Executive Summary

In partnership with the Australian Human Rights Commission and Meta, the Online Hate Prevention Institute undertook an 18-month project investigating the Australian context of anti-Asian Hate in social media and placing this within the broader picture of anti-Asian racism in Australian society. The research was carried out during 2020 and 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic and builds on the Online Hate Prevention Institute's previous work presented to the Victorian Parliament earlier in the pandemic.[1]

Anti-Asian racism is not a new phenomenon. In Australia it can be traced all way back to the earlier 1800s. There is both a base level of anti-Asian racism, and regular peaks as anti-Asian racism is stirred up by events, politicians, and the media. The Scanlon Foundation's Mapping Social Cohesion research, prior to Covid, indicated 13%-14% of Australians hold negative views of Asians, while 83%-86% of Australians support multiculturalism as being good for Australia. The Asian Australian Alliance noted how "anger and blame for the virus being wholly placed on anyone who looked Chinese/Asian, led to a rise in incidents of anti-Asian racism".[2] They recorded 541 incidents of anti-Asian racism in Australia between April 02, 2020 and June 28 2021.

This report builds on this past work, adding a particular focus on racism in social media. The new in-depth research was led by the Online Hate Prevention Institute in partnership with the Australian Human Rights Commission and Meta. The research used a mixed methods approach involving online data collection from Facebook and Instagram, a survey, and a consultation with leaders from Asian Australian communities around Australia. The report makes 45 recommendations to tackle the problem of online anti-Asian racism. Some recommendations are general to the problem of online hate, others are more specific and aim to help correctly identify anti-Asian racism.

From our survey we learn that the media and social media played a significant and dominant role in people's experiences of anti-Asian racism during the pandemic. The Internet allowed racism to spread further, faster, and be facilitated by anonymity. A perceived lack of consequence for online racism was believed to have removed the inhibitions against racism in the online world compared to other settings. In our focus group expressed their concerns over a lack of transparency in online moderation, a lack of confidence in moderators, and a concern about a clash of values between Australian expectations against racism and a possible American prioritisation of free speech, even when it is racist.

Among the more popular media and social media platforms, we observed a clear division in experiences of racism between two group of platforms. Lower levels of racism were experienced on WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Much higher levels of racism were experienced with online newspapers, TV News, and Facebook. The *Digital News Report: Australia 2022* highlights how

---

[1] Andre Oboler, Mark Civitella, David Wishart, "Online Vilification and Coronavirus", 17 June 2020, https://parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/lsic-LA/Inquiry_into_Anti-Vilification_Protections_/Submissions/Supplementary_submissions/038_2020.06.17_-_Online_Hate_Prevention_Institute_Redacted.pdf

[2] Asian Australian Alliance and Osmond Chiu, *Covid-19 Racism Incident Report Survey Comprehensive Report 2021 (2021),* Asian Australian Alliance, p. 5. https://asianaustralianalliance.net/covid-19-racism-incident-report-survey-comprehensive-report-2021/

19% of Australian (and 46% of Gen Z) use social media as their primary source of news and that Facebook is by far the most popular social media platform both overall and in absolute terms as a source of news. The fact experiences of racism on Facebook are more similarity to those with mainstream media than to other popular platforms suggests encounters with news content on Facebook are significantly contributing to the experiences of racism. Data on Twitter further supports this idea with Twitter being used even more regularly by its users for news content, and those on Twitter are experiencing racism even more frequently than users on Facebook.

Our research examined whether the problem with news content was "above the line" that is the content from journalists or those sharing news articles, or whether the problem was below the line in comments replying to news postings. The results indicate slightly more racism in the comments, but a problem both above the line and below it. We also found that while racism often / very often came from online trolls (52% of participants), anonymous (or effectively anonymous) users (38%), and then from politicians (32%) and the media / media personalities (32%). There was a view in our consultation that the "media perpetuates the problem" and that "it is difficult to hold them accountable".

We collected 182 items of anti-Asian hate from Facebook and Instagram. The data was classified into a schema for anti-Asian racism created as part of this project. The two most common themes were demonising / dehumanising Asians (37%) and attacking Asians because of their culture (37%). In our survey demonising and dehumanising content was the most common type of anti-Asian hate people reported seeing often or very often (reported by 54% of respondents), but other types were also reported as being encountered often or very often. The survey responses and the focus group feedback validated the schema we proposed in this report as a useful tool for categorising anti-Asian hate.

While research from before COVID-19 suggested the negative attention of the media was mostly focused on Muslims, with only a limited focus on Asians, this changed during the pandemic. Similarly on social media we observed groups dedicated to hate, including against Muslims, suddenly shift focus to anti-Asian hate.

A significant proportion of the racist content we observed on Facebook and Instagram was in the form of racist memes. More needs to be done to remove such content and to educate users that racist memes are against policy. Users also need to be made aware that posting a racist meme, while indicating that it is not intended seriously, does not make it acceptable. The report examined a number of these memes and the racist messages they promote. A significant part of this report is a presentation and analysis of the examples, grouped and categorised using the schema.

In our discussion section we explore a number of ways to help improve the online environment. Some are specific to anti-Asian hate, and some will be of wider impacted helping with the problem of hate speech in general. They include:

- **How to separate legitimate criticism of political parties, governments, and government policies from vilification of people**. Taking an international law approach, we note that once speech crosses the line into "incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence" against people on the basis of their nationality or ethnicity, it entirely loses its protection as free speech. One should not seek to balance the perceived value of the political criticism against the harm it may cause people.

- **How communities can effectively use counter speech to challenge racist comments.** We recommend rejecting specific examples of hate speech, exposing hate speech with public education, encouraging action on hate speech such as reporting, using petitions and articles effectively, and promoting positive cultural content.
- **How to better tackle the problem of managing racist comments on social media**. We propose a new approach that would see page owner act as the first line of defence in reviewing comments on the posts they make. Those that allow racist comments would lose the ability to post the sort of content that then attracts those comments. Safeguards are suggested to protect smaller organisations from being shut down through targeted attacks that exceed their moderation ability.
- **How to respond to disinformation**. We explore the problem of disinformation and its role in stirring up racism. We propose a notification system so those who have engaged with disinformation can be notified once the content is identified as false.
- **How to tackle serious and serial abuses on social media.** We explore actions platforms and governments can take together to tackle the worst offenders. Our ideas would require law reform in both Australia and the United States to bring online safety regulation out of the 1980s and make it fit for use in today's digital world.
- **How online racism should be regulated in Australia**. We consider who should regulate online racism in Australia and how, given the nature of state and federal law, and potentially overlapping responsibility of different regulators and government authorities.