

Building communiTEA resilience: combatting transmission infrastructure misinformation one tea at a time

Misinformation undermines community support for our transmission infrastructure buildout, which is essential to achieve our renewable targets.



Transmission infrastructure will be the backbone of Australia's energy transition. To achieve our target of 82% renewable energy in the National Electricity Market, Australia will need an additional 4,000km of transmission lines by 2030, and 10,000km by 2050 (AEMO (2022)). Australia is projected to fall behind by 1,200km by 2030 (Hutchinson (2023)) – and we cannot afford to fall further behind, with each year of delay costing Australia \$12.5B. Misinformation threatens to further delay or derail our critical transmission infrastructure buildout.

Box: This is Jo from the rural community of Nudgeville.

- Jo feels overwhelmed with the volume of conflicting information that she has been hearing about the proposed renewable transmission buildout.
- Jo does not know what to believe, but wants to ensure that her community's concerns are understood.
- Like over 77% of Australians, Jo is a firm believer in climate change, and supports strong action (Bradley et al (2022)).



Our behavioural solution will focus on people like Jo who:

- Have a strong pro-social or community orientation, and share a strong sense of regional identity.
- Do not intend to spread misinformation, and support climate action.
- Can be made more resilient to misinformation under the appropriate settings.

To address misinformation in communities impacted by transmission buildouts, we must empower them to overcome three key behavioural challenges.

1. **Social norms and messenger bias:** Jo's peers from Nudgeville post misinformation on Facebook about the risks of transmission lines. Jo is biased towards these views.
2. **Cognitive overload:** Jo is bombarded with conflicting messages and is not well equipped with the skills needed to wade through this complexity. (Ecker et. al. (2022); Weijers et al. (2020))
3. **Affect heuristic:** Jo is biased towards accepting the more sensationalist information of misinformative posts on Facebook (e.g., photos of infrastructure 'breaking, burning and falling') (Slovic et al., (2005); Simon (2022)).

Our solution empowers leaders to reduce misinformation in their communities (with tea and other strategies) to address challenges.

Box: A story of leader-led change

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the rise of a new movement: law and economics. But economists faced a challenge, they struggled to share economics with legal practitioners. To overcome this, they established a 2-week program (the Manne Economics Institute for Federal Judges). Starting in 1976, the program involved an all-expenses-paid conference. At the conference, leading economists (including past Nobel prize winners) taught federal judges about economics. Attendees spanned the political spectrum, including both Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Clarence Thomas. The program had a striking impact, influencing attendees' judgements for decades. (Ash, Chen, Naidu (2022)).

The scale of the impact generated by Manne demonstrated that leaders offer the point of maximal leverage to effect change. Indeed, reframing the misinformation problem as a leadership problem uncovers a new set of potential interventions. In this spirit, our solution consists of four key steps:

1. **Select:** Citizens hear about the retreat and apply. Leaders (respected in community) are selected for the retreat.
2. **Attend:** Leaders attend the retreat.
3. **Facilitate (over tea):** Leaders facilitate tea workshops. They equip people with pre-bunking and debunking strategies. Participants can share their concerns, which the leader can pass onto the program coordinator.

4. **Implement (with tea):** Community members implement strategies (e.g., pausing for tea – allowing ‘System 2’ to come to the fore, discussing fact-checking strategies over tea).

Collectively, this program addresses the three aforementioned behavioural challenges. Social norms and messenger bias is addressed by ensuring the message comes from a trusted leader. Cognitive overload and the affect heuristic are addressed by encouraging people to pause (for tea).

Community leaders are drawn to the program through a suite of nudges; at the retreat, they learn how to identify misinformation and become climate leaders.

Leaders are drawn to the CommuniTEA Leadership Program because of three key reasons. First, a desire to develop social status – the retreat would be presented as highly prestigious, with a robust selection process, additionally, attendee lists would be published, making clear who will be attending (Vigneron and Johnson (1999)). Second, **loss aversion** – the awareness campaign for the program would highlight the scarcity of places and evocatively describe the retreat highlights and opportunities (Kahneman, Tversky (1992)). Third, an intrinsic motivation to create change – the awareness campaign would frame the retreat as opportunity to make a profound difference on local communities and would evoke a sense of community responsibility for leaders (Kreps (1997)). In Australia, transformational approaches to leadership have been proven to enhance social cohesiveness within communities, and grow community resilience (Madsen & O’Mullan (2014)).

At the retreat, leaders would undertake a robust curriculum that would empower them to provide genuine climate leadership to their community. While we would suggest testing the curriculum with educators and potential leaders, the retreat could cover questions such as: What is the climate transition and why is it important? Why are regional communities particularly important? What is preventing a good and fair transition? How can leaders bring the transition back on track? and: What is misinformation and why is it important? What are some strategies to ensure communities appropriately respond to misinformation?

Leaders facilitate a workshop to share insights; people like Jo benefit by learning pre-bunking and debunking strategies (like pausing for tea).

Pre-bunking strategies include: Cultivating a critical/sceptical mindset; slowing down (with a TEA); considering the source; and verifying claims. (Lewandowsky et al. (2020)) Debunking strategies include: starting with a simple, clear fact; describing the misinformation; explaining fallacies in the misinformation; and finishing with a relevant fact. (Lewandowsky et al. (2020))

These strategies would deliver: Improved information reception due to familiarity and credibility of leader; greater engagement as the discussion remains relevant to the local context and values around transmission lines; and ongoing use of critical evaluation strategies over a cup of tea.

The workshop and the ongoing behaviour from Jo will use three key nudges. First, by responding to the **social norms** created around actively challenging misinformation (Gimpel et al. (2021)), second by responding to a trusted **messenger** of factual information (Byerly et al. (2018)), and third by creating **salience** around potential misinformation related to transmission lines and associating it with a cue to engage in **Systems 2** thinking (Pennycook et al., (2020); Sunstein (2016)).

The program will deliver robust outcomes and three key benefits:

1. **Builds enduring capability to combat misinformation.** By equipping communities with the skills needed to combat misinformation, citizens are empowered to deal with future misinformation.
2. **Is genuinely consultative and build community trust.** The tea workshops invite citizens to share their concerns with their workshop leader, ensuring that their concerns are heard by a trusted facilitator.
3. **Is cost-effective, with an outsized impact.** While only a small number of leaders need to be selected and trained, the impact of the program is amplified by equipping entire communities with (virtually) costless strategies to combat misinformation.