



25th June 2024

Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

About The Conversation

The Conversation is a non profit journalism project that pairs professional journalists with academics to publish articles that share new research and explain issues in the news. All articles are free to reproduce and republish, with the aim of sharing trusted information with the widest possible audience.

Founded in Melbourne in 2011, The Conversation has expanded to the UK, US, France, Spain, Africa, Canada, Indonesia, Brazil and New Zealand. In Australia and New Zealand it attracts 7.3 million pageviews a month, and more than 12 million when republication in other media is included. The Conversation in Australia employs approximately 38 journalists.

In Australia, our journalists act as editors to commission and collaborate with 4000 + academic authors each year. The Conversation has strict editorial standards around fact-checking and requires all authors to complete a disclosure of funding and interests.

The Conversation, along with SBS, did not receive any deal from Meta under the NMBC discussions. We did receive funding from Google.

Social media is strangling the audience for journalism

Meta has deprioritised news on Facebook and Instagram, and indicated it will continue to do so. The Conversation saw a sharp reduction of its audience via

THE CONVERSATION

Facebook of 40% since an algorithm change in May 2024. The impact of this on The Conversation's operations is not financial, but it does mean less Australians are seeing evidenced based, trusted news and analysis where they are spending significant time.

Meanwhile the latest [The Digital News Report 2024](#) from the Reuters Institute shows traditional media continue to lose their news consumers to a range of social media platforms. People consuming content online find it difficult to discern which sources they can trust. Concern about what is real and what is fake on the internet has increased by 3 percentage points in the past year, with six in ten (59%) expressing concern. The fast rise of AI generated fake news sites will further challenge reliable access to trusted news sources. [NewsGuard has so far identified 966](#) AI-generated news and information sites operating with little to no human oversight, and these sites are reliant on social and search platforms to connect to audiences.

Different rules for social media

Social media companies publish content that competes with news media publishers but under a very different set of rules and standards. They take little responsibility for the accuracy of content that purports to be true, or for instances where content causes harm and needs to be taken down.

To clean up our news media ecosystem, we need stronger regulation of social media platforms. This is important because ethical publishers play in the same attention economy, but under much more difficult and onerous rules. Social platforms should be required to play by the same rules as other Australian media outlets.

If Meta is designated and withdraws from publishing news (as it has done in Canada) to avoid triggering the NMBC, Meta could be regulated to explicitly publish disclaimers warning their audiences about the unreliable information

THE CONVERSATION

that they disseminate much like the health warnings mandated on cigarette packaging.

Impact of Meta's actions

There are many benefits that apps such as Facebook and Instagram deliver Australians, connecting friends and family and communities of interest. However Meta's interests are not the same as the Australian public's.

Meta has on many occasions chosen profit over tackling misinformation and harm. They prioritise maximising shareholder returns, as they should. Meta claims that news is so unimportant that it would rather not have news on its apps than pay news publishers for content.

The Canadian experience¹

[A recent study](#) from the Media Ecosystem Observatory suggests that six months after the ban, roughly a third of Canadians still use Facebook or Instagram for news and current affairs information. In northern, rural and Indigenous communities, where there is often poor communications infrastructure, and long distances between population centres, this is likely to be much higher.

According to the study, users' political engagement appears to have stayed the same and some sites, such as the conservative Canada Proud network, have seen an increase in engagement. News outlets, meanwhile, have seen their own engagement plummet. Screenshots of news articles have become the preferred way to get around the ban, especially during emergencies.

There has been a rise of social media influencers wielding disproportionate sway during emergencies. For example, during the August 2023 wildfires in

¹

<https://theconversation.com/metas-canadian-news-ban-could-put-people-at-risk-during-public-emergencies-228770>

THE CONVERSATION

the Shuswap Lake region in B.C., conspiracy theories and misinformation spread faster than the mainstream media's messages in small communities.

If Meta blocks access to news, the government should look to legal and regulatory options to force the company to open its platforms to news outlets during public emergencies particularly fires, floods, terrorist and large scale cyber attacks, armed conflicts and pandemics.

If Australians are to have access to a range of high quality and diverse media outlets, then creating a public interest journalism fund and using the News MAP to provide support for a wider range of news producers will be an important intervention. Without social platforms, news media brands will need to invest in their own distribution channels including newsletters, websites, apps and podcasts to connect to their audiences.

With 2024 a year of acute financial distress in the for-profit journalism world, tax deductibility for nonprofit news outlets could provide some hope for the future.

Thank you to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society for the opportunity to make this submission.

Misha Ketchell
Editor & Executive Director

Lisa Watts
CEO & Executive Director