



13 March 2020

Committee Secretary  
Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media  
Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary,

### **Inquiry into Foreign Interference through Social Media**

SBS appreciates the opportunity to submit to the Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media (the **Committee**) on the Inquiry into the risk posed to Australia's democracy by foreign interference through social media (the **Inquiry**).

SBS is unique in the Australian media environment, with a principal function of providing multilingual, multicultural and Indigenous radio, television and digital media services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians and, in doing so, reflect Australia's multicultural society. SBS reaches almost 100 per cent of the population through its six free to air television channels (SBS, SBS HD, SBS VICELAND, SBS World Movies, SBS FOOD and National Indigenous Television (**NITV**)), seven radio stations broadcasting in 68 languages other than English (with audio content also available via the SBS Radio App). SBS On Demand, SBS's video-on-demand service, provides more than 7,000 hours of exclusive and distinctive content across key genres such as drama, film and documentary, including SBS commissioned content—a vast collection of which are stories otherwise untold by other media.

SBS provides a suite of news and current programs as set out at **Attachment A**.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (**ACCC**) *Digital Platforms Inquiry – Final Report*, included examples of international research, finding '...numerous recent examples of bad actors intentionally manipulating information through digital platforms with the aim of affecting democratic processes.'<sup>1</sup> This report also looked at the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, noting that '...multiple countries [in Europe] have already experienced harms including social media interference, and campaigns of disinformation and malinformation from external countries seeking to affect domestic political processes.'<sup>2</sup> The Australian Government's response to the ACCC's *Digital Platforms Inquiry*, noted that it will

...ask the major digital platforms to develop a voluntary code (or codes) of conduct for disinformation and news quality. The Australian Communications and Media Authority

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<sup>1</sup> ACCC *Digital Platforms Inquiry – Final Report*, <https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Digital%20platforms%20inquiry%20-%20final%20report.pdf>, page 353

<sup>2</sup> ACCC *Digital Platforms Inquiry – Final Report*, <https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Digital%20platforms%20inquiry%20-%20final%20report.pdf>, page 371

**Office of the Managing Director – Special Broadcasting Service**

Locked Bag 028, Crows Nest NSW 1585 Australia  
14 Herbert Street, Artarmon NSW 2064 Australia [sbs.com.au](http://sbs.com.au)  
Tel: +61 2 9430 2828

ABN: 91 314 398 574



(ACMA) will have oversight of the codes and report to Government on the adequacy of platforms' measures and the broader impacts of disinformation.<sup>3</sup>

While it is a matter for major digital platforms, particularly social media platforms, to determine, in consultation with the Australian Communications and Media Authority (**ACMA**), how best to directly affect change on this sort of influence exerted on their platforms, the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry also include a broader reference to 'responses to mitigate the risk posed to Australia's democracy and values, including by the Australian Government and social media platforms'.

As a public broadcaster, SBS is in a unique position to contribute to the diversity of news and information sources available to Australian audiences.

The quality of SBS content, distributed across our own platforms, as well as on social media platforms under the trusted SBS brand, ensures that Australian audiences have access and choice in relation to news, information and analysis of current events. This includes content in relation to critical matters such as our democratic processes, and public health and safety. Distribution of this trusted content is vital to mitigating the risk posed by disinformation and malinformation also distributed by others on social media.

SBS plays a vital role by providing credible, trustworthy, inclusive, balanced and independent news and information services which meet the communication needs of Australia's multicultural community. SBS is the only nationally available Australian-based broadcaster providing news and current affairs services in a broad range of languages other than English (**LOTE**), and provides Australians with an unparalleled diversity of international and Australian programming.

Digital platforms should ensure that news from trusted sources such as SBS is prominent and accessible on their platforms, to counter the effect of bad actors intentionally manipulating information.

### **Language other than English news services**

SBS provides extensive news services in languages other than English across its radio and digital platforms. Each Census (every five years), SBS reviews its language services to ensure they reflect today's Australia, and that SBS is delivering content on the platforms and devices audiences are choosing to use. The balanced and impartial news and information delivered by these in language services act to mitigate misinformation spread by untrustworthy sources to Australian audiences.

SBS has made a significant investment to ensure the quality and reach of its in language news services. For example, prior to 2016, SBS Radio was broadcasting two hours of Arabic-language content daily, primarily attracting listeners from the Lebanese Australian community. In 2016, SBS launched SBS Arabic24, a 24 hour service to better serve all Arabic-speaking communities (which represent more than 20 communities in Australia). Audience demographics have since shifted substantially, with 92 per cent of listeners born overseas. The Australian Iraqi community is now the largest audience segment, and Lebanese is the fourth largest. Many recently arrived communities are now engaging with Australian news and information in Arabic. SBS Arabic24 has the largest Arabic-speaking radio audience in Australia, more than twice the market share of the next largest provider.

SBS is a particularly valuable news provider in languages other than English in times of uncertainty. As the Novel Coronavirus (**COVID-19**) situation unfolds, for example, SBS is providing:

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<sup>3</sup> Australian Government, *Regulating in the digital age* <https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-12/Government-Response-p2019-41708.pdf>, page 7



- Comprehensive coverage of reliable health information across all of its 68 language services, including in relation to government issued announcements, quarantine recommendations, evacuations, travel plans, and education advisories;
- Very extensive in language coverage, in particular for Mandarin and Cantonese-speaking communities, encompassing community impacts, talk back and interview programs, explainers, dispelling misinformation, and community impacts;
- In addition to the features and interviews, SBS's Mandarin program has also hosted talkback programs, giving listeners the opportunity to speak with public health expert Dr Zhang Ying about any concerns on this issue; and
- As the situation progresses, SBS's extensive coverage has continued to support and service the Persian-speaking and Italian-speaking communities, among others.

### Quality in news

SBS's news and current affairs services are among the most trusted in Australia, according to *The Essential Report Trust in Media* survey, the most recent results from which were published in June 2019. The results demonstrate that trust in SBS's television news and current affairs was 13 percentage points higher than commercial television news and current affairs and 14 percentage points higher than news and opinion in daily newspapers.<sup>4</sup>

Recent enhancements to SBS's news and current affairs offering, including a focus on its digital platforms and more distinctive content, continues to deliver greater audience engagement. Digital audience growth in the last financial year continued at a rapid pace with unique visitors up more than 30 per cent, page views up 80 per cent, and 100 per cent growth in SBS News video chapter views on SBS On Demand. SBS also has a strong presence on social media, with more than 1.4 million Facebook followers and 400 million video views—triple the figure for the year prior.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, while migrants to Australia can now readily access homeland news and information via satellite TV and the internet, SBS delivers **Australian** news and information in-language. There is a clear public interest in ensuring that SBS news and current affairs services are readily available and accessible to the Australian community, which is made up of many LOTE speakers.

As an independent national broadcaster operating under *the Special Broadcasting Service Act 1991* (Cth) (**SBS Act**), SBS is subject to strong accountability and editorial standards including the requirement to maintain independence and integrity, and to ensure that the gathering and presentation of news and information is accurate and balanced over time.

SBS has rigorous editorial standards and Codes of Practice<sup>6</sup> in place which underpin the delivery of its independent, balanced and quality news and current affairs services. SBS is required to notify its Codes of Practice to the ACMA, which also acts as a point of escalation for broadcast complaints made under the Codes of Practice which have not been resolved by SBS.

SBS's *World Watch* bulletins are sourced from a range of international news providers—government, public and commercial. These bulletins from other countries complement SBS news programming such as *SBS World News* and SBS-produced radio news. SBS undertakes a rigorous process to select *World Watch* news services to ensure that they are best suited to addressing the relevant communities' needs. SBS also ensures that audiences are alerted to

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<sup>4</sup> Trust in Media survey <https://essentialvision.com.au/?s=trust+in+media>.

<sup>5</sup> SBS Annual Report 2019, page 24

<sup>6</sup> SBS Codes of Practice <https://www.sbs.com.au/aboutus/corporate/view/id/109/h/codes-of-practice>



the source of this material so that they can exercise their own judgement about how issues and information are presented.

In providing audiences with information about world events, SBS Radio relies on a range of sources, including overseas media services, stringers and other contacts. SBS Radio carefully monitors the contributions of international stringers, to ensure contributions meet SBS's editorial standards. As SBS Radio broadcasts in nearly 70 languages (listed at **Attachment A**), there is a rolling program of translations, so that programs can be monitored for quality standards.

### **Online harms**

SBS recently submitted to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications' 'Online Safety Legislative Reform' consultation (the **Online Safety Consultation**). While the focus of that consultation was on harmful online content, rather than malinformation and disinformation, some parallels may be drawn in the management of content on social media platforms. A copy of SBS's submission to the Online Safety Consultation is at **Attachment B** to this letter.

SBS does not own, nor host on its servers, digital platforms that allow end users to upload/generate content. SBS has social media accounts as a user/client of the major digital platforms for the purpose of allowing SBS and communities to explore, learn and connect in ways that promote SBS's purpose. While SBS has moderation policies in place to manage user engagement on these platforms to the extent possible, SBS's submission to the Online Safety Consultation set out a range of suggestions for enhanced moderation functionality which may be of interest to the Committee. SBS would be pleased to provide additional information about its news services and these submissions to assist the Inquiry.

### **Future of journalism**

The ACCC in the *Final Report of its Digital Platforms Inquiry* recommended, in recognition of the role performed by the public broadcasters in addressing the public good nature of journalism and consequent risk of under provision of public interest journalism, that stable and adequate funding be provided to SBS and the ABC.

Stable funding to public broadcasters will continue to support quality, trustworthy journalism in Australia. If additional funding were to become available would increase the ability of SBS to develop and distribute additional in-depth content (including in-language content) on which audiences can rely, and would further mitigate the risks posed by misinformation from other sources. Such funding may also support the development of the next generation of public interest journalists, through the ongoing, and extended, provision of mentoring and cadetship programs.

Sincerely,



## Appendix A

### SBS News and Current Affairs services

<i>SBS World News</i>	Comprehensive national and international news coverage
<i>The Feed</i>	Youth-focussed news program
<i>Where Are You Really From?</i>	Exploring issues of cultural heritage and identity
<i>Insight</i>	Leading forum for debate and first person stories
<i>Dateline</i>	Current affairs program showcasing stories from around the world
<i>WorldWatch</i>	International news bulletins
<i>NITV News/Nula</i>	Australia's only dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait news service
<i>The Point</i>	Current affairs program examining the Australian identity and where the Indigenous story sits within the national psyche
<i>Living Black</i>	Comprehensive coverage of the issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

### SBS News and Current Affairs – Radio and digital language services

- Albanian
- Amharic
- Arabic
- Armenian
- Assyrian
- Bangla
- Bosnian
- Bulgarian
- Burmese
- Cantonese
- Croatian
- Czech\*
- Dari
- Dinka
- Dutch
- Estonian\*
- Filipino
- Finnish
- French
- German
- Greek
- Gujarati
- Hakha Chin
- Hebrew
- Hindi
- Hmong
- Hungarian\*
- Indonesian
- Italian
- Japanese
- Karen
- Khmer
- Kirundi
- Korean
- Kurdish
- Lao
- Macedonian
- Malayalam
- Maltese
- Mandarin
- Mongolian
- Nepali
- NITV Radio
- Pashto
- Persian
- Polish
- Portuguese
- Punjabi
- Rohingya
- Romanian
- Russian
- Samoan
- Serbian
- Sinhalese
- Slovenian
- Somali
- Spanish
- Swahili
- Tamil
- Telegu\*
- Thai
- Tibetan
- Tigrinya
- Turkish
- Ukrainian
- Urdu
- Vietnamese

\*Languages marked with an asterisk are currently in recess.