleagues (item 6).

Once we allow for such interactions, it becomes clear that the core performance factors offer an

lack of research-based evidence on what works best in education". The consequence is that in place of a judicious discussion of the international evidence, Gonski 2.0 offers a model in which (to paraphrase the line of argument):

1. The major constraint is the rigidity of curriculum delivery because all students receive the same fixed year-level diet of knowledge, skill and

understanding.

2. Lockstep delivery of the year-level based curriculum makes it difficult to develop teaching programs for students who are above or below year-level expectations. Australian students from low socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to have growth mindsets, that is, a belief they can succeed if they work hard. At the other end of the spectrum, some students may not be challenged enough.
3. Many students in our schools are not realising their full potential because our school system prevents teachers from putting individualised growth-focused teaching and learning into practice.
4. Therefore (so the argument runs) Australia should move from a year-based curriculum to a curriculum expressed as learning progressions independent of year or age. Instead of content and achievement *standards*, Australia would adopt a structured roadmap of long-term learning *progress*.
5. To support this, a new online formative assessment system would give teachers the tools with which to identify individual learning growth.
6. Shifts in technology and jobs are changing the balance of the skills our students need to develop, so there should be increased emphasis on general capabilities in the curriculum.

Some of this argument is incontestable. It has long been understood that socio-economic differences have a major bearing on academic performance. Teaching a class of widely differing abilities is very demanding. These strengths acknowledged, for the most part the Gonski model is either wrong or not supported by any evidence.

Teachers and pedagogy

Aside from much verbiage (“teachers deserve greater recognition and higher esteem”) Gonski has little to say about the role of teachers or pedagogy in explaining Australia’s low performance. Despite extensive international evidence about the role of teachers and pedagogy, the report does not explore the issue of alternative approaches to teaching. This leaves the report advocating a gee-whiz technological fix for the assessment system, but nowhere outlining the pedagogical approaches to be used for the ensuing interventions.

This is a serious omission, because in this country we persist with a teaching approach that is known to be ineffective. For many years *inquiry-based teaching* has been the predominant approach in Australia’s schools.

Inquiry learning is a constructivist, student-centred approach, with the teacher as facilitator and the students



That evidence is unambiguous: whereas adaptive and direct instruction rank near the top in their measured impact on educational effectiveness, inquiry-based teaching ranks near the bottom.

themselves making meaning. Guided inquiry may set parameters for class activity, but the essence is that students are actively involved, often through small-group activity, in constructing their own understanding and learning.

It might be thought that a small group, student-centred approach was ideally suited to engaging groups of varying abilities in a class, thereby extracting maximum performance. Nothing could be further from the truth. Inquiry-based learning ranks near the bottom (34th out of 38) of OECD’s performance-enhancing factors, and in fact has a strong negative association with performance scores.

Gonski is simply wrong in asserting that “it is impractical to expect that the same curriculum content can

adequately cater to each student’s different learning needs”. Whole-class direct instruction has been the dominant style in most Asian countries, and a major feature from East Asian test results is that they do not in general have the long tail of non-performing students seen in so many other countries.

The spectacular results achieved by Noel Pearson with direction instruction for indigenous students is entirely consistent with the international evidence. That evidence is unambiguous: whereas adaptive and direct instruction rank near the top in their measured impact on educational effectiveness, inquiry-based teaching ranks near the bottom.

There is abundant evidence that

Children cannot learn to be critical thinkers until they have actually **learned something to think about.**



socio-economic (dis)advantage is a major determinant of educational performance. But hand-wringing about social disadvantage achieves nothing. There is not much that any of us can do to change our parents, and planned policy changes in socio-economic structure take years to materialise. Direct and adaptive instruction are effective means of doing something about the problem – indeed, on OECD's ranking they are by far the most important means of doing something useful to overcome social disadvantage.

Mention direct instruction in any faculty of education and the tea-room will erupt as though you are advocating a return to Dotheboys Hall and Wackford Squeers. With direct and adaptive direct instruction ranking second and third in OECD's list of 38 factors associated with science performance, we are long past the time for a grown-up discussion of explicit instruction in Australia.

General capabilities

The recommendation to emphasise general capabilities rather than specific cognitive skills is back to the future with a vengeance. In 2013, the Draft National Curriculum had to be rewritten because it consisted largely of unsupported rhetoric about general capabilities and cross-curriculum themes.⁸

It was not difficult to see that a

IMAGE: © Stuart Pilbrow-Flickr

IMAGE: © Brisbane City Council-Flickr



national curriculum which filtered maths, science and literacy subjects through a perspective of general capabilities would not come close to giving our students the necessary level of achievement. Zombie-like, general capabilities have risen from the dead in Gonski 2.0, with claims that “general capabilities need to be at the core of our curriculum” (page 38).

No sensible person wants an education system that lacks, say, the study of history, or which pays no attention to wider personal development in drama, music and art. The importance of critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, and ethical understanding are well understood. That much accepted, there is unambiguous evidence (cited earlier as item 3) that what counts for our long-term wellbeing is high performance in the mainstream subject areas.

Subject content knowledge is sometimes dismissed as rote learning and set in opposition to critical thinking, but general capabilities need to build upon specific subject knowledge, not replace it. Critical thinking processes depend on some knowledge of the topic. Schwartz has pointed out, waspishly but accurately, that “children cannot learn to be critical thinkers until they have actually learned something to think about.”⁹

This is exactly the approach taken by Singapore in its recently announced reform package. Singapore has long

had a reputation for academic excellence, but the system is not known for encouraging critical thinking processes. Singapore now wants to produce more well-rounded students.

Crucially, this will not be at the expense of continued high performance in specific subjects: in some grades students “will be exposed to new subjects and/or higher content rigour and expectation”.¹⁰ Despite these requirements, students will have more time for self-directed thinking and to “develop 21st century competencies” because a substantial reduction in the number of school-based assessments and high-stakes examinations will make available much class time presently taken up with cramming for the tests.

This careful balancing of assessments, specific subjects and general capabilities, taken from a position of great educational strength, is a far cry from waffle about giving general capabilities pride of place in the Australian curriculum. Doing so will further reduce

our students’ achievement.

A new system of formative assessment

There is convincing evidence that data-driven assessment and feedback are vital for student performance. There can of course be too much testing as well as too little. There are indications that Australian parents welcome both the diagnostic information about their child and the school performance data provided by NAPLAN, but there is constant debate.

The United States and Israel have reduced the amount of testing and, as we have seen, Singapore is following suit from 2019. The problem is not so much the frequency of testing as such: the dilemma is that assessments often do double duty, partly as formative assessment for each student but also as high-stakes performance indicators for each school.

It follows that the frequency of assessments should depend on a judicious appraisal of the evidence, so it is extraordinary that Gonski proposed a new and

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It is extraordinary that Gonski proposed a new and more elaborate formative assessment tool based on no evidence at all.



more elaborate formative assessment tool based on no evidence at all. This new tool would switch from NAPLAN's measurement of *achievement* to measuring a student's learning progression, or *growth*.

There is not a shred of evidence that the rigidity of curriculum delivery is the major explanation of low academic performance and that assessment geared to more flexible learning progressions will fix the problem. Gonski 2.0 nowhere poses, let alone answers, the question why many Asian and European countries operate a traditional curriculum based on year-by-year assessment, yet score in the top 10 on the 2015 PISA.

Putting 'snapshot' *achievement* data online is one thing. Assessment of *growth*, or learning progressions, for the entire curriculum is quite another. Having it useable by teachers is yet another. Assessment scales can be hard to interpret: if Year 5 students in one school score 50 scale points below students in another school, this means very little to most teachers or parents.

Comparisons are further complicated because assessment scales are non-linear: in general, students show greater increases in scores in earlier rather than later years of schooling. Comparing the relative progress of different groups of students can be misleading unless we know the starting point for each group.

There are ways to solve these technical issues. It has become standard in the research literature to measure student progress by converting assessment scores to equivalent *years of progress*. The Grattan Institute has used this technique with NAPLAN data, but a glance at the technical calculations demonstrates that this is indeed a research tool.¹¹ Its interpretation needs more statistical finesse than the average school teacher or parent is likely to possess. And, like most statistical calculations, it works well when we compare groups, whereas measurement errors limit its applicability to individual students.

The Gonski vision of teachers arriving in the classroom and jumping nimbly online to look up curriculum-wide "achievement data calibrated against

learning progressions, to diagnose a student's current level of knowledge, skill and understanding, [and] to identify the next steps in learning to achieve the next stage in growth", has good entertainment value. It is, for the most part, fantasy.

It goes without saying that a student who is not academically gifted but who is doing his/her damndest to make progress needs to be encouraged and supported. This is quite different from substituting progress for objective attainment standards across the entire system. Learning progressions can be characterised as a proposal to supplant objective standards of attainment with the notion of the personal best.

Nowhere in the report is there any recognition of the paradox that a focus on relative progress can worsen measured performance. Relative measures can lead you not to expect enough of your students by accepting a ceiling on achievement that is far below what is possible. Low expectations then become self-fulfilling.

Learning progressions can be characterised as a proposal to supplant objective standards of attainment with the notion of the personal best.

Gonski 2.0 has unwittingly revealed that most State departments of education remain “devoted to education fads long since discarded in other countries”.

Salvaging the wreckage

So where does the Government go from here? A further lengthy inquiry is probably not the answer. Perhaps we could seek world's best-practice by holding a competition. That sounds flippant, but the marketing slogan writes itself: "We sought the world's best for the architecture of the Opera House and got one of the great buildings of the 20th century; now we want the best educational architecture for the new century".

One vital issue needs to be considered in any future review of the allocation of school funding. Gonski 2.0 seems to have depended heavily on submissions from the State departments of education, with many of its proposals apparently originating in the State administrations. It is entirely proper that State thinking should figure prominently, but the problem lies in what is revealed about that thinking.

As Hewett has noted, Gonski 2.0 has unwittingly revealed that most State departments of education remain “devoted to education fads long since discarded in other countries”.¹² Proposals for general capabilities, learning progressions and a new system

of formative assessment all appear to be based on State submissions.

This is where the single, best recommendation from Gonski 2.0 comes in. A research and evidence institute to provide practical advice for teachers, school leaders and decision makers to drive better practice should be implemented as urgently as possible. It should be at the national level.

It is clear from the report that we cannot rely on State-based administrations to develop the necessary policies for evidence-based performance improvement. At State level, only the NSW Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation 'has form'. The model could be the Productivity Commission in Canberra, whose recommendations are not always accepted but which has a reputation for analytical, evidence-based work.

Finally, barely tackled in the Review is the question of how we actually deliver programs for performance improvement. It's clear from the core performance factors that improvements must be made at the school level, with a focus on teachers and pedagogy. That much is obvious, but there is an arithmetic 'wrinkle'.

In 2017 there were some 282,000

full-time equivalent teachers in Australia. Annual entry into the profession varies, but between 2016 and 2017 an additional 5,600 were employed. Improvement in teaching methods, such as adaptive instruction or phonics for reading, will be painfully slow if we rely on changes to what is taught in pre-service teacher education. Without major investment in professional development for existing teachers, it will take many years for proven better ways of teaching to percolate through the system.

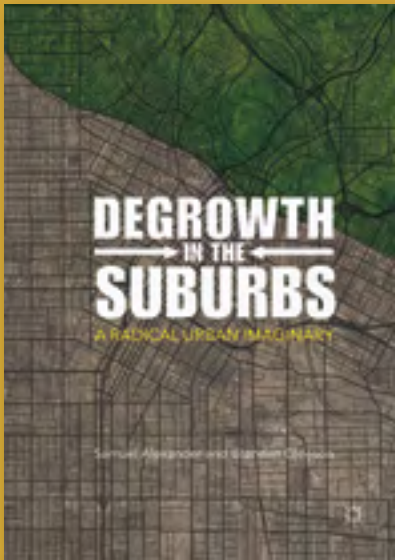
Australia already offers a wide variety of professional development courses, but survey evidence indicates that Australian teachers are less likely than teachers elsewhere to report favourably on the classroom benefits. From the variety of courses offered, it seems likely that much professional development in Australia lacks focus and has little relevance to the core business of performance-oriented classroom teaching.

An important element of the additional expenditure promised by Canberra should be a reform of professional development, making such development the umbrella for updating existing teachers on adaptive instruction, collaboration with colleagues, the importance of cognitive skills, phonics, classroom management, and inculcating evidence-based approaches. ^{ACQ}



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Ken Gannicott was previously Professor of Education at Wollongong University. He now works as a consultant and has undertaken many international assignments. An economist by training, he has long been interested in relationships between funding and outcomes in education. He remains optimistic that in Australia we will learn that simply increasing public money for education will do nothing to improve our deplorable performance record. We have to take an evidence-based view of value for money.



Interested in reading more about the theory of 'degrowth'?

Sam Alexander contributed to AQ's 2018 Special Edition on Post-Capitalism. You can still purchase digital versions of the Special Edition through Zinio or PocketMags

www.aips.net.au/aq-magazine/subscribe

DEGROWTH IN THE SUBURBS: A RADICAL URBAN IMAGINARY IS AVAILABLE NOW THROUGH PALGRAVE MACMILLAN AS A HARDCOVER OR EBOOK:

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ISBN 978-981-13-2130-6

Degrowth in the Suburbs: A Radical Urban Imaginary

BY DR SAMUEL ALEXANDER AND PROF BRENDAN GLEESON

REVIEW BY: DR AMANDA MCLEOD

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There is a sense of urgency within the pages of *Degrowth in the Suburbs: A Radical Urban Imaginary* – as well there should. Capitalism and its enthusiastic bedfellow, neoliberalism, have failed to deliver the good life. Global warming, climate change, global poverty and deforestation are not problems of future imaginings. They are here now and if we are to survive, let alone prosper, we must deal with them. At its tipping point, climate change becomes a 'wicked problem', a crisis that can no longer be mitigated but must be adapted to. This book provides a comprehensive blueprint for change.

In their critique of the growth economy, the writers do not seek to move away from the city and its suburbs to live an idyllic life on the land. The solution to the problem of overproduction, for Alexander and Gleeson, is not to be found in the regions or in rural locales. Rather, this beautifully written manifesto offers a forward-looking solution to the problem – a reform, if you like, of the place where most of us live: suburbia.

The answer to the problem of overconsumption and unfettered growth is 'degrowth' – a planned contraction of overgrown economies.

Evocative and eloquent are not words usually associated with economic writing. Woven within its almost lyrical prose, *Degrowth in the Suburbs* offers a serious critique of neoliberalism and the growth economy. It does more than just provide a critique. This book is an invitation to rethink, rework and redo the suburbs. This book does not just tell us what to do but also tells us how to do it. It debunks 'techno-optimism' – the belief that technology will solve all energy and environmental problems. Alternatively, Alexander and Gleeson argue for a low-carbon city, based on 'degrowth, solidarity, and sufficiency'.

This book is far from pessimistic about the future. Nor is it naively optimistic. Rather, one of its major strengths is that it is firmly rooted in reality. The book claims to be an imaginary, but it offers solid and practical measures to counter the failings of the growth economy. It is imaginary in its vision – a reworked suburbia that has moved away from the growth model of accumulation to one of inclusion, liberation and sustainability.

The book covers the practical side of degrowth as well as its philosophical underpinnings. It aims to make sufficiency – the politics of enough – central to the transformation of cities. The solution will not be top-down, though it needs political will to support it. The solution to the failings of the growth economy will be bottom up. It will come from the people who call the suburbs home.

The messages contained in this book will not be easy to adopt but they are certainly worth pursuing. *Degrowth in the Suburbs* is an important book and one that should be read by anyone who wants to live lightly, purposefully and prosperously. Politicians and any other proponents of neoliberalism should read it too. It will change minds.

In order to change the system the authors encourage us to 'raise hell'. This is precisely what they have done in this book and what we should do too. **AQ**

Technology at the crossroads



IMAGE: © Keiichi matsuda

Engineers pride ourselves on solving problems. But what happens when we don't know the questions? We are great at minimising one cost function, and maximising another. But what if those are the wrong functions to measure?

As our technologies change society, these dilemmas make us consider our values, ethical frameworks, and the design methodologies that can genuinely decrease harm and increase wellbeing.

ARTICLE BY: **PROF RAFAEL A. CALVO AND JOHN C. HAVENS**

The Good Life At Risk

The board room was already full when I walked in. Someone walked out to get an extra chair while I heard the round of introductions. I knew most of the academics in the room, but did not know much about their interest in the fourth industrial revolution or in engineering ethics, the theme of our meeting.

Technologies were reshaping the concept of what constitutes a good life. They were redefining work, basic emotions, and even volition.

The specific goal of the meeting was to prepare a response to Australia's Human Rights Commissioner, who was seeking comments on their human rights and technology issues paper.¹ Technologies, like the ones we were about to discuss, impinge on our perceived rights², for example around privacy, free speech, workplace technologies and government surveillance.

Not everyone talked. Some were probably asked to be there by their managers, but the majority felt a sense of urgency uncommon in academics. Most of us explained what brought us there. There was a manufacturing researcher who explained how 3D printing was being taken to an industrial level and they could not predict

what manufacturing would look like in 10 years.

Then there was a biomedical engineer who described how brain stimulation could be used to suppress the excretion of adrenaline and therefore suppress the fear response that stops soldiers from going into a battlefield (the same emotion that many of us were feeling).

Then it was my turn to describe how social networks have been used by companies and governments to manipulate the attention of people like us, both pushing their commercial and political agendas. How companies like Cambridge Analytica were risking the core democratic values of the enlightenment.

In all these cases, technologies were reshaping the concept of what constitutes a good life. They were redefining work, basic emotions, and even volition. These are not 'academic' questions, they have daily consequences to citizens, and to engineers like us.

Technologies are designed to shape what we spend time on, and the outcome was that we spent one billion human hours watching Youtube videos in 2017, millions of hours sharing selfies and making lip-sync videos on musical.ly. Technologies are transforming, or altogether eliminating jobs (according to some, 800M jobs will disappear by 2030³).

No human activity is safe from disruption: even caring for others could

How far should we go?



IMAGE: © Gerd Leonhard-Flickr



be the purview of robots (consider that in Japan 80% of the elderly will be taken care of by robots – in 2020⁴).

As reflective professionals and engineers we should be asking, is this the sort of world we want?

I think the academic who called the meeting, a world leader in robotics, did not expect the general sense of unease many of us had. He told the story of a public panel where he discussed his vision for the future, together with a journalist and a philosopher. At the beginning of the event the host asked the audience how many thought that AI would make the world a better place. Roughly ½ raised their hands. An hour into the event, when the three speakers had presented their arguments they asked again. This time only twenty percent raised their hands.

My colleague thought it had been his fault – a poor presentation of the benefits. But I was there and knew he had done an excellent job presenting his views. Could it be that it was not him, but us, (engineers in general) who do not have a compelling description of ‘the good life’? Could it be that our vision of what technology can provide did no longer satisfy people’s ideas of what they want?

As technologies become part of our lives, their implicit values (including that of their designers) raise moral dilemmas. Should technology be designed to drive us away from pain and towards

the hedonic pleasures offered by the market economy? Or should they be designed to support what Aristotle called the *eudaimonic* life, where the good life consists of achieving potentials?

When I (Rafael) wrote *Positive computing: Technologies for wellbeing and human flourishing*, we could already see technologies having positive and negative effects on the human psyche. We discussed a new discipline of how technologies could (and should) be designed to support psychological wellbeing. That is still the case.

Design engineers cannot leave to chance the unintended impact of technologies. In the same way that we design products to be safe and respect our physical health, we need to design them so they respect our psychological health, and that of our environment.

Engineers are often stereotyped as naïve technophiles. Of course some are, but the actual perspectives of most engineers do not reflect this attitude. Colleagues from around the world are expressing their concerns, questioning long-standing ideas, and raising alarms.

In such situations it may seem easy to despair, but we can also find strength in numbers with a growing awareness that emerging technologies require a new level of due diligence to protect and increase the wellbeing of humanity at large.

What has become increasingly clear is that the definitions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are more complicated than we could expect. Anyone only looking at today’s media would think that moral norms vary amongst age groups, political parties, even genders. So what are the universal values that should drive our technology design?

Reframing Design in the Age of The Algorithm

One way to answer this question is through open, multidisciplinary and multistakeholder debate. This is what the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE) have been doing since 2016 in relation to the ethics of autonomous and intelligent systems.

IEEE is the largest professional organisation of its kind. Over 420,000 engineers from 160 countries are members who go to IEEE conferences, participate in forums, read (and write) articles in its many journals.

The IEEE Global Initiative on Ethics of

Anyone only looking at today’s media would think that moral norms vary amongst age groups, political parties, even genders. So what are the universal values that should drive our technology design?



Should guidelines be narrow and strict, bordering regulations, or should they be broad and an instrument for critical thinking?

Ethically Aligned Design Version 1

You can download Ethically Aligned Design version 1 at [HTTP://BIT.LY/EADV1](http://bit.ly/EADV1)⁷

You can also see an overview of the document at [HTTP://BIT.LY/EADV1-SUMMARY](http://bit.ly/EADV1-SUMMARY)⁸

Ethically Aligned Design Version 2

You can download Ethically Aligned Design Version 2 at [HTTP://BIT.LY/EADV2](http://bit.ly/EADV2)⁹

You can also see an overview of the document at [HTTP://BIT.LY/EADV2-SUMMARY](http://bit.ly/EADV2-SUMMARY)¹⁰

Autonomous and Intelligent Systems⁵ (AVIS) was launched in April of 2016 to move beyond paranoia, or the uncritical admiration, of autonomous and intelligent technologies. Its goal is to align technology development and use with ethical values, advancing innovation in a way that truly serves humanity while diminishing fear in the process.

The IEEE Global Initiative also aims to incorporate ethical aspects and values relating to human well-being in ways that may not automatically be considered in the current design and manufacture of A/IS technologies.

This is why the Mission Statement of The IEEE Global Initiative is, “to ensure every stakeholder involved in the design and development of autonomous and intelligent systems is educated, trained, and empowered to prioritize ethical considerations so that these technologies are advanced for the benefit of humanity.”

By training all engineers or manufacturers to utilise applied ethical frameworks (or what is often called, “values-based design”) before projects are sent to be developed, progress will not be measured only in terms of materialistic criteria but can include the intentional prioritisation of individual, community, and societal flourishing as measured by both subjective and objective criteria.

The discussions of the IEEE Global Initiative and the IEEE P7000™ Standards Working Groups that it inspired,⁶ are open to the public or any experts who

wish to join. In this process entrepreneurs, psychologists, sociologists and philosophers are sharing their expertise with other engineers, data scientists and engineering stakeholders moving the overall work from ‘principles to practice’.

The IEEE Global Initiative has several outputs including the creation and iteration of a body of work known as *Ethically Aligned Design: A Vision for Prioritizing Human Well-Being with Autonomous and Intelligent Systems* and the identification of multidimensional indicators of wellbeing. *Ethically Aligned Design* (EAD) is a Creative Commons document so any organisation can utilise it as an immediate and pragmatic resource.

Version 1 was released in 2016; Version 2 was released in 2017; both versions were released as Requests for Input and received over five hundred pages of aggregate feedback. *Ethically Aligned Design, First Edition* will be released in early 2019 and will feature over one hundred top A/IS Issues and pragmatic Recommendations.

It was created by over three hundred global experts in A/IS and another seven hundred Initiative members were able to review it so that EAD can be the ‘go-to’ resource to help technologists and policy makers prioritise ethical considerations in A/IS.

Of course, the IEEE is not alone. Other initiatives include the Ada Lovelace

IMAGE: © Cdbrice00-wiki

Institute, The Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence, The Future of Humanity Institute, the AI Now Research Institute, and many more.

Companies are also acknowledging some of the issues: John Giannandrea (who leads AI at Apple), Mustafa Suleyman (co-founder of DeepMind), Satya Nadella CEO of Microsoft have, for example, acknowledged the risk of bias in AI systems.

Achieving consensus about what are the important issues is hard. Achieving consensus on how to address them would seem impossible. Even the form that guidelines should take is controversial. Our work in IEEE has seen many heated discussions. Should guidelines be narrow and strict, bordering regulations, or should they be broad and an instrument for critical thinking?

Multiple approaches are probably needed. For example, the IEEE has also established the Ethics Certification Program for Autonomous and Intelligent Systems (ECPAIS)¹¹ dealing with transparency, accountability and reduction of algorithmic bias.

Some groups are top down, with a small group of 'experts' (who may



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consult the public) producing their own reports and research. Some are industry based, others more academic. Consumer or civil society groups are also joining the fray, including The European Consumer Organisation (BEUC) and AlgorithmWatch.

The Good Life, Reengineered

Engineers, and those designing technologies, need to move beyond the traditional method of design to deal with the new realities facing humans in the algorithmic age. And we are beginning that critical work. We are working with others across disciplinary, cultural and political boundaries.

The engineering community, through IEEE and other professional organisations, will continue to develop these guidelines in consultation with the broader community. The development of such guidelines will have impact in at least two areas: education and professional standards.

It is expected that these guidelines will be used in engineering curricula worldwide, and by other professional organisations. This will affect what we expect from future graduates and the way they go about their work. Another way of influencing professional practices is through the certification of AI systems (similar to the ISO quality standards accreditation), an initiative that IEEE will be developing in 2019.

And we are not naïve: these discussions may lead to regulation that limits what the major tech companies, those that shape our lives, can do. But we are at a crossroads, and such transformation will need a new social contract.

Society is struggling to decide which way to go, and with a renewed focus on defining risk as the elements that keep us from realising our values or full potential, engineers can help minimise risk and increase wellbeing for the future. [AQ](#)



IMAGE: © ITU Pictures-Flickr



Young people, political knowledge and the future of Australian democracy

Recently, Western Australian Greens Senator, Jordon Steele-John, introduced a bill to Federal Parliament that proposed voluntary voting rights be granted to Australians aged 16 and 17. This has prompted a flurry of debate about whether or not a 16-year-old is ready for this responsibility.

ARTICLE BY: **DR ZAREH GHAZARIAN AND DR JACQUELINE LAUGHLAND-BOOY**

Yet irrespective of the age at which they are able to vote, a young person must understand the Australian system of politics and its electoral system to be prepared to confidently participate in the democratic process. The current problem is that many young Australians may not possess such knowledge.

In 1973, the voting age in Australia was lowered from 21 to 18. The decision to reduce the age of franchise received

IMAGE: © Takver-Flickr

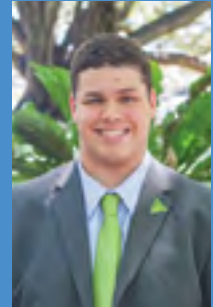


What is the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment

(Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation)
Bill 2018?

THIS BILL PROPOSES TO:

- 1) Lower the minimum (non-compulsory) voting age in Australian federal elections and referenda from 18 to 16 years
- 2) Allow 14 and 15 year olds to be added to the electoral roll
- 3) Provide for 16 and 17 year olds to be included in the certified list of voters (but not to be given a penalty notice if they do not vote)
- 4) Enable an eligible voter, who is not yet on the electoral roll or enrolled at their correct address, to cast a provisional vote on election day.



RIGHT: Western Australian Greens Senator, Jordon Steele-John.

IMAGE © Australian Greens

bipartisan support and reflected the broad mood of the electorate. The arguments at the time centred around the fact that 18 year olds were able to drive, marry, work, pay taxes, and serve in the armed forces, so should therefore have a say in who was running the country.¹

Those who supported lowering the voting age to 18 also presented young Australians as being quantifiably different from previous generations. As Opposition Leader Billy Snedden put it, young Australians in the 1970s were 'better informed, better able to judge, more confident in their judgements, more critical in their appraisals, and on more mature terms with society around them.'²

Current day supporters of further reducing the voting age in Australia have argued that today's 16 and 17 year olds are politically literate. They are, after all, 'digital natives', who have a vast source of political information at their fingertips. It is also thought that it is better to politically engage citizens when they are younger.³ The family and educational networks young people also have at this time of their life, help 'socialise them into the practice of voting at elections'.⁴ This means that young people could be given extra support whilst engaging with the electoral process for the first time.

Proponents for change also argue that lowering the voting age is the

tonic to cure a sense of alienation some young people experience with politics. If the voting age were lowered then parties will make greater efforts to advance the interests of younger Australians.

There is, however, reason to be cautious. Research suggests that 16-year-old Australians are unlikely to be politically informed. There is also evidence pointing to the possibility that lowering the voting age would not necessarily increase political participation of young people.⁵ For example, international experience reminds us that inconsistencies across jurisdictions and schools in preparing young people to vote may result in

In 1973, the voting age in Australia was lowered from 21 to 18.

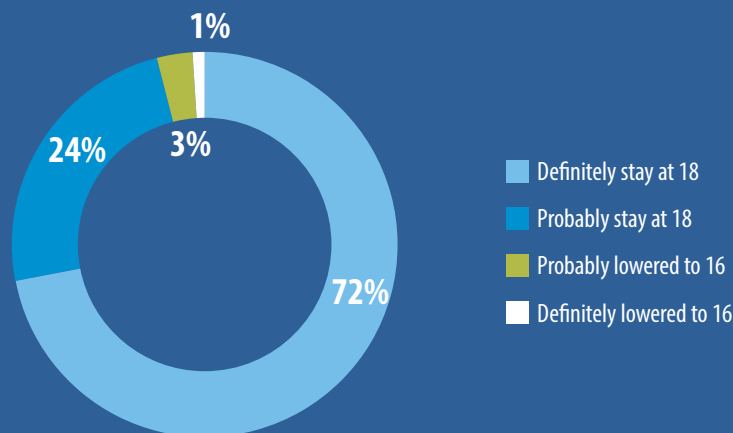
Young people themselves are also less than enthusiastic about allowing 16 year olds the right to vote.

Do young people think the voting age should be lowered?

The Social Futures and Life Pathways Project is an ongoing longitudinal study of young people from Queensland, Australia.¹⁶ Also known as 'Our Lives', it is following a single aged cohort of young Australians as they progress from adolescence and into adulthood. The project commenced in 2006 when the cohort were 12–13 years old and were in their first year of secondary school. To date, six waves of quantitative data collection have been completed with the most recent survey being carried out in 2017.

In 2013, the Our Lives cohort were aged 18-19 years old and were voting at their first federal election. At this time, the Wave 4 Our Lives survey was administered to the group. One question asked of the cohort was whether they thought the voting age should be lowered from 18 to 16.

As their responses indicate, irrespective of education, background, or political affiliation the overwhelming majority felt that the voting age should stay at 18.



SOURCE: Our Lives Wave 4, 2013. Percentage of Our Lives participants who thought the voting age should stay at 18 or be lowered to 16 (n=2,173).

patchy participation rates.⁶ Young people themselves are also less than enthusiastic about allowing 16 year olds the right to vote.

Critics have also argued that those under 18 do not have the experience to be able to make an informed political choice. For some commentators, the fact that many young people lived with their parents and had yet to take on the responsibilities of adulthood was grounds to keep the voting age at 18.⁷

Further concerns about the legislation extend to its potential to undermine compulsory voting, which was introduced for federal elections in 1924.⁸ Rather than rely on the Australian Electoral Commission, a statutory authority, to get people out to vote, parties and candidates would have to find ways to mobilise voters under 18.

While this in itself is not problematic, it has the potential to shift campaigning methods towards modes seen in the USA or other systems that use non-compulsory voting. Parties would therefore have to balance the policy demands of the broader electorate with targeting the population of younger voters.

There is also a view that the Greens and Labor stand to benefit from a lowering of the voting age.⁹ This is predicated on the assumption that young voters tend to be more socially progressive and would support left-of-centre candidates. The evidence,

however, suggests otherwise. In our research on the voting strategies of first time voters in Australia, we found that many weigh up the suite of proposals before deciding whom to vote for, including economic, welfare and social policies. In doing so, the voting choices of young people broadly replicated the voting patterns of the electorate.¹⁰

Irrespective of whether or not the voting age is lowered, more needs to be done to prepare our young people for the responsibility of voting.

While family is an important source of political socialisation, the job of ensuring that young people have the functional knowledge they need to confidently participate in the electoral process lies with the schooling system. This is the best place to provide all young Australians access to accurate information about how the system works and to provide the knowledge they need to be empowered citizens.

Civics and citizenship education in Australian schools

As Australia is a federation, states are responsible for administering education. This has meant that

teaching young people about civics and citizenship has varied across the states. It is within this context that successive national governments have sought to equip young Australians with

The assumption that young voters tend to be more socially progressive and would support left-of-centre candidates.

The evidence, however, suggests otherwise.

knowledge about their civic rights and responsibilities since the 1980s.

One of the most significant attempts to implement a national approach to building political literacy was made by the Keating Government in 1994. Following consultations with the community and educators, the Civics Expert Group outlined its findings in a report handed to the government. Amongst the recommendations, the report proposed that all young people receive civics education throughout the compulsory years of schooling.¹¹

Although the Keating Government welcomed the report it could not fully act on its recommendations as it lost the 1996 election. The incoming Howard-led Coalition, however, also had a desire to increase the political literacy of young Australians. In 1998, the government introduced the





There is currently no compulsory national civics and citizenship curriculum for Year 11 and 12 students. Instead, students must enrol in an elective unit such as Legal Studies or Australian Politics (if they are offered by their school), in their final years of high school if they wish to learn more about their national system of politics and government.

Discovering Democracy program, which implemented many of the themes identified by the Civics Expert Group report including teaching young people the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, as well as how the Australian system of politics and government was structured.

More recently, the goal of preparing young Australians to be active and informed citizens was incorporated into the redesigned national curriculum. Known as the *Australian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship*, this was introduced during the time of the Gillard

A democracy operates best when its citizens **understand their nation’s system of government and its democratic processes.**

Government. It seeks to provide educators with tools to teach young Australians about democracy and civic participation.

Currently, the civics and citizenship curriculum begins in Year 3 by providing students with a broad introduction to values and principles. The program continues in each year level through primary and secondary schools and concludes in Year 10. By that stage students are expected to have a more nuanced understanding of how the parliamentary and judicial systems work as well as how they may participate in democratic processes.¹²

Since 2004, the National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship (NAP-CC) has sampled Year 6 and Year 10 students every three years in order to measure their knowledge about subjects including Australian government and democratic processes. The test identifies the percentage of students who achieve the proficient

standard, which is a point on a scale that represents what has been deemed as a challenging, but reasonable, expectation of student achievement for their year level.¹³ The most recent NAP-CC tests were carried out in 2016.

The 2016 results show that the proficiency rate for Year 6 students has consistently been over 50 per cent and rose to its highest rate of 55 per cent in the latest round. The results for Year 10 students, however, has been more volatile and has never reached 50 per cent. The strongest result was in 2010 when 49 per cent of Year 10 students reached the proficiency level, but since then the results have fallen. The 2016 Year 10 performance was the lowest on record at just 38 per cent.

This is a concerning result as it shows that young Australians who are approaching voting age may not have the functional knowledge to confidently participate in Australian democratic processes.

Year	Year 6 percentage of students at or above proficiency standard	Year 10 percentage of students at or above proficiency standard
2004	50%	39%
2007	53%	42%
2010	52%	49%
2013	52%	44%
2016	55%	38%

TABLE 1: Year 6 and Year 10 achievement on the National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship¹⁴

IMAGE: © Madeleine Holland - Flickr

The strength of Australian democracy therefore lies in whether or not the Australian citizenry understands how the political system works, rather than the voting age.



The future of Australian democracy

The question of whether individuals possess sufficient knowledge about politics and government to participate effectively in the electoral process is an important issue in advanced liberal democracies. According to normative theory, a democracy operates best when its citizens understand their nation's system of government and its democratic processes.

Those with higher levels of political literacy are better able to understand how decisions are made, better equipped to select candidates that advance their aspirations, and have the capacity to make sense of the political debate. Moreover, citizens who know how a political system is structured and functions are better able to hold decision makers accountable and cast their vote with confidence.¹⁵

The strength of Australian democracy therefore lies in whether or not the Australian citizenry understands how the political system works, rather than the voting age.

There have been concerted efforts by state and national governments to provide Australians with political knowledge, especially through the education system. The fact that the states have retained the constitutional power over the realm of education, however, has meant that national

programs have often lacked uniformity as states have implemented reforms at different rates and times.

The ending of the compulsory civics and citizenship curriculum at Year 10 is also limiting what young Australians know about their rights and responsibilities. While they do encounter many core themes in early years of schooling, students need to consolidate this knowledge prior to leaving secondary school. Opportunities exist to do so.

Many schools run life skills classes for students in Year 11 and 12, where they are taught about issues such as resilience, safe consumption of alcohol, and reproductive health. Within this framework, short courses could be delivered to refresh and crystallise


young people's understanding of Australian politics and government. This would provide greater confidence to school leavers about their civic rights and responsibilities.

In sum, conversations about a person's capacity to vote responsibly in Australia should not just be about age. It should be about knowledge. The only way young people will ever be able to contribute to the Australian democratic process is if they are provided with the knowledge and skills to do so confidently. [AQ](#)



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LOUISE TARRANT

The distortion of the Australian public sphere

Australia stands out as one of the most concentrated media markets in the world and this increasing concentration has been happening for some time. Media and journalism play a vital role in supplying the public sphere with the fuel it needs: information that is in the public interest in order for citizens to be self-governing. And as is being seen in Australia and elsewhere, when the media options narrow, then the sensible political centre is readily abandoned for the partisan fringe. So what can (and should) be done? Well, it's not rocket science...

JOHAN LIDBERG

Gonski 2.0: A controlled flight into terrain

The Review that led to the Gonski 2.0 report was established with everything in working order. It had just one job, which was to provide advice on how funding should be used to improve student achievement. It was in the blissful position of not needing to argue the case for extra funding because \$24.5 billion had already been committed. David Gonski enjoyed enviable public esteem. And there is now an extensive literature, drawing on evidence from high-performing countries, on the policies required for improved educational performance.

What, as they say, could possibly go wrong?

KEN GANNICOTT

Young people, political knowledge and the future of Australian democracy

Once again the question of voting age has been raised in public discussion. In a world of disenfranchised voters and disillusioned citizens, have we been failing to provide our children with a civics education that engages them with the system?

In which case the question becomes, not whether 16-year-olds should be allowed to vote, but is our society doing enough to prepare them to vote?

ZAREH GHAZARIAN AND JACQUELINE LAUGHLAND-BOOÏ

