

**ABC Submission to the
Joint Select Committee
on Social Media and
Australian Society**

June 2024



Introduction

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society inquiry into the influence and impacts of social media on Australian society. This submission provides the ABC's perspective on these issues in areas related to the ABC and the Australian media environment.

Australians of all ages have embraced social media platforms as a way to interact with friends and family, and to discover content that interests them. They have come to rely on them as a source of entertainment, information, and news. Unfortunately, the open nature of the platforms means that this can also expose them to mis- and disinformation, as well as harmful content.

The negative effects of social media platforms on mental health, especially among younger users, are difficult to measure. The National Council for Mental Health reported recently that, while there is evidence of increased psychological distress amongst young people (15-24 years of age) over the past 17 years, there isn't clear research-based evidence to suggest digital technology causes distress.¹ Commenting on this, Dr Aliza Werner-Seidler, a senior researcher at the Black Dog Institute, said that data held by the tech companies could help to address this.²

In terms of the impact of social media on society as a whole, a recent literature review in the *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies* found that:

“Social media has profoundly transformed the way individuals communicate, connect, and engage with information. It has played a pivotal role in shaping social behaviour, politics, cultural norms, and activism. However, this transformative power comes with a range of challenges, including privacy concerns, the spread of misinformation, and the potential for negative social consequences.”³

The fact that many Australians prefer to access digital content via social media requires the ABC to be active in such spaces. It cannot cede what has become a public space to mis- and disinformation, and it must ensure that good quality entertainment is available. But in this, it should also be recognised that those whose work involves social media must also face its harmful aspects. Journalists and other ABC employees may be targeted on social media, and the work itself, including moderation, may expose them to distressing content.

For the ABC, any potential negative effects on individuals and Australian society are matters for concern. The ABC actively supports an awareness of mental health issues through its news coverage, documentaries, and special programs. It also strives to bring factual news and information to all Australians and build constructive national conversations around current issues. This content contributes to a robust and healthy democratic society, but only where it can reach audiences and remain clear and undiluted.

The emergence of social media as a channel for news and entertainment has irrevocably changed the Australian media environment. It has brought some benefits and positive changes, but the ABC believes it is important to address these potentially negative effects.

¹ Consultation summary: Digital technologies and youth mental health. National Council for Mental Health, May 2024.

² Ange Lavoipierre and Loretta Florance, “Many blame social media for poor mental health among teenagers, but the science is murky.” ABC News, 2 June 2024.

³ Wani, Zahid Ahmad, Ayesha Bhat, Vartika Vishnoi, Hina Praveen, Naveen H Simon, and Diana Hephzibah. 2024. “Impact of Social Media on Society: A Literature Review”. *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies* 50 (4):320-28. <https://doi.org/10.9734/ajess/2024/v50i41334>.

1. Age verification

The debate around the deployment of age verification systems for online content is important for Australia. While it offers the potential to provide protection to younger audiences against exposure to harmful content, issues of privacy and technical feasibility also need to be considered. The ABC welcomes the Government's commitment to an age assurance trial and believes that the results of this trial should guide policy development in this area.

There is some evidence that age verification can help to limit exposure to harmful content to some degree, and that privacy concerns can also be addressed.⁴ However, the broader debate should also consider the degree to which there is support for safe online spaces and prominence requirements for entertaining and educational children's content.

Currently, the ABC creates and distributes some content for younger audiences via social media, such as stories and explainers related to the *Behind the News* program for schools. This content is aimed at general audiences as part of a media literacy initiative but is also suitable for younger audiences. The ABC does not produce social media content specifically for audiences under 13 years of age, as the majority of social media platforms require users to be at least 13 years old. As a result, ABC Kids uses Facebook and Instagram to reach parents and caregivers. An exception to this is ABC Kids content on YouTube which is published to reach children via the YouTube Kids app. This app does allow younger users and offers parental controls.

The ABC Kids YouTube channel has 96,500 subscribers and the ABC Big Kids YouTube channel for entertainment aimed at 8–12-year-olds has 97,600 subscribers. These channels are important for reaching audiences in the 8–16-year age range, which are a challenge to reach for all media organisations.

It should however be noted that it is not possible for the ABC to monitor the age of users who engage with ABC content on social media platforms. It must instead rely on the platforms to comply with age restrictions and related policies in the jurisdictions where they operate, such as the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) in the United States. The ABC's focus is instead on creating high-quality content and fostering responsible online communities and conversations.

On its own platforms, the ABC provides children's content with a dedicated ABC Kids website, a range of apps, and a dedicated ABC Kids section on ABC iview. These are safe spaces but may be more difficult to discover than content on social media. The ABC has addressed this issue in detail in its submission on the provisions of the Communications Legislation Amendment (Prominence and Anti-siphoning) Bill 2023 in January 2024.⁵

2. Agreements with Meta

The ABC received funding from Meta through commercial arrangements negotiated in the wake of the *Treasury Laws Amendment (News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code) Act 2021*. This deal, combined with revenue from an agreement with Google, enabled the ABC to significantly expand and strengthen its regional news services, including the employment of 60 additional journalists and establishing a presence in 10 new locations.

⁴ ABC News provides background and a survey of the issues in Ange Lavoipierre's article, "How age verification rules for porn and social media could impact millions of Australian adults", published on the ABC News website on 19 June 2024.

⁵ See: [Submissions received by the Committee](#).

The ABC has expressed its disappointment with Meta’s announcement on 1 March 2024 that it would not renew its agreements with Australian news publishers. The ABC has supplied information to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) and the Department of Communications to assist them to provide advice to Government on appropriate next steps.

The loss of this revenue from the Meta deal would create a financial challenge for the ABC that would need to be resolved on a whole-of-ABC basis. Every effort will be made to maintain the regional news positions it created. This position reflects the importance of regional news services, especially in response to the decline of commercial news outlets in regional areas. The problem of local “news deserts” in Australia continues to grow, and the ABC will continue its efforts to address it. The ABC will also continue to work with the Government to address the impacts of Meta’s decision.

To date, the Australian Government has not moved to “designate” Meta under the News Media Bargaining Code. Designation would require it to enter into negotiations with news providers for funding agreements or potentially be subject to mandatory arbitration. The practical impact of designation is uncertain. It could result in a continuation of some funding which the ABC would direct to maintaining critical services. Alternatively, it could prompt Meta to once again block news content on its platforms.⁶ The ABC notes that Meta’s response to the imposition of a new regulatory regime in Canada has been to block access to news on its platforms.

It is important to note that Facebook continues to be a popular platform in Australia and, despite Meta’s claim to the contrary, a source of news for many users.⁷ The University of Canberra’s *2024 Digital News Report Australia* states that 32% of Australians use Facebook for news. It further states that:

“Social media is catching up with TV as a source of news. Although television remains the most popular news source, its popularity declined to 56% (-2pp). Almost half of Australians (49%) use social media to access news, marking a 4-percentage point increase since last year. Nearly two thirds of Gen Z (60%) rely on social media as their main news source, which is a significant increase of 17 percentage points from last year. This year Gen Z’s use of Instagram for news increased by 8pp and the platform is now the top social media platform for news among this generation (34%).”⁸

3. The importance of journalism

Good quality, independent journalism is a cornerstone of democratic societies. It serves to create a more informed citizenry and holds the powerful to account. But its effectiveness in these roles depends on the extent to which it is accessible, and its standing as a source of trustworthy information. There is also a factor of scale: there needs to be enough journalists to report on important events and the decisions in the spheres of government and politics, big business, science and technology, and society and culture.

In its early days, social media became another channel news organisations could use to distribute their content. However, over the past decade, it has also had a corrosive effect on the quality, quantity, reach, and impact of public interest journalism. Commercial news organisations lost

⁶ Meta blocked access to news content on Facebook for a week in February 2021.

⁷ [A statement from Meta](#) on 29 February 2024 said that: “The number of people using Facebook News in Australia and the U.S. has dropped by over 80% last year.

⁸ Park, S., Fisher, C., McGuinness, K., Lee, J., McCallum, K., Cai, X., Chatskin, M., Mardjianto, L. & Yao, P. (2024). *Digital News Report: Australia 2024*. Canberra: News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra.

advertising revenue to social media platforms, making it more difficult for them to sustain news operations. In 2019, the ACCC reported that media businesses, particularly traditional print (now print/online) publishers, had experienced a significant fall in advertising revenue.⁹ In the newspaper sector alone, revenues declined at a compound annual growth rate of 4.4% over the five years to 2023.¹⁰

Social media also disrupted the relationship between news outlets and audiences, introducing foreign and global operators as gatekeepers with the ability to influence what audiences would see. It also became a harmful space for many users, with women journalists among those most targeted with abuse and harassment. This, in turn, has had a “chilling effect” on their participation in public discourse, weakening media freedom and democracy. Beyond this, and perhaps most damaging to society as a whole, social media became a channel for mis- and disinformation.

Mis- and disinformation have the potential to undermine trust in governments, academic and public institutions, and the media. For example, those who believe COVID misinformation have lower levels of trust in doctors, health officials, and other authoritative sources.¹¹ There are two fundamental responses to this problem. One is to prevent the spread of mis- and disinformation. The other is to mitigate its effects. Preventing the spread of mis- and disinformation rests largely in the hands of the platforms themselves, as well as with the governments who may regulate them. Meanwhile, the news media and journalism can play a significant role in reducing its effects.

Recent research shows that: “With some variation across countries and across categories of media outlets, news use increases political knowledge gain, and while it often broadens people's *awareness* of false and misleading claims, it does not increase the likelihood—and in several cases decreases the likelihood—of *believing* misinformation.”¹² Findings such as this underscore the value of the ABC as an independent source of trustworthy news. Further, beyond its primary function as a news source, the ABC's investment in a dedicated fact-checking team and its support for, and engagement with, media literacy initiatives are on target as countermeasures for mis- and disinformation.

For more than a decade, the ABC has operated a dedicated fact-checking team. ABC RMIT Fact Check began with a focus on political fact-checking and expanded its remit over time to look at mis- and disinformation, especially through the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognising this changing focus, the ABC has decided to discontinue the partnership with RMIT and will instead focus on internal verification skills. From 1 July, the new ABC News Verify team will have a sharper focus on user-generated content. The team will be a centre of excellence for open-source intelligence (OSINT) skills at the ABC. ABC News Verify will work on investigations, track misinformation campaigns during times of national significance, including elections, and scale up in times of crisis to support the ABC's 24-hour multiplatform news operation. They will also train ABC journalists and editors to use online verification skills in everyday work practices.

At the same time, the ABC is a member of the Australian Media Literacy Alliance and produces media literacy content for both general audiences and school-aged children.¹³ This content is published to the ABC Education website and includes articles and video items on explaining the

⁹ ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry, 2019.

¹⁰ Newspaper Publishing in Australia. Ibisworld. August 2023.

¹¹ [ACMA report to government on the adequacy of digital platforms' disinformation and news quality measures](#), June 2021.

¹² Altay, S., Nielsen, R. K., & Fletcher, R. (2024). News Can Help! The Impact of News Media and Digital Platforms on Awareness of and Belief in Misinformation. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 29(2), 459-484. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612221148981>

¹³ See: [Australian Media Literacy Alliance](#) and [ABC Education](#).

news, questioning the media, and tips for teachers. These efforts towards improving media literacy are important because it is not possible to verify, or fact check, all claims. By developing the awareness and skills of audiences, the ABC can try to inoculate them against mis- and disinformation.

The ABC's news services and specific efforts around fact-checking and media literacy stand as an important countermeasure against the rising tide of mis- and disinformation. This is further reflected in the fact that the funding the ABC received through the News Media Bargaining Code was primarily directed to adding journalists. This recognises the vital role that journalists play in countering the negative effects of social media.

It should be noted that governments around the world have recognised and responded to the decline of public interest journalism resulting from digital disruption and the impact of social media. In Australia, this has included various subsidies as well as the introduction of the News Media Bargaining Code. The Australian Government continues to explore ways to support the viability of commercial news outlets. In 2023, it launched the News Media Assistance Program (News MAP) to develop a policy framework for government interventions for news and journalism.¹⁴

4. The influence of platforms on exposure to content

The risk that malicious actors will use online and social media services to share false or misleading information, now increasingly generated by AI, in order to manipulate public opinion is widely acknowledged.¹⁵ At the same time, algorithms designed to serve the commercial interests of tech companies deprioritise news content from trustworthy sources, making it more difficult for Australians to find independent and reliable information.¹⁶ Furthermore, the integration of generative AI features in internet search tools (e.g. Google Search, Bing, ChatGPT, Perplexity) are likely to make it even more difficult for Australians to both identify the source of information and determine whether or not it is trustworthy.¹⁷

While major online and social media platforms have signed up to the voluntary Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation to address the spread of false or misleading information on their platforms, the ACMA has urged further improvements to the code by made by digital platforms.¹⁸ Last year the Government engaged in a consultation process on a draft Bill to, amongst other things, strengthen the powers of the ACMA to deal with mis- and disinformation. The ABC made a submission in this process.¹⁹ The ABC understands that the Government intends

¹⁴ News Media Assistance Program (News MAP). <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/media-communications-arts/news-map>

¹⁵ ACCC (2019) Digital platforms inquiry - final report. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.; UNESCO (2023) Guidelines for the governance of digital platforms: safeguarding freedom of expression and access to information through a multi-stakeholder approach. Paris: UNESCO.; World Economic Forum (2024) Global Risk Report 2024. Geneva: World Economic Forum.; European Parliament (16 May 2024) Foreign interference: how Parliament is fighting the threat to EU democracy.

¹⁶ Evershed, N., & Taylor, J. (6 May 2024) 'News on Facebook is dead': memes replace Australian media posts as Meta turns off the tap. The Guardian.; Newman, N. (2024) Journalism, media, and technology trends and predictions 2024. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

¹⁷ Heikkila, M (14 May 2024) What to expect at Google I/O: And why you still can't trust AI search results. Angwin, J., Nelson, A., & Palta, R. (27 February 2024) Seeking Reliable Election Information? Don't Trust AI. Proof.

¹⁸ ACMA (2023) Digital platforms' efforts under the Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation Second report to government. Canberra, Melbourne, Sydney: Australian Government.

¹⁹ <https://www.abc.net.au/about/plans-reports-and-submissions/submissions/abc-submission-on-the-communications-legislation-amendment-comba/103718760>

to make amendments following the consultation process and introduce the Bill to Parliament later this year.

Generally, governments around the world are moving to regulate technology platforms and social media spaces more effectively. For example, the European Union has introduced the Digital Service Act (DSA), the Digital Market Act (DMA) and the Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act). These measures oblige online and social media platforms to actively fight disinformation, ensure transparency in relation to the algorithms used to prioritise content, and warrant online safety.

Content algorithms, and the lack of transparency and consultation around their use, carries considerable risks for media organisations like the ABC. As noted above, the ABC needs to reach audiences via social media to provide important information as well as raise awareness of the Australian content it provides. The ABC's strategy, outlined in its ABC Five-Year Plan 2023–28, makes this a priority. As a result, any restrictions on the ABC's presence across social media platforms would diminish the ABC's ability to connect with audiences. It would also diminish the presence of content with the editorial rigour and oversight that the ABC provides.

The ABC operates a diverse range of social media accounts aligned with its content and services, including ABC iview, ABC listen, ABC News, ABC Kids, triple j, Double J, ABC Classic, ABC Science, ABC Indigenous, ABC Arts, ABC Sydney, ABC Brisbane, ABC Melbourne, ABC Darwin, ABC Adelaide, ABC Perth, ABC Hobart, ABC Sport, Gardening Australia, Landline, Rage, Media Watch and digital-first brands including ABCQueer, ABC Gamer and more. These operate across platforms including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, YouTube Kids, TikTok and X (Twitter).

The purpose of these accounts is to engage Australian audiences on the platforms they prefer and grow awareness, uptake, and frequency of use for the ABC's free and commercial-free products. The use of the platforms recognises that some people in Australia will not use ABC digital products or broadcast channels. It is critical for the ABC to maintain a presence in the lives of these audiences, even if the only interaction is on social media platforms. This is particularly important for emergency and other important community alerts, announcements, and public safety information.

Many of the ABC's social media accounts also deliver unique, high-value content that Australian audiences may otherwise miss. This content includes diverse Australian stories, explainers that give context and analysis to events, and specialist content across genres like the arts, science, religion, history, and health. The accounts also connect Australians to important national events and celebrations, including New Year's Eve, Anzac Day, NAIDOC Week, ABC events such as triple j's Hottest 100, Classic 100, One Night Stand, Mardi Gras, and National Science Week, and with live sport coverage across codes that define Australian life, such as cricket, AFL, NRL, and tennis.

Given the importance of the ABC's ability to reach audiences on social media platforms, the fact that platform operators can limit and disrupt content discovery through algorithm changes creates a significant risk for the free flow of valuable information. The ABC believes its content should be given the best chance to reach the audiences who will find it relevant, useful, and interesting. However, the ABC has noted that Facebook and other platforms have been deprioritising content from news organisations to an increasing extent over the past year.

Meta has made no secret of the fact that it has adjusted the algorithms for content recommendations on both Facebook and Instagram. In early 2024, Meta announced it had changed the Facebook algorithms to favour content that attracted user interactions, such as comments. At the same time, Instagram algorithms were changed to deprioritise content it identified as political

or related to politics.²⁰ Such measures have meant that, across the major platforms, aggregate Facebook traffic to news and media properties has declined by 48%, with traffic from X/Twitter down 27% and Instagram by 10%.²¹

5. Harmful content

The ABC has monitored the rise of harmful content appearing on social media platforms and through other channels, such as email and text messaging. With more people accessing news via social media, the negative effects of such content represent a growing problem in Australia, and one that intersects with the ABC's role and operations in a number of ways.

Misinformation and disinformation are forms of harmful content that threaten the ABC's efforts to help keep Australians informed and engaged in the real issues that shape their world. They introduce false and misleading information that has the potential to sow distrust around fact-based reporting and distort public debate. The ABC works to counter these effects with fact-checking and is currently exploring ways to present its content as verified on different platforms.

Scams based on "imposter content" are one type of harmful content that has a direct impact on the ABC. These scams involve fake content that is presented with the ABC's name and logo often seeks to draw people into transferring money to the scammers. This problem became prominent in 2019 when a woman lost \$670,000 to scammers using ABC-branded stories about Andrew Forrest.²² A subsequent analysis of the notifications received that related to such activities in 2020 identified three main methods in which ABC-branded imposter content was being disseminated:

- 39% of imposter content was disseminated by unknown email addresses impersonating the ABC to an individual's email address. This method became widespread in March 2020. The emails were an example of phishing, a common attack method used by scammers intended to steal information or money from the recipient.
- 11% of imposter content was disseminated via a (usually sponsored) Facebook post. Similar posts also appeared on Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn. This method first became prevalent in April 2019. The posts, while not displaying any ABC branding, was typically worded in such a way to make the user click on it to find out more information. The link loaded a webpage that was often a fabricated news article with ABC branding.
- 9% of imposter content was disseminated via SMS from unknown senders. This method was widespread from August to December 2020. The SMS contained a URL to a webpage that was made to look like a legitimate ABC News site.

The numbers in this analysis were based solely on notifications sent to the ABC, and 33% of all notifications did not specify how the imposter content was received. They nonetheless demonstrate the use of trusted news sources to deceive people and lure them into accessing harmful content. This could work to undermine trust in genuine news sources and damage their reputations.

²⁰ [Continuing our Approach to Political Content on Instagram and Threads](#). Instagram. February 2024.

²¹ Data analytics company Chartbeat using aggregated data from 1930 news and media websites with a high proportion from the United States and Europe.

²² See: [Scam using fake ABC News stories about Andrew Forrest sees woman fleeced of \\$670,000 - ABC News](#), 19 September 2019.

Currently, the only way to address imposter content on social media platforms is to request that the content is removed when it is reported. The effectiveness of this measure depends on how well, and how quickly, platforms respond to such requests.

Harmful content directed at journalists is another area of concern for the ABC. The concerns are set out in the ABC's submission to the Statutory Review of the Online Safety Act 2021 that is currently underway. The submission draws attention to the difficulties the ABC faces in protecting its journalists from online bullying and harassment, including volumetric or "pile-on" attacks. In particular, it notes that, under the Online Safety act as it stands, while the online abuse can be extremely distressing for the subject, it often does not reach the necessary threshold for intervention by the eSafety Commissioner.

It should also be noted that online abuse disproportionately affects journalists who are female, CALD, LGBTQIA+, living with a disability, and/or Indigenous. These individuals are more likely to suffer from online abuse and, consequently, feel pressure to limit their reporting or even leave the industry. For example, an International Women's Media Foundation survey in 2018 found that, globally, one third of female journalists considered leaving the profession due to online abuse.²³

The ABC has employed a social media wellbeing advisor to support staff faced with online abuse. The advisor has created resources that direct staff to appropriate support following online abuse, including psychological debrief options, personal security measures, and where to report offending content for both in-platform and legal assistance. The advisor also works with teams to consider social media safety risks when content is commissioned, and how to manage the risk to staff and talent featured in ABC content.

In response to the rise of harmful content, the ABC believes that social media platforms should do more to ensure that users are safe. This includes reducing the amount of harmful content, improving moderation tools for account users, strengthening user privacy, operating with greater transparency, and promoting content from trustworthy sources like the ABC.

²³ [Attacks and Harassment: The Impact on Female Journalists and Their Reporting](#), 2018.