



**AUSTRALIAN PARENTS  
FOR CLIMATE ACTION**

## Submission to the Murdoch Media Inquiry Bill 2023 Consultation

7 September 2023

Australian Parents for Climate Action  
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Australian Parents for Climate Action represents over 17,000 parents, grandparents and carers from across Australia. We are Australia's leading organisation for parents advocating for a safe climate. Our supporters are from across the political spectrum, across all Australian electorates, and from varied socio-economic positions. We seek non-partisan responses to climate change and its impacts.

We advocate for Australian governments and businesses to take urgent action to cut Australia's carbon emissions to net zero as quickly as possible. We encourage Australia to take a leadership role on the world stage, leading by example and calling for other nations to take the necessary action to protect our children's futures.

For more information, visit [www.ap4ca.org](http://www.ap4ca.org)

This submission was prepared by volunteer Simon Campbell, and has been approved by Nic Seton, Chief Executive Officer of Australian Parents for Climate Action.

## Overview

We thank the Senate for giving us the opportunity to comment on this extremely important bill.

As parents concerned about our children's future, and all having volunteered in the climate change space, we are very conscious of the damage that an unhealthy media landscape can do. This is evidenced by the level of disinformation spread by the largest media companies in the country, the perceived lack of social licence for climate action that successive governments have experienced, and ultimately in the lack of climate action by Australian governments.

We strongly support a review into Australia's media laws with a view to reducing misinformation and disinformation, and restoring trust in science and other research. Only with a healthy media landscape can Australia hope to maintain sensible public discourse, tackle current and future challenges, and make the future bright for our children.

## The critical importance of a healthy media landscape

Public discourse based on quality, unbiased information is a key cornerstone of representative democracies such as ours. Without it we cease to function rationally and decisively, with possibly disastrous consequences.

Central to the provision of quality information is a robust, free and independent press. As put by the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA), free press is "essential in a democracy to hold the powerful to account and to counter lies and disinformation". In addition to this we would add that a robust misinformation-free press is essential to allow society to follow the best evidence on any topic.

As parents, we are concerned about the trajectory of the Australian media landscape, since it will affect the world that our children will live in. Looking to the USA, we can already see some of the dire consequences of a degrading media/information landscape. For example, in the lead-up to the January 6th 2021 attack on the US seat of government, Murdoch's Fox News channel endorsed conspiracy theories saying that the 2020 presidential election was "stolen"<sup>1</sup> – a direct undermining of their democracy.

As a group concerned, and knowledgeable, about the climate crisis, we are acutely aware of the role disinformation has played in delaying climate action over the past decades. It has affected policy decisions at all levels, often leading to decisions diametrically opposed to Australia's environmental and economic interests.<sup>2</sup>

### Australia's media landscape is not healthy

1. It is common knowledge that Australia's media is extremely concentrated in the hands of a few business men, especially for a developed, democratic country:
  - From Reporters Without Borders (RSF):  
*"Two giant firms dominate the media landscape, making Australia's media landscape one of the most concentrated in the world ... News Corp., controlled by the family of Australian-American magnate Rupert Murdoch, is emblematic of the dangers that*

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<sup>1</sup> [Washington Post: Murdoch admits some Fox hosts 'were endorsing' election falsehoods](#)

<sup>2</sup> [The Madhouse Effect: this is how climate denial in Australia and the US compares](#)

*media ownership hyper-concentration pose to media pluralism. The company's Australian subsidiary controls more than two-thirds of the country's leading papers, including The Australian daily, as well as most online news portals.*<sup>3</sup>

2. Australia's standing as a free-press leader in the region has undergone a steep decline – in 2002 Australia was ranked 12th in the World Press Freedom Index, whilst in 2023 we are ranked only 27th. The main reasons behind Australia's low ranking are in the RSF summary on Australia's media landscape:

*"Press freedom is fragile in this island-continent of 26 million people, where ultra-concentration of media ownership, combined with growing official pressure, endanger public-interest journalism."*<sup>4</sup>

3. Journalists increasingly work in a state of fear:

*"[A] staggering 92.5% of media who fear that threats, harassment and intimidation of journalists are on the rise. That is an increase on 88.8% from the 2021 survey."*<sup>5</sup>

4. Misinformation and disinformation is a known scourge:

*"In an era of disinformation and fake news, the role of public interest journalism has become increasingly vital — in sorting out fact from fiction through ethical and accurate reporting and holding power to account."*<sup>6</sup>

5. The Murdoch media empire, NewsCorp, clearly wields too much influence for a democratic country:

*"[Newcorp's] newspaper, radio, pay TV and online news portfolio gives it significant audience reach and huge political sway. In April, former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull labelled the Murdoch media "the most powerful political actor in Australia".*<sup>7</sup>

## **The "Madhouse Effect" – When misinformation undermines society – The climate example:**

- Climate change is a perfect example of how misinformation can undermine a society's ability to act rationally and decisively.
- In a reference to the Greenhouse Effect, the distinguished US climate scientist Professor Michael E. Mann and Tom Toles coined the term "Madhouse Effect" for the title of their book on climate change misinformation.<sup>8</sup>
- As described by Prof. Schlosberg (University of Sydney), the book details how the climate information landscape has been actively distorted:

*"denialists and distortionists have undermined public knowledge, public policy, new economic development opportunities, and the very value of the environment. Climate policy is being built upon alternative facts, fake news, outright lies, PR spin and industry-written talking points."*<sup>9</sup>
- Prof. Schlosberg also points out that the Madhouse Effect is "in full force in Australia".
- The Madhouse Effect is an apt term, since it highlights the fact that Australia has been acting irrationally – making a problem worse despite mountains of scientific evidence on the cause of the problem. Indeed, we are now seeing news headlines that highlight the increasingly 'mad' state we find ourselves in (Figure 1).

<sup>3</sup> [RSF 2023 World Press Freedom Index – Australia Summary](#)

<sup>4</sup> [RSF 2023 World Press Freedom Index – Australia Summary](#)

<sup>5</sup> [2022 MEAA press freedom report](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Truth versus Disinformation Foreword to the 2022 MEAA press freedom report](#)

<sup>7</sup> [What's behind News Corp's new spin on climate change?](#)

<sup>8</sup> [The Madhouse Effect: How Climate Change Denial Is Threatening Our Planet, Destroying Our Politics, and Driving Us Crazy](#)

<sup>9</sup> [The Madhouse Effect: this is how climate denial in Australia and the US compares](#)



**Figure 1:** The remarkable juxtaposition<sup>10</sup> of the effects of climate change and Australia's continuation of making the problem worse by expanding fossil fuel exploitation. This has likely been partly enabled by the "Madhouse Effect" of misinformation in Australia's socio-political landscape. We need to repair the media landscape before the situation becomes even more dangerous (cf. USA/January 6 2021).

- The problem of misinformation is broad and extremely serious, since the effect is to undermine trust in (i) news sources, (ii) science/experts, and (iii) government. As colourfully put by Mann and Toles on the climate situation:

*"There is a fire in the house, almost a literal one. But even as the evidence has become unmistakable, and **even though the alarm has been sounded several times, public policy has been paralyzed**—sometimes from ignorance, sometimes from uncertainty, but often from a campaign of deliberate misinformation."*

*"This is the madhouse of the climate debate. We have followed Alice through the looking glass. White roses here are painted red, and words suddenly mean something different from what they used to mean. **The very language of science itself, of "skepticism" and "evidence," is used in a way opposite of how science really employs it.**"<sup>11</sup>*

### **We don't want our children's future to suffer from the "Madhouse Effect"**

- As parents concerned about the mounting effects of anthropogenic climate change, we are well informed about the science of global warming. The information we rely on comes from trusted sources, with roots in climate science research: The IPCC, NASA, IEA, UN, CSIRO, BOM and Australian climate scientists, for example.
- So when we see climate misinformation in the media it really stands out to us. Newscorp outlets have been particularly bad for many decades (and is still at it, see Figures 3a, 3b).

<sup>10</sup> [SBS News: "After Australia's warmest winter on record, the government approves more coal mining"](#)

<sup>11</sup> [The Madhouse Effect: How Climate Change Denial Is Threatening Our Planet, Destroying Our Politics, and Driving Us Crazy](#)



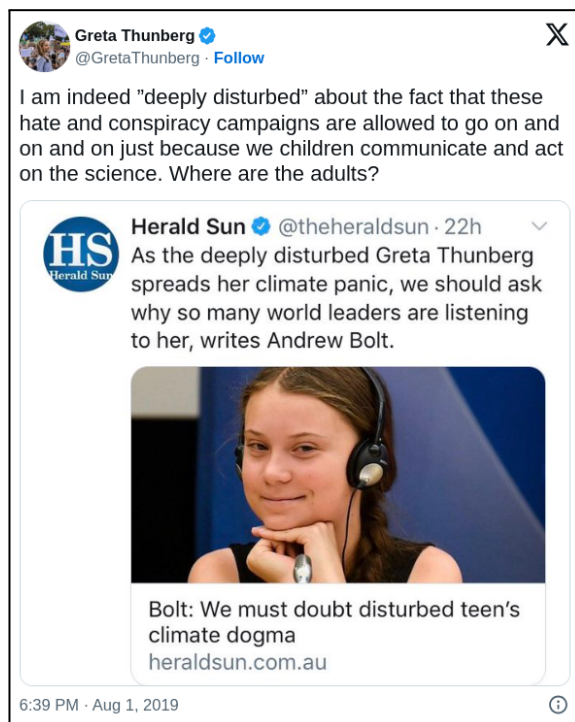
OPINION Andrew Bolt

### Bowen is a global warming zealot

How many experts is Climate Change Minister Chris Bowen ignoring as he straps us in for his green train to disaster?

**Figure 3a,b:** Newscorp commentator Andrew Bolt is a consistent source of climate misinformation.

- Multiple studies have been conducted into climate misinformation/disinformation in the Australian media<sup>12,13</sup>, with Newscorp being noted as the most influential.<sup>14</sup>
- This is not controversial – even Rupert Murdoch's son, James, has called it out.<sup>15</sup>
- Our children hear this disinformation, either on the TV, radio, or at school (through friends).
- Like junk food, **our children should not be subject to this junk information** – a developed, rich society **should be able to provide a healthy information diet for its kids** (and indeed adults),
- In practice, this means very strong support for the public broadcaster (ABC), and strong media laws, which this Bill aims to advise on.
- We have even seen Newscorp attack children (Greta Thunberg, Figure 4), which is an abhorrent act and something our children should not have to witness – or be future victims of.



**Figure 4:** Newscorp masthead the Herald Sun attacks a child for asking people to listen to climate scientists' warnings. What effect does this have on our children?

<sup>12</sup> [Australian Centre for Independent Journalism report: Sceptical Climate Part 1](#)

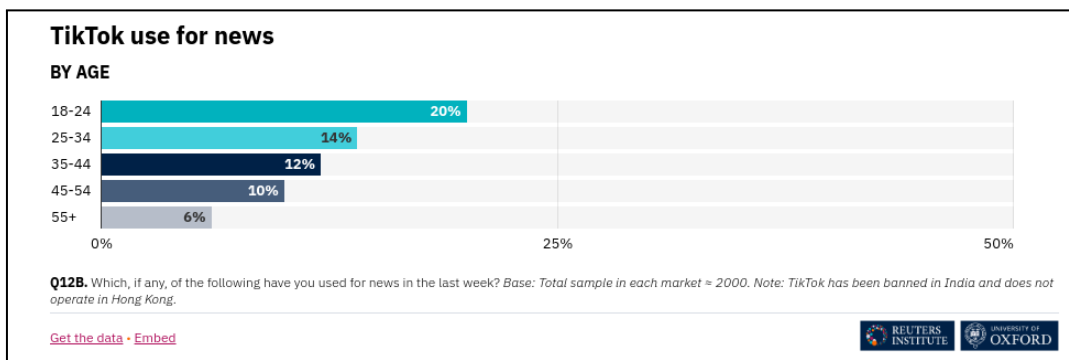
<sup>13</sup> [Sceptical Climate Part 2: CLIMATE SCIENCE IN AUSTRALIAN NEWSPAPERS](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Sceptical Climate Part 3: Lies, Debates, and Silences: HOW NEWS CORP PRODUCES CLIMATE SCEPTICISM IN AUSTRALIA](#)

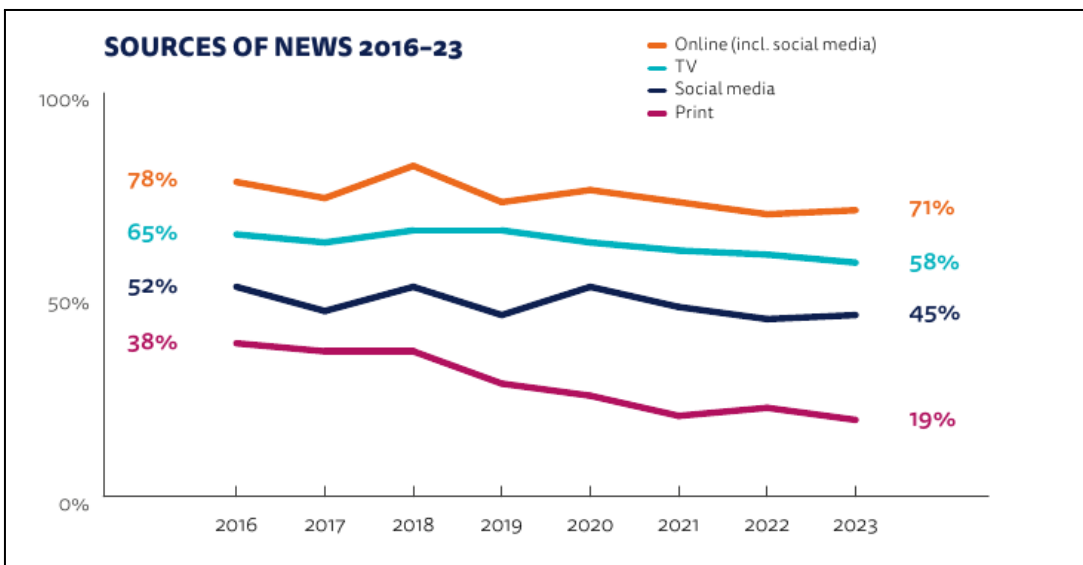
<sup>15</sup> [SBS News: "James Murdoch blasts News Corp's 'ongoing climate change denial'"](#)

- **The challenge at hand: Our kids, and young adults, consume media differently:**
  - Having grown up with the internet and social media, young people get much more of their information from online sources (for example, from TikTok, Figure 5).
  - Although a stronger effect in young people, the transformation to online sources is happening across the board (Figure 6).
  - However, young people are not sourcing their news directly from the news outlets as much as older people, rather they source it through social media or web searches (Figure 7).
  - Any media legislation needs to take these media changes into account, otherwise they may be exploited by mis/disinformation actors.
- **A strong public media broadcaster (ABC) must be part of the solution**
  - As noted by the *Reuters 2023 Digital News Report*:

*"Public media brands are amongst those with the highest levels of trust in many ... countries, but reach has been declining with younger audiences. This is important because we find that those that [do] use these services most frequently are more likely to see them as important personally and for society. These findings suggest that maintaining the breadth of public service reach remains critical for future legitimacy and especially with younger groups."*<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 5:** One in five young people now source news from TikTok. Global data, from Reuters 2023 Digital News Report<sup>17</sup>

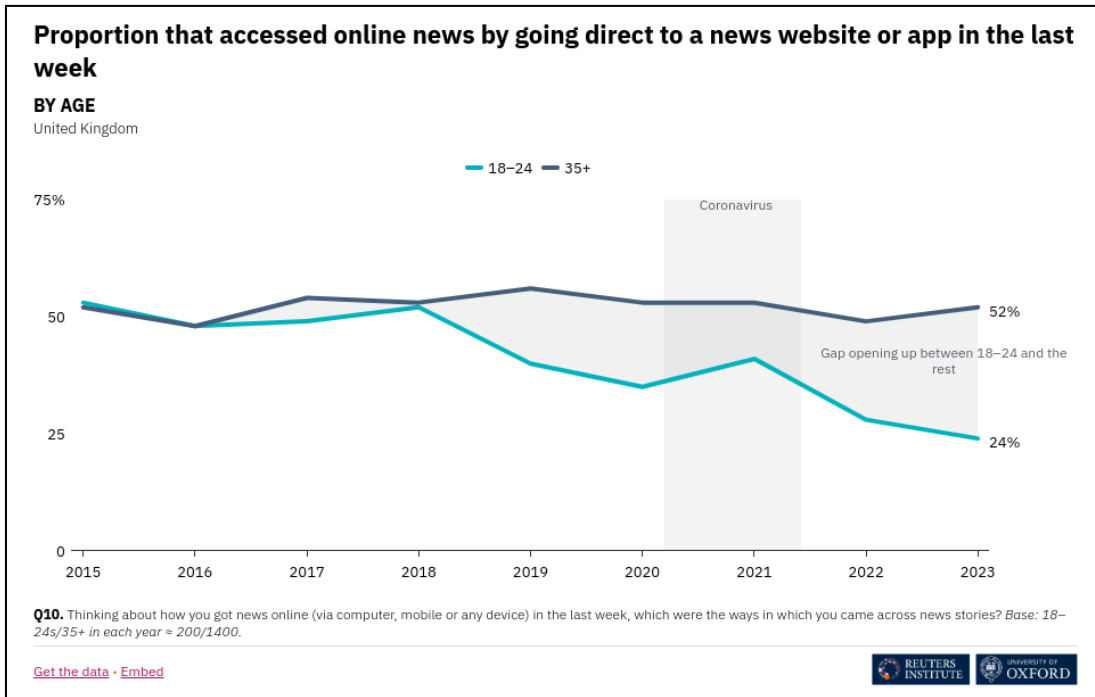


**Figure 6:** Change in news sources over time in Australia. Figure from Reuters 2023 Digital News Report.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> [Overview and key findings of the 2023 Digital News Report](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Reuters 2023 Digital News Report](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Australia section of Reuters 2023 Digital News Report \(page 127\)](#)



**Figure 7:** Young people source news in a different way to their parents. This is a changing landscape, we need to be careful that misinformation and bias does not get out of control. UK data, AU data not made available. Figure from Reuters 2023 Digital News Report<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> [Reuters 2023 Digital News Report](#)