The Australian Curriculum gambit: Playing knowledge games with education policy

Abstract

The Australian Curriculum, and therefore the Australian education system, continues to be a site of contestation and review. The Australian Curriculum has become dominated by third parties playing knowledge games with the document to win elections. This paper draws on ongoing research into political knowledge games in educational policy making in the ongoing debates about History and Civics and Citizenship Education (CCE) in the Australian Curriculum. The actions undertaken by various politicians via an analysis of social media activity. The findings indicate that the development of curriculum, which is something that should be undertaken via a democratic process that privileges community engagement and consensus, is at risk of being subverted by these actors through ideology-borrowing, laundering and acquisition. The paper will conclude with a discussion of what teachers and traditional advocacy groups should be concerned with in an age where curriculum is determined by social media.

1. Introduction

Educational policy has always been political, but in recent years, both within Australia and internationally, that debate has become increasingly inflamed by the populist manoeuvres of ideological entrepreneurs. In the United States of America, for example, the issues of mask mandates (see Dean et al., 2021) and critical race theory (CRT) (Filimon & Ivănescu, 2023) divide parents, policy-makers and educators. In Australia, there have been persistent divisive arguments about the nature of school funding (Cranston et al., 2010), the role of universities in teacher training (Mayer, 2014), and the value of phonics instruction in teaching children to read (AUTHOR XXX). While the implementation of policy might continue to provide challenges for both state and federal governments, the pace of policy creation is accelerating as policy becomes increasingly globalised (Peck & Theodore, 2015). In addition to being more rapid, there are rising numbers of actors seeking to influence policy, often in public or semi-public spaces, largely due to the ubiquity of technology and social media. This means that ideological entrepreneurs (Finlayson, 2021), multinational organisations and 'think tanks' are working harder and more openly to influence educational policy, alongside politicians and other more traditional political actors (Lingard, 2016).

This paper explores the way various actors have played 'strategic knowledge games' to 'will to power' (Foucault, 2007) influence over one particular site of policy: the Australian Curriculum. It examines pieces, counters, dice and pawns of these knowledge games that resulted in a government intervention into the review of the Australian Curriculum by federal education ministers Alan Tudge and Stuart Roberts, and Senator Pauline Hanson. One of the key gameboards was the Internet where connections were made between education debates in the United States and Australia. We looked

specifically at the subjectivities connected to the social media posts of Sky News Australia that related to education. These posts were analysed to identify how key figures manipulated education discourses to win a political game – the 2022 Australian election.

The analysis found that globalised and mediatised policy actors engaged in a political gambit to reframe education politics and policy using three game strategies to manipulate educational policy reform discourses. In the first instance, there is evidence of an *ideology borrowing* strategy; that is, political actors adopt ideological standpoints from other settings and jurisdictions, including overseas, if they anticipate it becoming a mechanism by which to generate influence and therefore power. This leads to deploying a form of *ideological acquisition*; which, although giving the appearance of ideological neutrality, engages in the development of networks with compatible foundational assumptions in regards the purpose and aim of education to gain influence and power. Whilst their actions give the impression of a "band-wagon" type politic, these actors leverage the influence of others with compatible ideological perspectives in a way to generate the greatest influence. The final aspect is *ideology-laundering*, or the process by which localised culturally unacceptable ideology is laundered through various acceptable channels until it becomes more amenable to the policy it is informing. What was evident from these strategies was a bastardisation of what Hayek (2007) describes in his 1944 neoliberal roadmap *The Road to Serfdom* – the use of simple metaphors that reflect tradition to explain complex processes. These techniques make up a broader strategy used by political actors hoping to 'will to power' an election win.

In this work we sought to answer the following research question: *How did a knowledge games gambit concerned with Critical Race Theory in the United States influence the development of educational policy in Australia?*

2.0 The CRT gambit

The increasing use of social media channels by politicians, and their desire to be seen as 'influencers' in this medium means that a political actor can show an idea is popular. Demonstrations of popularity means that politicians can wield power in a democratic system of government and, in the case of our study, policy and curriculum development. Possibly the most successful online gambits is the War on Woke (Davies & McRae, 2023), one aspect of which, the attack on Critical Race Theory, contextualises our own study. The success being that the online strategy has successfully made its way into the news media and traditional commentary in the UK, especially around trans rights, CRT has been banned from the National Curriculum in Australia, and significant laws are being passed in some US states that severely limit past gains in human rights due to the combined effect of gender critical and anti-CRT commentary.

2.1 Rufo's CRT gambit

The notion of critical race theory (CRT) (Crenshawe et al., 1995), and especially its role within schools has been a focus of right-wing politics in the USA for a lengthy period of time. The Obama administration was criticised in cohort with the theory but that gambit was largely unsuccessful. Most recently, ideological entrepreneur Christopher Rufo, from the Manhattan Institute (an Atlas network think tank based in the US), began raising concerns about the 'woke' agenda of CRT. He published a number of articles beginning in June 2020, about diversity training in corporate settings, such as 'When "Diversity Training" Is All About Feeding Racism' (Rufo, 2020) wherein he

criticises the adoption of CRT and its use in corporate training and development. However, perhaps due to not finding much traction, Rufo refined his strategy. Firstly, he changed his focus to schools, and then especially to parental challenges to issues of race within schools. It is when Rufo happened upon this combination of parental worry about their children within a political sphere that had just witnessed protests in the United States by the Black Lives Matter movement after Eric Garner was killed by a police officer, that suddenly he garnered a lot more interest. Furthermore, the change in tactic happened in January 2021 at the same time as the storming of the Capitol. Into this political tinder box, Rufo launched his most successful knowledge games gambit.

Rufo's gambit began with a video posted by the Manhattan Institute on 19 February 2021, entitled 'Parent Led Challenge to CRT' had more than 48,000 views, 1700 likes and 551 comments as at 13 December 2021. Previously, the highest number of views he had received was 153, for an article entitled 'Woke Elementary', published on 13 January 2021 (See Figure 1).

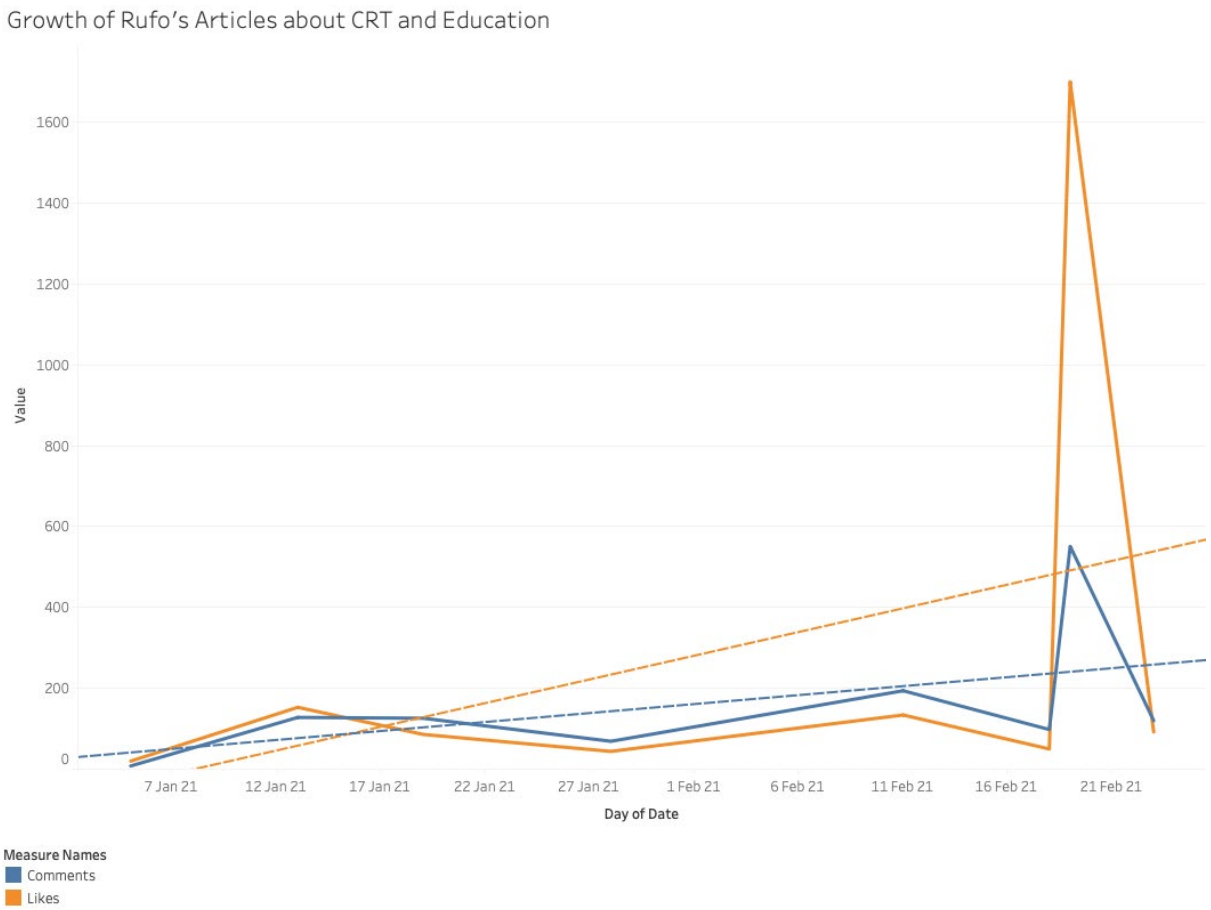

Figure 1. The virality of Rufo's opinion pieces about CRT. Increased virality in February 2021 when he linked CRT to schools

Rufo's gambit was also highly manufactured. Unlike what Davies and McRae (2023) noted in the UK about the combination of gender critical commentary and CRT being more rhetorically effective, Rufo was more successful in getting traction when shifting the rhetoric from 'woke' to CRT. The gambit was also deliberately deceptive and strategic. Rufo connected CRT to so-called 'white racism' and the inclusivity movement in schooling.

Schooling and CRT have been connected since the theory's inception, born out of the desegregation of schools in the US via *Brown versus The Board of Education*. CRT theorist Derrick Bell was interested in why the desegregation of schools resulted in the development of the school choice

movement. Bell's theory focused on understanding why social systems, like schools, do not automatically prevent experiences of being racist, even if the law prevents the humans and policies in those systems from being racist. So CRT is about inclusivity and Rufo would have been very strategic in making that connection but his purpose was still to deceive. On 21 March 2021, Rufo tweeted the now deleted statements that still exist quite extensively online:

> 'I am quite intentionally redefining what "critical race theory" means in the public mind, expanding it as a catchall for the new racial orthodoxy. People won't read Derrick Bell, but when their kid is labelled an "oppressor" in first grade, that's now CRT.

Rufo's success has meant that politicians around the US, UK and in our case, Australia, have played knowledge games with CRT and changed tactics in a policy development moment to include it in their framing.

3. Knowledge games

Knowledge games is a framework that draws on both Foucault (2007) and Hayek's (2007) discussion of subjectivity. The unlikely marriage of these two theorists was proposed by Pennington (2023) who examined the synergies between Foucault's and Hayek's theories to understand the health advice during the COVID19 pandemic. We apply similar thinking to the subjective strategies employed by Australian politicians and US ideological entrepreneurs in 2021 educational discourses. The reason we see value in drawing upon Hayek as well as Foucault is that many of the actors in our analysis are connected to the Atlas network of neoliberal think tanks who proudly associate their organisations with Hayek, Friedman and other key influencers of the socio-economic theory. As such, the strategies that are part of Hayek's framework can be extrapolated to the strategies we noted in our analysis. The synergies with Foucault come from his lectures on biopolitics (2008) and security (2007) that have often been criticised for being too closely related to and supportive of neoliberalism. While this condemnation has been critiqued as unwarranted due to the unfinished nature of his theorising (Zamora & Behrent, 2016), Foucault's raw assessment of the socio-economic theory is quite useful for adapting Foucauldian analytical tools to the contemporary highly mediated globalised world.

Foucault and Hayek's theorisation of subjectivity challenges the human tendency to connect significance to a historical event. For example, scholarship in the future will most likely connect changes and continuities in the political sphere to the COVID19 pandemic. This is a natural tendency according to both theorists, and one easily made in our own analysis. What a framework of knowledge games does, is to acknowledge that it is impossible to fully blame one significant event for contemporary outcomes. There are too many variables connected to what a Foucauldian might term an 'aggregation of individual decisions' (Pennington, 2023 p. 128). Hayek, on the other hand, looks at the same problem but strategically. He sees the 'human mind as a classification system that interprets the external world through culturally acquired rules' (Pennington, 2023 p. 128) and those rules are best understood when connected to traditions. In other words, people are more likely to make decisions based on traditional cultural tropes and those tropes can make the decision easier to make and more predictable giving what Foucault would term 'spontaneous order' to all the aggregated individual decisions. In other words, humans subjectively determine that an event like the pandemic is the reason for an outcome giving it a 'totalising power-knowledge claim' (Hayek 1978; cf Pennington, 2023 p. 129).

So knowledge games are the games those seeking power play to gain power and the strategies are the decisions players make to manipulate subjectivities and win said power. Foucault's characterisation of significant events being due to the accidents of individual decision making has been adapted and adopted by 21st Century players, some of whom are the subjects of our analysis below. This is not the first time a theorist who is often adopted by left wing researchers has been adopted by conservative strategists. For example, Tugal (2020) describes conservative actors use of Leninist strategy to infiltrate the government institutions. Numerous political commentators (see for example Blum, 2020) have discussed this in relation to rising dominance of the Tea Party faction in the US Republican Party. In the case of Foucault, Slobodian (2023, p. 187) characterises this adaptation of traditionally left-wing theory of historical subjectivity by right wing actors as 'how could such historical accidents be made to happen again?'

In the following sub-sections we consider the elements of the knowledge game that made up the strategy under scrutiny in this paper.

3.1 Fast Policy and ideology borrowing

Many who consider the global mobility of policy tend to draw on Peck and Theodore's (2015) fast policy conceptualisation. This concept considers how an increasingly globalised world, porous policy-making borders and international influences have become a key feature of policy making. It is through fast policy that the first of the knowledge game strategies is arrived at: 'ideology-borrowing'; this refers to the way that various 'models' or plans transition from one jurisdiction to the next. In educational policy, this is apparent between countries like the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Australia (amongst others). A good example of this is the governmental support for programs like Teach for America (TFA). TFA has become TeachFirst in the United Kingdom, and Teach for Australia in Australia. Policy borrowing is most closely related to education ideas that have a global audience who want to know "what works" in the classroom, effectively borrowing ideas across nations with minimal thought of how it might be different in a different context. However, we are not analysing policy, but politics. So our focus is on ideological borrowing or the mobility of an ideological idea – opposition to Critical Race Theory. This means focusing on the core elements of political communication, framing and political actors.

3.2 Political framing and ideology laundering

Ideology laundering is not a new technique because it is a form of political framing. Indeed political framing is arguably the strongest analytical tradition in communication sociology (López-Rabadán, 2022). This field is concerned with how political institutions frame the issues, usually with the knowledge that the media will respond to that framing in predictable ways. Political framing is important during a crisis. It can aid good decision-making when circumstances are confusing, but oversimplification can lead to political actors missing important factors in said decision-making (Shelley, 2021). Shelley (2021) explains how political framing is frequently used by political actors to simplify complex ideas 'in order to orient themselves in the political world and aid their decision-making…putting emphasis on certain aspects of the social world…and de-emphasizing others' (p. 458). When one framing is not gaining political traction, political actors will endeavour to use one of the alternatives to rework the issue in a way that attracts more attention from the citizenry. Political framing is a rhetorical technique used by political actors to give themselves most traction. What we

mean when we use the term *ideology laundering* is that the outcome of an issue being continuously repositioned is to make that idea more palatable to a civic population. The *Overton Window* is usually considered when discussing how a libertarian organisation shifts the thinking of a polity to the political right (though it would technically apply to the political left as well) (see AUTHOR XXX), and this research fits within that trend; however, we must remember that in the reframing, the political actors may not be intentionally laundering, rather experimenting with the civic populace to find the most effective framing. Social media is one communicative site where this type of experimentation happens.

3.3 Ideological entrepreneurs and ideological acquisition

First noted by Dardot and Laval (2013) when they explained how the political left has been seduced by neoliberalism, the ideological entrepreneur riffs on the idea of an intellectual entrepreneur. It refers to writers, academics and intellectuals who use their platform, often a media platform, to enter the marketplace of ideas, with the intention of earning a living from public intellectualism. Social media, blogging and expert media appearances have turned many of these public intellectuals into influencers. The intellectual entrepreneurs are successful because they understand how arguments network nationally, but also transnationally, and they make appearances across multiple platforms. But public intellectualism is a broad church with some engaged in deep theoretical and complicated discussions (see for example AUTHOR, 2021; Carrigan & Fatsis, 2021), whereas actors are finding success by being unapologetically disruptive to both institutions and ideological norms (Schradie, 2019). For example, Peter Theil, Elon Musk's business partner in the development of PayPal and Trump administration advisor, has been known to pitch the idea of doing away with democracy for the sake of capitalism: 'I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible' (https://www.cato-unbound.org/2009/04/13/peter-thiel/education-libertarian; cf Slobodian 2023 p. 1).

These examples highlight some of the ways in which conservative actors are attempting to transform institutions, history and culture. These actors in effect pull together, or acquire, perspectives from compatible conservative ideological standpoints as a means of gaining greater power through larger networks. An example of the presence of this ideological acquisition has been renewed interest from conservative historians, economists and political scientists to revisit the virtues of colonialism (see for example https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/school-compulsory-lessons-colony-slave-trade-b1807571.html). We have termed this strategy of *ideology acquisition* to mean that the strategy, though appearing to display political flexibility, in fact simply gathers perspectives from similar foundations as a means of gaining power. The political frames will engage with motifs that are so outrageous to the general Western civic populace, like putting an end to democracy, bringing back colonialism and calling anything that goes wrong in school CRT, in order to experiment with the most effective conservative frame to get a reaction from the populace. It is ultimately about utilising different extremes of conservatism as a means of holding voter attention in the most effective way possible.

3.4 The gameboard: 'Old media' and social media

The knowledge games of education are now played on social media. Through the broadening of the ability to produce media; indeed, in the era of smartphones and YouTube, anyone can claim to be a journalist, any organisation can publish their inflammatory, click bait, contradictory political framing in the media regardless of the legacy media's decision to broadcast it (See AUTHORXXX).

Indeed, the modern media landscape, especially as related to the news media, has struggled in the face of an assault from 'new media'. A direct result of this has been that staffing, funding, and readership engagement with old media, and especially print media has drastically reduced. This directly affects education reporting, which has become among the 'top three or four topics' directly covered within the news media (Shine, 2018, p.2). In other words, Education news stories no longer languish in the middle pages of a newspaper. Education news is intensely clickable (AUTHOR XXX). Shine and Rogers (2021) explain that education is an complicated subject, and only becoming more so, yet those reporters who are tasked with writing on it are often young and inexperienced. Waller, in his analysis of the relationship between journalists and their sources, noted that:

> *Journalists were criticised by some participants as lacking adequate knowledge about education generally, not having the time or skill to comprehend academic research and of poor numeracy skills that are necessary to interpret quantitative data on school performance. Poor numeracy among journalists has been documented as a widespread problem internationally, and a barrier to good reporting. (2012 p.6)*

In comparison, social media, as one example of new media, has meant that there are now 'backchannels' or mechanisms by which 'viewers' can become active participants in discussions. Comparing social media discussion with traditional news reporting on PISA 2015 results, Baroutsis and Lingard (2018) noted the wider representation of opinions and voices within the Twitter discussion:

> *In contrast to legacy media, there is more scope for multiple voices on social media. For example, the voices of teacher unions and academics are much more prevalent on social media than in the legacy media coverage of PISA. (p.16)*

In response, newspapers, for example, have rushed to open their own comments sections and provided share links for every conceivable social media platform (Kovic et al, 2016). Other legacy media providers, such as news television programs, have taken to sharing excerpts from their programming via social media sites like Facebook. This allows viewers to leave comments, and indicate their thoughts about the story via emoticons - and their support or disagreement with the arguments presented therein.

While these mechanisms were originally heralded as an opportunity for a democratic flourishing (Fukuyama, 2006, a claim which has since been derided according to Morozov, 2016), the reality is significantly more complex, and has led to concerns about 'clickbaiting' and the siloing of opinion. These currents within the media arena have also had an effect upon how education policy is developed. It is now much easier for respondents to make a contribution to, for example, community consultation mechanisms within the public policy process, if all they need to do is navigate to a webpage and complete a short survey. For organisations that have the capacity to employ researchers or policy consultants, as well as social media managers and similar roles, they are well positioned to seek to influence both the formal (i.e. via a constituted process) formation of policy, and the less formal 'court of public opinion', which increasingly takes place on social media. Thomson and Riddle (2018, p.1) recognise this dichotomy: "It could be argued that social media is an ideal public space, a place where argument happens" - yet the work of social infrastructures, and especially organisations such as those we will discuss in this paper means that this space is ripe for manipulation - and rife with misinformation, too. It is in this environment that the ideological entrepreneur flourishes and experiments with political framing can take place.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Focus

The focus of this research project was the way different actors seek to play knowledge games with the development of educational policy and curriculum in Australia. As described above, the conceptual framework recognises the role of ideological entrepreneurs within the formulation policy development. Our particular interest was communication of that ideology within social media spaces. It should be noted that one of the challenges of studying social media networks lies in defining where the network begins and ends - a decision that is sometimes made by time and computing constraints, rather than any philosophical position. As this is a small-scale study, we made the deliberate choice to limit the scope to one particular Facebook page: Sky News Australia. While small, it does provide enough information to explore ideological mobility interactions between policy actors.

4.2 Ethical Considerations

A second consideration relates to the ethical difficulties involved in examining social media accounts. While there is a case to be made that politicians and media and corporate organisations are public figures and hence their accounts are 'fair game' for researchers (Fuchs, 2018), the same cannot be said for those who follow politicians and those who comment on posts by politicians. Gaining informed consent from these individuals is challenging (Fuchs, 2018) because there might be tens of thousands of such individuals, they might not be readily contactable or identifiable, and they might be distinctly hostile towards researchers and any perceived or attributed agenda of those researchers. While it is possible to seek a waiver of consent due to some of these concerns (National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, 2007), for this project we have limited our research solely to the posts made by Skye News Australia on Facebook and therefore ignored any comments by followers of the pages. In addition, we have examined the statistics related to each of these posts - data such as the type of post (text, link, video), whether there were other participants (and their affiliation) and how many views, likes, shares and comments (as appropriate).

This information was gathered manually. Facebook has strict rules about the use of automated scraping tools for the purpose of harvesting data, and hence we have gathered data in this way to ensure we didn't breach any terms of service. For this reason, and also due to the appropriateness of the posts that were gathered, only small samples were analysed.

5. Disrupting and changing the narrative

5.1. Sky News Australia and its use of Facebook

We'll begin with a brief explanation of Sky News. Sky News Australia is an Australian 24-hour news channel. It became part of News Corp in 2016. It is generally considered to have a conservative bias. Muller (2017) has suggested that it has a 'split personality', with a more objective focus during the day, and then becoming right wing 'punditry' in prime time. Two of its highest

profile commentators, Andrew Bolt and Paul Murray, have been compared to presenters from Fox News like Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity. Muller (2017) has been scathing in his criticism, suggesting that Sky News engages in "the unconstrained peddling of extreme right-wing propaganda, lies, disinformation, crude distortion of fact and baseless assertions..." It is generally critical of Labor governments or policies, while being supportive of conservative politics.

Sky News, despite being nominally a legacy media site, is active in new media spaces, too, especially social media. In general very short excerpts from some of its more polarised television shows are re-packaged and shared via Facebook. This has proven to be very popular: the Sky News Australia Facebook page has 1,193,781 followers (as at Jan 20, 2021) and 866, 286 likers.

For this project, Facebook posts from 2021 that included the word 'education' were manually gathered from the page, and then analysed. There were 31 posts that were analysed in this fashion, of which the vast majority were video clips. We cross-referenced these videos with references to Critical Race Theory (CRT) due to the theory being banned in the Australian Curriculum.

5.2 The Social Media Narrative

So what story does social media tell us? It is clear from our analysis that what took place across Sky News' Facebook posts is a battle of competing narratives and attempts by various political actors to reframe the arguments in a way that suited their interests and allowed them to influence members of the public. The Australian Curriculum was the board upon which this game was played. This became a political object in 2019, when the Coalition government (and the then-Education Minister, Dan Tehan) announced a review of the curriculum. This review was initially framed as decluttering the curriculum (Karp, 2019). At this stage of the review there was no indication that the curriculum needed more than editing.

However, opposition to CRT became a feature of the revision in 2021, the same year as Rufo's online knowledge games. The first group to highlight CRT as a problem with the Australian Curriculum was One Nation, a far-right party. Mark Latham, who appeared on Sky News on 31 March 2021. The Facebook post about this appearance, was entitled 'Mark Latham slams education website teaching "white privilege''' and had (as of 13 December 2021) more than 53,000 views, 646 likes, and 146 comments. This was followed, over the next three months, with another 16 posts about CRT and education. On 21 June 2021 One Nation was able to pass a motion in the Senate that called on the Federal Government to reject any attempt to include CRT in version 9.0 the Australian curriculum. To illustrate the fact that this was less about the nature of curriculum as an educational tool, and more about it as a policy object for knowledge games, it should be noted that there were no plans to include CRT in any version of the Australian Curriculum. In short, Latham's outrage was entirely confected but One Nation was able to use both legacy and social media to reframe debate about the Australian Curriculum to a topic that suited their interests and leverage that power into a legislative outcome. In the months that followed (until 30 November 2021, when the data gathering concluded) education remained a central topic amongst the Sky News Facebook posts.

Alongside various Atlas Group national and international think tank figures and conservative journalists, a number of other politicians were also represented in the Facebook posts. Of interest here is that the then-Federal Education Minister, Alan Tudge made an appearance twelve times. Tudge's appearances are important because they demonstrate an attempt by the Government to recapture the narrative. The Government's reframing included appeals to nationalist ideologies. In his first

appearance, on 30 April 2021, Tudge's comments are quite moderate. He responds to Latham's CRT panic by suggesting that the 'National curriculum needs to "balance" Indigenous history' with Western Heritage history, indicating that the document probably needed to provide more options for learning about significant political figures that shaped Australian identity like Prime Ministers Robert Menzies and Gough Whitlam. However, as the think tank and journalistic commentators and One Nation politicians, continued to promote their concerns about CRT, Tudge's discourse gradually moved closer to those concerns and took on a militaristic turn – a nationalist motif, or as Hayek would say, traditional metaphor, that has been discursively linked to concerns about education since Federation in 1901. The Boer War was considered a 'crisis of Empire' and the intelligence of Australian men was linked to Britain's success in that war (House of Representatives Official Hansard 23 April 1902, p. 11937). Further, Prime Minister Menzies suggested that the failure of men to enlist in the Vietnam War was a failing of the education system because thousands of men were failing the military entrance exam (Queensland Legislative Assembly, 9 December 1964, p. 2262). The linking of war and education was a strong discursive feature in the Cold War as US media ran stories on how clever Russian schoolboys were in comparison to US schoolboys (Wineburg, 2018). Tudge made the same game play as politicians have made for over a century – he shifted his discourse to Australia's risk of war with Russia and China and the draft curriculum risked discouraging young people from defending the country.

On 21 June, Mark Latham said that education was in crisis because of CRT. This post had more than 20 000 views on Facebook. Shortly afterwards, on 23 June, Alan Tudge appeared, in a post titled 'Education minister slams draft national history curriculum'. This post only received 2,300 views, but it was obviously an idea that Tudge felt had some utility, because Tudge returns to the same theme on 19 August ('Education Minister slams draft national curriculum 'ideological'', 3,000 views) and 9 September (''I won't have a bar of it': Tudge slams national curriculum draft', 4,900 views). By 28 October, Tudge had broadened his attack on the draft Australian Curriculum, suggesting that it was not teaching democracy (Parents and teachers want Australian democracy taught, 5400 views). In sum, between 30th April 2021 and 28 October 2021, the then minister for Education had moved his rhetoric from the 'national curriculum is balanced' to the 'national curriculum is undemocratic and needs rejecting' (see Figure 2).

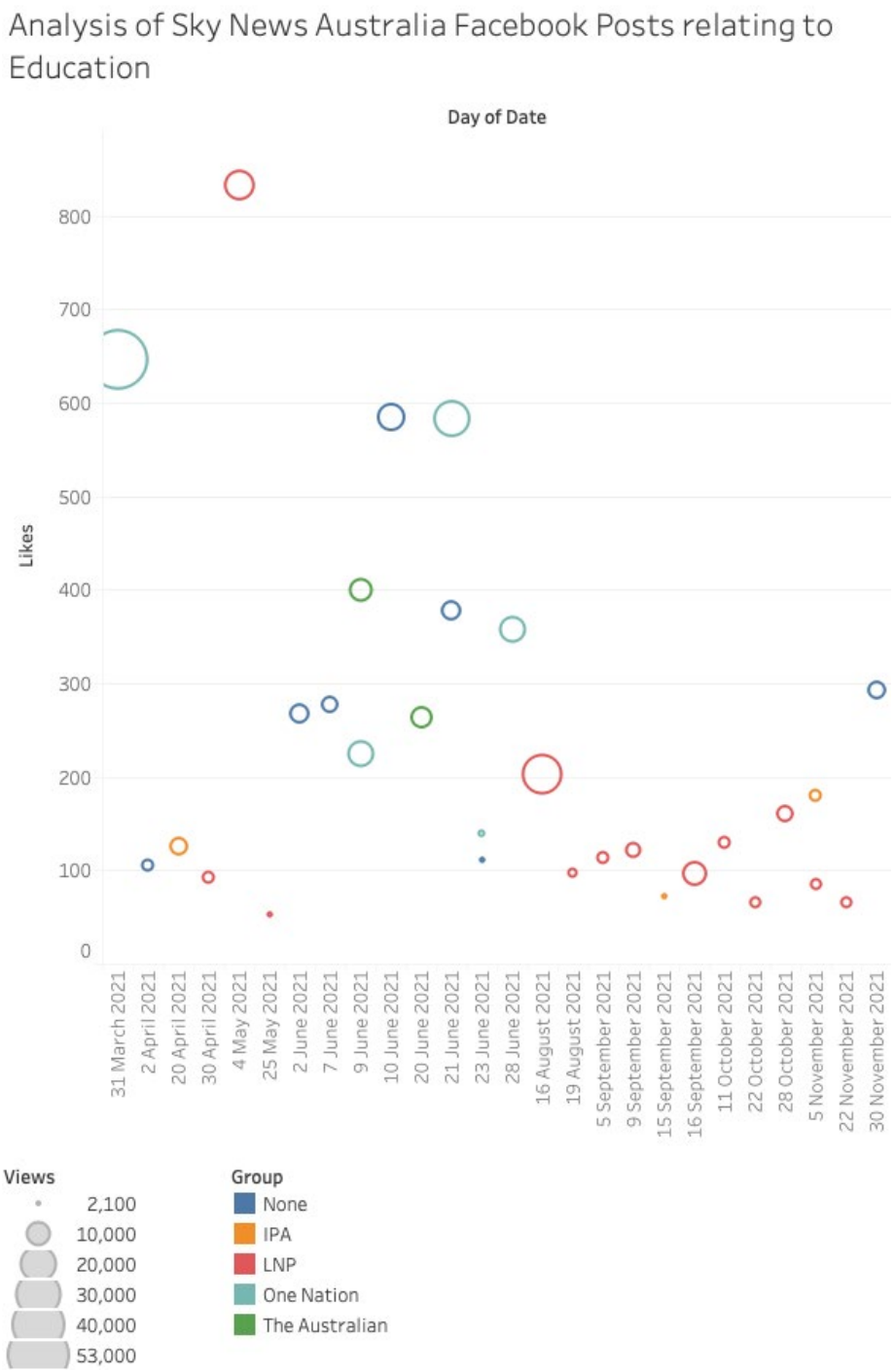

Figure 2. The y axis indicates the 'likes' and the x axis indicates the timeline. It is evident that the LNP's discussion of CRT increased over time after Latham's discussion of CRT in March 2021 went viral

6. Discussion

Of course, there is a difference between Rufo's comments about CRT and the draft Australian Curriculum. Nevertheless, the online enthusiasm (whether supportive or adverse) was difficult for Tudge to dismiss. The desire to seize upon a populist issue in order to gain influence (and shape the

narrative of educational debate in Australia) is evidence that ideological borrowing, laundering and acquisition were knowledge game strategies.

6.1 Ideology-borrowing

As a highly clickable media topic, education has become a useful gameboard for different parties and their supporting apparatuses (Gomendio & Wert, 2023). A key strategy in this knowledge game is to use the curriculum and a metaphor for fixing perceived national concerns. In Australia, both major political parties supported the development of a single national curriculum, a symbolic document more that a practical one in that the States control what is taught in schools. The document has become a productive political tool as different political parties debate what 'in' and what was 'out' of the different subjects and broader curricular documents. However, this also meant that the curriculum, and more broadly the entire school system, became a site of attack for disaffected groups. These attacks in many cases, did not even need to be grounded in fact; rather, actors were seeking to generate political capital by promoting outrage about 'hot-button' topics, such as literacy, race and gender. In order to do so, politicians such as Mark Latham drew from other sites of educational debate. In the case of this research, he borrowed from the USA the talking points and broader policy initiatives relating to CRT - despite the fact that CRT has not, and never did, have a place in the Australian Curriculum.

The purpose of this ideology borrowing is worth considering; it is likely that Latham had no intention whatsoever of actually having a role to play in the Australian Curriculum review; indeed, One Nation (his political party) is far too small to have that influence. However, his rhetoric prompted those who were powerful enough to have to play the knowledge games and strategise how to reframe the debate to traditional successful metaphors such as the discursive link between the military and education.

6.2 Ideology-laundering

The mechanism that shifted a US-centric ideological knowledge game to the Australian Commonwealth Senate is what we have termed ideology laundering. The education minister initially dismissed claim that CRT was int the draft Australian Curriculum by indicating that the document just needed a little more balance by adding in some influential political figures and that it was not relevant in the context of the Australian education landscape. However the traction that One Nation received in Facebook could not be ignored by a political party looking towards the next federal election. In response, Tudge drew on traditional nationalist positions by claiming that the Australian Curriculum had a role to play in ensuring that children were prepared to fight for the country (Urban, 2021). Tudge took a previously unpalatable and confusing knowledge game from the and laundered its discourse until it became more acceptable and understandable to the Australian public. Tudge made it appear as though the Government were taking a stand against CRT by shifting the discourse to more familiar ground – education and the military.

6.3 Ideological acquisition

It is difficult to deny that the social media reactions to Sky News and Latham had an effect upon the Education Minister. One Nation was hardly a threat in terms of vote share to the Government. At first, then, it seems inexplicable that these comments should wield such power as to trigger a rewrite of parts of the Australian Curriculum. However, the fundamental conservative beliefs

behind these actions were ultimately compatible with the Government's ideological perspective. Though giving the appearance of party flexibility, in the way of seemingly moving with the political tides, what this shows is something that we describe as ideological acquisition, the pulling together of palatable ideological beliefs into a form of conservatism that can partner with numerous groups. This phenomenon has been referred to elsewhere as *conservative modernisation* (see Apple, 2012). Tudge's behaviour is just one example of this. The role played by news organisations and other actors who make use of social media are an essential ingredient in prompting this change. In order to retain power, politicians have to retain the attention of the public. In this case, this meant changing Tudge's original position on the curriculum to embrace a more extremely conservative point of view.

Certainly, in the case of Sky News, we were looking at their actions upon the internet, and the way they used their social media sites, and especially Facebook, to promote the comments of Latham and others. The question of whether it is manufactured is more complex; there is no reason to suspect that the followers of Sky News's Facebook page are not real people. This means that the likes and the shares, as reported above, are real, too. However, the argument itself, in this case about CRT, is definitely one that is both manufactured (in that it has no relevance to the Australian education landscape) and deceptive (in that Latham and others are claiming that it does). Finally, it would appear to be a knowledge game or gambit for an electoral win in the federal election. Latham's goal was most likely to increase the leverage of One Nation through dominating the intensely clickable educational debate. He certainly achieved that. Equally, Tudge most likely sought to leverage Latham and Sky New's popularisation of this topic into something that he perceived as a vote-winner for himself. In all of these instances, the curriculum became a hostage to be used to leverage influence, rather than a mechanism for improving education for Australian students.

7. Conclusion

What does political actors playing knowledge games with the Australian curriculum for political gain say about Australian democratic schooling? It suggests that the Australian Curriculum is less about the Australian schools and more a policy object to be used as a weapon in the struggle for power. It suggests that debates about education are not necessarily about education. Politicians care deeply about what children are taught in school but they do not see the curriculum the same way as teachers. Teachers care about the enacted curriculum and politicians are more interested in its symbolism. Through this research we have come to wonder whether teachers actually need to care about the symbolism of what they teach. If so, the nation is moving in a direction of authoritarianism and away from democracy. It is appropriate to discuss what will be included and excluded from school curriculum because a teacher cannot be expected to teach it all. But when the debate turns to nationalist metaphors it means that the discussion is about national identity. This should not be the remit of a reactionary political party like One Nation, but a bipartisan discussion across the political spectrum. Couching this discussion as concern about the curriculum middies that conversation as different groups see education in different ways.

This paper explored the processes that sit behind efforts to influence, in this case, the Australian Curriculum specifically, and education policy more broadly. These processes are generally unseen, and unnoticed by most within education, most notably the teachers themselves, who have to deliver the curriculum. Further work into the knowledge games connected with curriculum development will serve an important function of making transparent those things that are relevant to the functioning of a

productive democracy. As rank-and-file teachers are consistently removed from curriculum and policy development, and powerful ideological entrepreneurs take their place, manufacturing and responding to online political outrage, the ability for teachers to work politically and democratically within the curriculum system diminishes. The tendency of political actors to engage in ideological acquisition with regard and engage in populist debate suggests that curriculum debates are ultimately bound in issues of power, rather than educational outcomes.

If we consider teachers as genuinely 'democracy workers' (AUTHOR 2020; 2022), the ways that democracy is being manipulated, shaped and decided is of interest here. Whilst small in the area of its research site, this paper also suggests that further research into the tripartite concepts of ideology-borrowing, laundering and acquisition. We propose that any consideration, or indeed reconsideration of the way that education policy and curriculum development is handled within Australia must pay heed to these strategies in political knowledge games. This work is also of great stock to those organisations, such as unions, teacher advocacy groups and teacher associations for whom these processes of knowledge games represent direct challenges to their more natural, organic and grassroots advocacy in curriculum contestation. The narrow focus here on the push to ban CRT is but one small illustration of this process in action. Democracy thrives in the presence of clarity and transparency, and through digital means DAT challenges both, as such developing an awareness of this process represents a significant social justice issue.

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