

QUESTION ON NOTICE
Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society
PUBLIC HEARING
Friday 21 June 2024

Agency: Australian Communications and Media Authority

Topic: Influence or impact of social media companies on Australian society

Hansard page number 47

The Committee asked:

CHAIR: Going more broadly, do you have measures that we could use to rate the influence or the impact of social media companies on Australian society? Part of what we're trying to get to here as a committee is what influence these platforms have over our society and our democracy. Is there information you can point us to that would help us make a judgement on that?

Ms O'Loughlin: I can certainly take that on notice. We have a range of statistics. We do annual research around things like usage, particularly focused on news—where people are accessing news from and what their main sources of news are. Some of that is very similar to the University of Canberra report.

From our last June 2023 report: 48 per cent of Australian adults accessed news via social media, compared to 53 per cent for free-to-air television—so, television is just above social media these days; 53 per cent accessed news via online news websites; and 37 per cent accessed it via radio, including streaming. We also found that 20 per cent of Australian adults now report that social media communications and websites are their main source of news. Even though the University of Canberra and ourselves use slightly different methodologies, we're coming out with very similar responses around how people are using news.

We also find that there are some really good statistics around: of Australian adults who accessed news in the last seven days, 68 per cent accessed professionally produced news. We'd be happy to provide those sorts of research and statistics to the committee. As I said, some of it aligns with the University of Canberra study. I'd also reference some of the previous research we did on misinformation and disinformation, around the impact of misinformation on the Australian community and their concerns about it. We'd be happy to provide links to that, and an explanation of that in a submission to the committee.

Answer:

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) refers to its written submission (28 June 2024) to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian society which includes references to several relevant research which may assist the Committee.

In addition to the information provided in the ACMA's submission, the University of Canberra's News and Media Research Centre undertook a mixed method research project on behalf of the ACMA to study Australians' access to, consumption of, and critical engagement with news, information and misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study examined how and where Australians were getting information about COVID-19, which sources they found trustworthy and their experiences with misinformation. This report, released in 2022, found that:

- a. Most Australians (82%) reported experiencing misinformation about COVID-19 in 2020.
- b. When asked about the frequency of seeing news or information about the pandemic that they knew or suspected to be false or misleading, 60% of Australians reported having seen some, and an additional 22% reported seeing 'a lot' or 'a great deal' of misinformation.
- c. Only 7% of respondents reported no experience of COVID-19 misinformation at all.

QUESTION ON NOTICE
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Agency: Australian Communications and Media Authority

Topic: Misinformation and Disinformation

Hansard page number 49

The Committee asked:

Senator HANSON-YOUNG: I was asking the ACCC earlier about the impact of section 230 in the US, the immunity clause. Unless we have some way of getting around that, I can't see—there needs to be a legal foothold in Australia for us to have proper enforcement, whether it's on mis- and disinformation, the enforcement of a news media bargaining code or other safety regimes.

Ms O'Loughlin: I think it depends. If you look at the development of the mis- and disinformation legislation, that gives us regulatory responsibility, and we can take action against those organisations. We have a similar issue: we regulate interactive gambling, and most of those businesses are external to Australia, but we do have regulatory powers that we can use. So I think it's crafting the regulation to give the right regulatory powers to a regulator to be able to do it. Of course, that will be tested along the way, but, as I think our ACCC colleagues mentioned earlier today, I think we are all learning from what works internationally. There's a huge amount of cooperation going on between regulators internationally, and I think we can advise the government and the parliament of what we're seeing internationally that we think will work.

Senator HANSON-YOUNG: In terms of that, have you had a look at the EU Digital Services Act—

Ms O'Loughlin: Yes.

Senator HANSON-YOUNG: to see which bits we could mirror here and how that could be done?

Ms O'Loughlin: They have similar arrangements in there around misinformation and disinformation. I think it's fair to say that, in looking at the voluntary code, we were looking at the EU code at the time and what were the best parts of that to get the industry to put in place. I think we put ours in place, and then the EU has gone a bit further. We'd certainly be happy to provide information about our observations on that code.

Senator HANSON-YOUNG: That would be helpful if you could take that on notice.

Ms O'Loughlin: Of course.

Answer:

The 2022 EU Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation (EU Code) and the Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation (AU Code) set out similar arrangements for the treatment of misinformation and disinformation.

Differences include the scope of participation. For example, signatories to the EU code include, fact-checkers, civil society, and third-party organisations with specific expertise on

disinformation. The EU code also addresses the dissemination of mis- and disinformation on private messaging services. These services are out of scope in the AU Code.

The EU Code has a more detailed and granular, three-tiered, reporting framework whereas the AU Code provides platforms with greater flexibility to report how they are meeting their commitments under the code.

QUESTION ON NOTICE
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Agency: Australian Communications and Media Authority

Topic: News media bargaining code

Hansard page number 49

The Committee asked:

Senator HANSON-YOUNG: They're next anyway. Okay. Can I ask about the news media bargaining code? We heard some concerns from some of the smaller independent digital publishers that even getting on your list to be registered has been problematic and not easy. Where are we up to? How many people are on this list? How long does the process of application take? How many get on the list and then how many have been able to strike deals?

Ms O'Loughlin: I might ask my colleague on the first one, and then I might take a stab at the second.

Ms Zurnamer: I think we currently have 42 registered entities. There is a 43rd who subsequently sought to have their registration revoked because they couldn't meet anymore. I'm explaining because if you look on our website you'll see 43.

Senator HANSON-YOUNG: Yes.

Ms Zurnamer: I'd have to take on notice the amount of time. I think it would, logically, depend on the number of news sources that a particular business was seeking to register. In some cases it might be a pretty straightforward application where you're seeking to register one news business. But there are some on our register that have up to five or six websites or 70 news sources associated with that application. Those would naturally take longer.

Answer:

As at 30 June 2024, the Australian Communications and Media Authority had assessed 55 applications to register news businesses and the register includes 42 eligible news businesses. On average, each assessment was completed within 50 days of receipt. The time taken to assess individual applications is impacted by the complexity of individual applications and the number of news sources included in an application. The number of news sources in the applications assessed to date has ranged between one to 225 news sources.

QUESTION ON NOTICE
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Topic: Data or metrics on amount of minutes spent on social media platforms

Hansard page number 53

The Committee asked:

Dr MULINO: I was just going to drill down a little bit into a couple of the metrics that the chair was discussing around the influence of some of the major platforms. You and also the University of Canberra studies have made reference to the proportion of people who use social media platforms for some of their news or, indeed, the proportion of people who use it as a primary source of the news. I was just interested, do you also obtain data in relation to other metrics such as how many minutes people might spend on social media platforms, compared to say, traditional media websites, and the different ways in which they engage?

Ms O'Loughlin: I don't think we get down into minutes. Our regular survey looks more at where people are accessing news from and what their main source of news is then dividing that up between television or radio, or news websites or Facebook et cetera. It is more directed at that. I would certainly take it on notice for you if we are aware of any other research that might go to your point.

Dr MULINO: That would be useful, thanks. On notice, if you can provide some other possible metrics to see if they are things that you capture or partly capture.

Ms O'Loughlin: We will, yes.

Answer:

Since 2022, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (the ACMA) Annual consumer survey has collected data relating to the proportion of Australian adults accessing news via numerous sources in the past 7 days and what platforms they used to access news. In 2022 and 2023 we did not include questions to capture amount of time spent accessing different news sources, including social media.

In our June 2024 survey, we expanded these questions to include how much time (hours/minutes) were spent accessing news across the different news sources, including via social media. The fieldwork period was from 11 June 2024 to 30 June 2024. The research is anticipated to be published around December 2024.

The ACMA is aware of the following international research efforts to measure how much time people spend engaging with news on social media platforms and more traditional platforms (both online and offline).

1. Research published by the UK Office of Communications (Ofcom) in 2022 using passive tracking software found that 11% of participants were 'unconscious frequent' users of news via online intermediaries (OIs) (i.e., search engines, social media, and news aggregators), meaning that they accessed OIs 30+ times over an approximate one-month period but underreported their use when asked in a survey. This suggests that

time spent using OIs to access news is higher than what consumers report based on recall. (<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/multi-sector/media-plurality/annex-7-quant-research.pdf>)

2. A report published by Ofcom in 2024 found that, for the main sources of online news used by consumers, OIs have a 24.7% share of attention. Within online intermediaries (including Meta, Google, X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok) Meta has a 14% share of attention. The measure records the time spent by individuals on a specific news source as a share of their total engagement with all news sources they use. (<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/multi-sector/media-plurality/2024/0324-online-news-research-update.pdf>)

QUESTION ON NOTICE
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Topic: International research on how information is accessed using social media platforms
Hansard page number 53

The Committee asked:

Dr MULINO: Following up on that, it is not just the amount of time. I guess the starkest comparison for me would be some of the modern websites with more traditional media, where you might follow a newspaper and then flick through and pick out which stories you are interested to and listen to the radio in the car on the way to work and home then switch between stations and then watch TV at home and, again, switch between stations. There might be a limit to how much choice you have there. You might have a favourite station for news that you watch every night. It does seem to me that there is a degree of self-direction which is very different to, for example, if you hop onto Facebook for five hours and a chunk of that is news. It might not all come at once; it might come in different ways and through different sources. It does appear to me that, in addition to how many people are getting news from each of these sources, there does seem to be something qualitatively different from the platforms—and I am thinking Meta here—in that it is directed at you in ways that are very opaque but which can vary materially influence your experience and what you're getting.

Ms O'Loughlin: I think that is absolutely right. As I said, we would be happy to ask our research team if they are aware of research internationally that might come to that point. We do some annual research around people's use of communication services such as how much television time they are watching, what sort of devices they are accessing—television or radio or social media. That might come to some of the point, but I would be happy to take it on notice and see what we can find for you.

Answer: The Australian Communications and Media Authority (the ACMA) is aware of the following research efforts aimed at understanding the pathways via which consumers are exposed to news content on social media:

1. The News and Media Research Centre (N&MRC) in Canberra published in their latest Digital News Report questions relating to trust in different news sources and the sources of news people pay most attention to while on digital platforms. The report found that mainstream brands are still the main source of news on social media platforms, and that distrust in news has risen.
<https://www.canberra.edu.au/about-uc/media/newsroom/2024/june/digital-news-report-australia-2024-ai,-social-media,-misinformation-and-distrust-what-the-data-tells-us-about-the-news-landscape-in-2024>)
2. The 2023 Reuters Digital News Report (DNR) points to scepticism amongst consumers about the quality of news shown to them by algorithms based on what they consumed in the past or what their friends and family consume, and news curated for them by

editors and journalists.

[https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital News Report 2023.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital%20News%20Report%202023.pdf))

3. The 2024 Reuters DNR shows that, in some countries, alternative news sources and individual accounts are cited more often by consumers than mainstream news brands when asked what sources they pay attention to on large social and video networks. [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/RISJ DNR 2024 Digital v10 lr.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/RISJ_DNR_2024_Digital_v10_lr.pdf))
4. In December 2023, the UK Office of Communications (Ofcom) and Lumen Research released a report on attention to news on social media. This report showed that news stories positioned higher in a social media feed were more likely to be viewed and viewed for longer compared to stories positioned lower in a social media feed. Positioning a news story higher in a social media feed also led to increased recall of the content of the story. <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/media-plurality/social-media-online-news/>)
5. The Ofcom 2024 News consumption survey (results not currently available) includes the following questions to distinguish between active and passive news consumption. This example uses Facebook, but the content is repeated for other social media platforms:

Earlier you mentioned that you get news from Facebook. Which of the following do you do NOWADAYS?

- 1. See news stories that Facebook says are trending*
- 2. See comments from friends or other people about news stories*
- 3. See links to news stories posted by friends or people I follow*
- 4. Actively follow traditional news organisations e.g. BBC, ITV, Daily mail, Guardian, etc*
- 5. Actively follow online-only news organisations e.g. Buzzfeed, Huffington, etc*
- 6. Actively follow organisations that bring news together from other news providers e.g. Newsnow*
- 7. Actively follow journalists/public figures*
- 8. Actively follow specific news programmes e.g. Panorama, Newsnight, etc*
- 9. Other – specify (WRITE IN)*

The ACMA has included a similar series of questions in the 2024 Annual consumer survey. The fieldwork period was from 11 June 2024 to 30 June 2024. The research is anticipated to be published around December 2024.