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LIVING WITH MISINFORMATION

A Media Literacy Approach

Tanya Notley, Michael Dezuanni,
Sora Park, T. J. Thomson
and Aimee Hourigan



Living with Misinformation

This book investigates how media literacy can be used to help people understand, identify and respond to online misinformation.

Drawing on a three-year research study that examined the everyday media experiences and abilities of more than 4,400 adults, this book presents an in-depth look at how individuals experience and interpret misinformation across a range of topics. It argues that we need to learn to “live with” misinformation and outlines the skills, knowledge and critical thinking required for people to make informed decisions about their media use. This book uniquely integrates contemporary challenges such as generative AI and long-standing concerns about information integrity, presenting both the problem and actionable educational responses.

Living with Misinformation: A Media Literacy Approach is essential reading for scholars and students in media, education and communication studies as well as educators, librarians, journalists, parents and community workers seeking to foster media literacy in varied populations. Its global relevance is reinforced by comparative insights from international studies, making it a valuable resource for anyone seeking to address the many challenges associated with misinformation.

Tanya Notley is Professor in the School of Arts and a member of the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University. She is an engaged, practice-based media researcher, who collaborates with communities, governments and industries to support digital inclusion and media literacy.

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As we complete this project, we're delighted that addressing misinformation and developing media literacy are both now firmly on the political and public agenda in Australia in ways we've not seen before – this is also true for many other countries. We hope our book and associated publications can play a small role in shaping conversations and bringing people together to collaborate.

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T. J. Thomson and Aimee Hourigan

1 Introduction

It was just a few weeks before the end of 2025. It had been a hot summer's day, and the sun was getting ready to set. The location was idyllic and iconic: a small park next to Australia's most famous beach, Bondi. Upbeat music played as people who were gathered for an annual religious-cultural festival milled about. The crowds took photos and recorded videos, tasted festival food, mingled and enjoyed the event.

But, then, everything changed. Shots pierced through the music. Just as the crowds began to question whether it was fireworks or gunfire, they witnessed thousands of people running away from the scene looking panicked, some screaming. Within minutes, 15 people, including a 10-year-old girl and an 87-year-old Holocaust survivor, were fatally shot. Dozens more would be wounded. Within 6 minutes of the first gunshot, police had shot both alleged gunmen.¹ By this time photos and videos from the event were already rapidly circulating online. People around the world joined journalists and bystanders to witness, document, process and reflect on the attack and its aftermath through online stories, comments, photos, videos and audio clips.²

In moments of high information demand – like during breaking crises – misinformation quickly proliferates, amplified by digital platforms that allow real-time sharing by anyone. Within hours of the attack at Bondi, images of an innocent man with the same name as one of the two accused shooters were widely circulated across social media, putting his life at risk. False claims were made that other events were being targeted in the area, causing further havoc. Information that sought to deny the Muslim and Arabic identity of one of the heroic men who confronted the terrorists was published. Witness photographs and video footage were picked up and re-circulated with false descriptions to suggest, wrongly, that police had surrendered to the terrorists. Footage from a much earlier event was shared to suggest, falsely, that Palestinian rights activists were celebrating the attack. A victim's image posted to social media was manipulated using generative AI software to make it look like he had faked his own gunshot wound using paint.³ These are just a few examples of the false and misleading misinformation that was shared in the hours and days following the attack. Some of this misinformation had

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hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of views online, and some of it remained online months later. And while some false and misleading content was clearly created to deliberately mislead, some was created and shared without this intent by people who simply got it wrong and were trying to inform others. Most times, though, people's motivations for creating and sharing this misinformation were unclear.

We had already begun writing this chapter of the book in the days before the December 14, 2025, Bondi Beach shooting – an event that was later declared a terror attack directed at Sydney's Jewish community.⁴ The event reminded us, yet again, just how destructive misinformation can be. It also reminded us how important it is for local communities and nations to have credible news sources they can rely on and citizens with sufficient knowledge and skills to work out what information is reliable and trustworthy. But misinformation does not just exist in times of crisis. Those of us who spend time online are constantly encountering information that we know or suspect is false or misleading. While much of that information may be unimportant or irrelevant to our lives, we still need to navigate the flood of content we encounter and to find effective methods and approaches to help us work out when to engage with information and how to determine if it is true and trustworthy. We also need to grapple with the broader impact of misinformation on our societies. Addressing these challenges is the focus of this book.

Our contribution to this issue focuses on the role media literacy education can play in addressing misinformation, not only in formal educational settings but through what has been called Connected Learning; that is, everyday, peer-to-peer learning that takes place around issues of interest in informal and semi-formal learning contexts.⁵ We do this by proposing a framework for a media literacy approach that supports people to live with misinformation. This approach promotes a holistic and lifelong approach to media literacy, where people are provided with opportunities to develop their understanding of media throughout their lives and in ways that relate to their everyday experiences. Our contribution is based on a 3-year research project, *Addressing Misinformation with Media Literacy through Public Cultural Institutions*. In the course of this project, we studied people's everyday experiences with information and misinformation online.⁶ In the first half of the project, we examined relevant research from around the world (see Chapter 2) and implemented our own empirical research methods (see Chapter 3). Our research was motivated by a desire to address a research gap in Australia around how Australian adults identify, respond to and navigate the challenge of misinformation online. We also wanted to know what it looks and feels like for people to be making decisions about who and what to trust online on a daily basis. As we discuss in Chapter 3, this involved four inter-related studies:

- 1 A nationally representative survey of 4,422 Australian adults designed to understand their media practices, attitudes and confidence in their abilities.

- 2 An activity-based test of 2,115 of the survey respondents to assess their abilities to verify information online from different sources, such as web-sites and social media platforms.
- 3 A digital diary study of 55 respondents, in which the participants documented their encounters with online news and information over the course of 1 week and reflected on how they decided what was trustworthy and what was not.
- 4 Semi-structured interviews with 20 participants to explore how socio-cultural dynamics influence people's information-seeking and decision-making behaviours.

In the second half of the project, we put our research into action by working with four industry partners – a public broadcaster, a cultural archive, a museum and an association for library and information professionals – to explore how media literacy can help different adult groups and communities prepare for, respond to and live with misinformation (see Chapter 4). Our industry partners developed and piloted their own projects to respond to our research findings. These experiences, alongside our own research, have been used to create *Living with Misinformation: A Guide for Media Literacy Action* (2026), which complements this book and supports the practical design and implementation of media literacy initiatives.⁷

Through our research, we have learnt that misinformation is complicated and complex: first and foremost because people often don't even agree on what it is. We've also learnt that many people are almost constantly experiencing information overload when they are online: they no longer feel in control of what information is put in front of them as they scroll or swipe through social media, and they are often unable to manage and filter the many different information sources they are connected to. Indeed, many online experiences involve a muddled mix of (mis)information: opinion sits alongside fact-checked news reports, sponsored content is pervasive and not always labelled as such, under- or unregulated advertisements target people based on what they've been searching for and looking at online, and millions of websites and social media accounts actively distribute misinformation for political, social and economic gain. All the while, new technologies are constantly changing the techniques used to target, engage, deceive and manipulate people.

But in the face of these challenges, whole populations and communities say that they want to see things change. People want to be able to make informed decisions, and they don't want to be misled or fooled.⁸ They want action from their governments, technology companies and education providers. In addition, most adults in our own study told us emphatically that they want to learn more about how to make informed choices about information sources and how to verify information online.⁹

Why are we dealing with this problem?

Some readers may by now be wondering why we are using the term “misinformation” (false and misleading information *created by mistake*) without any reference to the now commonly used term “disinformation” (false and misleading information *created with intention*). In this book we use misinformation as an umbrella term for all kinds of false, inaccurate or misleading information since we recognise that all too often it is impossible to work out who originally created misinformation, let alone know their intention or the intention of those who shared it. This was certainly the case with misinformation that circulated around the Bondi terrorist attack as well as other high-profile events and everyday topics we have studied in the past few years.

The scale, reach and diversity of misinformation shared online about the Bondi terrorist attack reinforced to us that crises and disasters provide the perfect conditions for misinformation to flourish. One of the reasons we are all vulnerable to misinformation during these types of terrifying and tragic events or situations is because we are often desperately seeking answers. As news was breaking about the Bondi attack, credible news sources were verifying content, fact-checking claims and pausing before publishing content to avoid revealing the identities of victims before families had been notified and also to avoid jeopardising an active police investigation. Others, however, were prepared to step in to exploit the delay. Rather than alleviating people’s concerns and fears, the misinformation communicated by these sources deepened the confusion and uncertainty surrounding the incident. In many cases, this was exactly what those sources had sought to do.¹⁰ As we turn to the internet in these situations, to seek answers or to view eyewitness footage and unfolding reactions – often with a heightened level of emotion – we are more likely to let our own biases and ideologies shape how we perceive the information we come across.¹¹ Emotions like fear and anger can increase the likelihood that we will believe and share false and misleading claims.¹² Repeatedly seeing or hearing a false claim can make it seem more believable and make us more likely to remember it.¹³

But there is another key reason why misinformation flourishes online during events that arouse high emotions: money. Misinformation is a very profitable business, and the internet makes it possible for anyone, anywhere, to create and share it widely for their own benefit.¹⁴ The most common way that people make money from misinformation is from online advertising revenue. In Australia, as is undoubtedly the case globally, a significant proportion of websites that include advertising use the Google advertising platform. In 2020, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission estimated that 90% of online advertising impressions passed through at least one Google ads service.¹⁵ Google ads services pay people who host advertisements based on the level of engagement they receive. Because advertisements are often

personalised according to demographic factors and what people have been searching for and looking at online, they are relatively effective. Soon after the Bondi terror attacks, entirely AI-generated content websites were created. Fake fundraisers and online shops claiming they were in Bondi were quickly established: this content and these websites were trying to capitalise on what people were looking for.¹⁶

This is not to suggest that misinformation only proliferates because of financial incentives. Oftentimes, people create and share misinformation because of their own political persuasions, biases, prejudices and beliefs or because they simply misunderstood the facts. But there is no doubt that financial motivations supercharge misinformation efforts and, unless these business models are disrupted, this poisonous industry will continue to grow and prosper. Indeed, the most profitable social media and online search companies have failed to seriously address misinformation, and many scholars now argue that it is futile to believe they will do so unless they are forced to because they profit enormously from it.¹⁷

Governments have so far mostly failed to regulate the internet and digital media in ways that prevent or seriously minimise potentially harmful misinformation. Given that a few social media and digital platforms now wield enormous power over our communication systems, regulation could be used to address market concentration. However, regulatory efforts have predominantly focused on content moderation rather than tackling structural issues.

From a policy standpoint, there have been attempts to curb the harmful impact of online misinformation by democratic governments. For instance, the Australian Government under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese tried twice, in 2023 and 2024, to get a misinformation bill passed through Parliament. Both times, the bill was unsuccessful, with dissenting civil liberty groups and parliamentarians citing concerns that the proposed legislation would limit speech or have the potential to be used to silence people or groups.¹⁸

It is vital that governments find effective ways to ensure that critical communication infrastructure is accessible, fair and safe for citizens. This includes finding ways to minimise misinformation that can cause people and communities harm. Regardless of whatever developments unfold with legislation, every individual and community still needs to be ready to spend considerable time in digital environments where, as British political communication scholar Andrew Chadwick writes, “it is increasingly difficult to distinguish what is authentic and sincere from what is inauthentic and insincere”.¹⁹ We all also need to grapple with the public consequences of misinformation, including declining trust in credible news and information sources and growing polarisation.²⁰

Scholars who study misinformation often cite influential philosopher Hannah Arendt to make the point that perhaps the greatest risk associated with misinformation is not that people will believe false content but that they

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no longer know who or what to believe and therefore can no longer make informed decisions about politics and social issues. Writing in the 1960s about how totalitarian leaders and states control and deceive publics, Arendt argued:

the result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed.²¹

A few of the research participants in our study had given up on the belief that they could trust any online information source (see Chapter 3). This is a hopeless place for people to arrive at. Disengagement and cynicism, our research suggests, are heightened when people feel helpless because they don't know who to turn to for trustworthy information or what steps they can take to verify information. This is something that must be addressed by those seeking to respond to the challenge of misinformation. But we can't do this by promising that we can defeat misinformation or somehow "inoculate" ourselves against its effects. While misinformation can be minimised – and this is a goal we should strive for – it will never completely be eliminated. Neither can people simply learn a few things that will forever protect or even "inoculate" them for a short period of time. That is why we hope this book can contribute to a much-needed, multi-pronged and sustained approach to addressing misinformation: to address people's need to be prepared, by developing their media literacy right across their lifetimes. We wrote this book for people who want to do something to help themselves or others prepare for and live successfully with misinformation, whether that be through research, education, policy, advocacy, technology design, social support services or as a family or community member.

Living with misinformation: our approach

When we started this project, we initially used words like "combat", "tackle" and "fight" to describe what we were trying to achieve with misinformation. In the later stages of our analysis, however, we realised that this kind of language encourages mythical and inaccurate thinking. After reflecting on our research findings (detailed in Chapter 3), we realised that we shouldn't delude ourselves or others into believing that we can ever win a battle to create the perfect, protected personal information ecosystem that will magically shut out, eliminate or even drastically reduce misinformation. We also don't want to suggest that any of us can ever know enough to guarantee that we will always make the right decisions about what is and is not valid or true. Ultimately, all of us will be misled in varying ways and at multiple times across our lifetimes. Instead, we believe that we all need to accept that we will

more than likely come across misinformation among all the information we encounter each day. It will take many forms and sometimes be quite sophisticated. There will not always be a “right” and “wrong” or a “true” or “false” for every piece of media content we come across, and we won’t always be able to work out what is trustworthy and what isn’t in a timely way. While this may sound a bit defeatist, we believe one of the most important first steps we can take to be prepared for misinformation is to accept that we live in a highly complex, often challenging and frequently misleading media environment. To successfully navigate it, we all need to continue to learn about media throughout our lives. To achieve this, rather than believing we can always identify or avoid misinformation, we need to ensure that we have a broad range of knowledge and effective strategies – that will require updating over time – to help us decide where to get information from and to know what information is consequential enough to deserve our attention. Building our critical thinking and knowledge about media alongside digital skills over time will help us to live with misinformation in a way that reduces the potential for it to harm us or those we support and care about.

In Chapter 4, we propose an educational response to addressing misinformation that emerges from the field of media literacy education. It is a response that combines aspirational capabilities, a theoretical framework and a Connected Learning approach. The field of media literacy has evolved across several decades to support thoughtful and critical media engagement. In this book, we build on these decades of media literacy theory, frameworks and research, while also being informed by our own and others’ research on this topic, including research from academic fields like media studies, sociology, education studies and social psychology.

For us, living with misinformation means accepting that information environments are confusing, complicated and overwhelming and that they are often contested and weaponised. This requires that we learn to make strategic and effective decisions about who and what we give our attention to. We achieve this by asking critical questions about the motivations, relevance and quality of different information providers and assessing the principles and processes they follow to determine whether they are well informed, fair, transparent, fact-checked and accountable. A media literacy approach also requires that we accept that we all have our own social and cultural perspectives, learned behaviours and biases. Acknowledging these can reduce the chance they will stand in the way of us making well-informed decisions. Being more media literate also demands that we understand and recognise the limits of our own media knowledge and technological skills, that we know who we can turn to for help and, ideally, that we also commit to updating our knowledge and skills over time.

As media environments and misinformation techniques develop, we all need to update our critical questioning, knowledge and skills. This means that media literacy is a lifelong pursuit, and it needs to meet people where they are.

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For this to be achieved, media literacy education needs to be embedded not only across our formal educational systems but also across social, health and cultural services as well as information and entertainment services. While media literacy can be carefully integrated into schools and universities and students can be encouraged and supported to develop foundational knowledge, most adults won't take a week-long annual course to update their skills. However, they can pick up new knowledge and skills here and there – while they are visiting a doctor's clinic, listening to their favourite podcast, tuning into the news, connecting with friends on social media or watching an entertaining television programme. When delivered in an accessible and integrated way, media literacy education can make us more alert and prepared, while helping us to extend, and be aware of the limits of, our own knowledge. Added to this, media literacy can help people to advocate for better responses to address media-related societal challenges – like misinformation – as it supports them to be informed and to reflect on their own and others' experiences and needs.

In summary, we argue that a media literacy approach to living with misinformation involves the following:

- 1 Increasing our knowledge about media environments and the techniques used by the misinformation industry.
- 2 Advancing our critical thinking capabilities to support healthy scepticism about the information we encounter.
- 3 Developing digital skills that will help us to verify claims and sources and exert more control over our information environments.

Using this holistic media literacy approach can help people prepare for and respond to (mis)information in a humble and thoughtful way, whether they are doing this for themselves, for the benefit of their families, workplaces and communities or for improving society more generally. We elaborate on this approach in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Addressing misinformation can at times feel like an impossible task, but our research shows that people in Australia, just like those around the world, are far from ambivalent about this issue.²² People are concerned: they don't want to be misled or manipulated, and they do want to be able to do something. Fortunately, these attitudes provide an essential precondition for implementing a media literacy approach that can help and guide us to live with misinformation. Importantly, though, we also recognise the limits of media literacy. While this book demonstrates how media literacy can prepare people for misinformation, it can't eliminate this problem. Instead, we argue that media literacy needs to be one part of a multi-pronged and holistic approach to addressing misinformation. This approach is the focus of Chapter 2 where we explore the evidence on why misinformation is proliferating and what we know about the effectiveness of different measures.

Notes

- 1 See Peach et al., 2025, for a timeline of events. We use the term “alleged” because at the time of writing a court case is still pending.
- 2 Australian news organisations relied extensively on eyewitness footage to piece together the event. See, for example, Hair & Taouk, 2025.
- 3 Jackson et al., 2025; Malik et al., 2025; Taylor, 2025.
- 4 Albanese, 2026.
- 5 See Ito, 2013; Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2014.
- 6 An archived version of the project website can be found at <https://perma.cc/2PFN-XHSV>.
- 7 Dezuanni et al., 2026.
- 8 Diepeveen & Pinet, 2022; Notley et al., 2024; Tully, Madrid-Morales et al., 2022.
- 9 Notley et al., 2024.
- 10 Taylor, 2025.
- 11 Hameleers & Brosius, 2022.
- 12 Martel et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2023.
- 13 Roozenbeek et al., 2023.
- 14 Braun & Eklund, 2019; Horwitz, 2025.
- 15 Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2021.
- 16 Roberts, 2026.
- 17 For example, see Horwitz, 2025; O’Neil, 2017; Pasquale, 2015; Srnicek, 2017.
- 18 Davis & Molitorisz, 2024; Wilding & Dwyer, 2026.
- 19 Chadwick, 2019, p. 11.
- 20 See Esau et al., 2025; Flew & Yao, 2026.
- 21 Arendt, 2006.
- 22 Park, Fisher, McGuinness et al., 2025; Park, Lee et al., 2024.

2 Understanding misinformation

The internet has opened up the opportunity for anyone to publish content anytime and anywhere. This has largely been a positive thing since it has allowed people to share their own experiences and opinions more widely, and it has supported a more diversified media environment where a range of voices can co-exist and smaller media businesses can thrive. However, this change has come without clear lines of accountability. Who should be responsible when falsehoods are published online? And how can people be made accountable for the spread of harmful untruths if they are anonymous online? Without any systems in place to address these challenges, misinformation has proliferated online and it has become difficult for the public to identify the source and accuracy of content they come across.

While some scholars have claimed that the problem of misinformation has been overstated,¹ how researchers understand this issue is very much influenced by how they define misinformation, the research methods they use to study it, the platforms where they focus their attention and the events and topics they choose to study. For instance, misinformation research has tended to focus on politics, major events and health, whereas everyday topics have been neglected. A great deal of research has focused on news-like content with far less attention given to other forms of media such as advertising and entertainment content. Also, a disproportionate amount of academic research has focused on the United States and on cohorts that are not representative of diverse groups in the population.²

There are also questions regarding what gets included as misinformation. Many terms are used to describe different forms of misleading or deceptive information, some of them contested and some with overlapping, unclear or fuzzy boundaries.³ Some of these terms are contingent on understanding the intention of the person who created the content: disinformation, for example, is the term used to refer to false and misleading content that was created with the intention to deceive.⁴ As discussed in Chapter 1, misinformation has typically been used to describe false and misleading content that does not ostensibly have an intent to deceive. For most people though, it is not useful to differentiate between all the different types of false or misleading information because doing so can be

difficult, impossible or simply not worth their time to investigate. In addition, the intent of the creator of dubious content is often unknown or unclear.

This is why we use “misinformation” in this book as an umbrella term to cover all sorts of false, deceptive or misleading information.⁵ Misinformation spreads in different formats (videos, podcasts, memes, infographics, data visualisations, headlines, articles, etc.) and modes (e.g., visual claims, spoken claims, written claims). It is created for varying reasons (including economic, social and political ones), and it can have individual and collective effects.⁶ The category of misinformation is also not static: content can move in and out of it based on the available evidence, changes in consensus or expert opinion and as a result of environmental factors coming to light, such as the context in which the content was created, edited, shared and discussed.

While academic and public understanding of what misinformation is, and what its implications are, remains contested, there is widespread public and policy consensus that this is a serious problem affecting individuals and society. According to the World Economic Forum’s *Global Risks Report* for 2026, misinformation is among the top five global risks, just behind societal polarisation.⁷

In this chapter, we lay the foundations for this book by focusing on why people around the world are grappling with the problem of misinformation and by analysing why it seems to be getting worse over time. When we surveyed the academic literature on this topic, we identified five key underlying factors that enable and amplify the problem of misinformation, as shown here in Figure 2.1.



Figure 2.1 Five key factors that enable and amplify misinformation online and five types of responses.

Many proactive steps have been identified by civil society organisations, policymakers and researchers that can help to address the problem of misinformation. In the final section of this chapter, we explore what the research says about four commonly used approaches: fact-checking, labelling content, changing algorithms and public interest journalism. To conclude, we examine how media literacy can provide effective support to help people to live with misinformation and we explain why this is the approach we focus on in this book.

Monetised and opaque digital media infrastructures

The digital platforms where people spend the most time accessing media content are under the highly concentrated ownership and control of a small handful of mega technology companies that dominate the global market.⁸ These platforms are designed to make users invested and engaged, with the intention of monetising their interactions through advertising.⁹

To maximise audience reach, most digital platforms – which include search engines, social media, generative AI websites and news aggregators – provide a never-ending stream of media content that users can access easily. Rather than producing content themselves, which would be costly, these companies rely on content produced by others. These infrastructures are designed to facilitate, shape and influence our interactions with this media content, usually by removing or reducing the possibility of us directly engaging with the media producer for direct access to the content. In other words, these digital platforms make users dependent on them to access content. These platforms are effective at delivering content to users because they draw on many digital datapoints: people's locations recorded by GPS coordinates; their engagement with content through tracking of user behaviours; user demographics gained by asking people directly or working this out based on what they do online; assessments of users' interests, anxieties and fears, based on what can be gleaned from their online engagement and search digital footprints; and purchasing behaviours gathered through third-party cookies and device fingerprinting.

This mediated process where people get access to content via third parties is a departure from a time when people mostly relied on limited sources of news and information. Such news sources were typically produced by trained professionals and curated by publishers who sought to target and engage a mass audience rather than attract more individualised and distributed audiences. While this system was far from perfect, it was much easier to identify who was creating the content and the purpose for which they were creating it. People and places were still stereotyped and misrepresented, and issues important to some communities were neglected, but patterns of bias or misrepresentation were also more visible and, therefore, more contestable. Today, though, the content people encounter online is

hyper-fragmented and produced by a diverse array of creators who are often invisible or unknown to the user.¹⁰

Algorithms are a key technology used to determine and shape what people see online – and they are never neutral. The algorithmic systems that underpin digital platform – including search engines, social media platforms and generative AI systems – are built on biases.¹¹ For example, AI-enabled filtering and detection systems rely on machine-learning models trained on large datasets. These datasets often contain limited or skewed examples, which means that the machine-learning models trained on them can produce content that under-represents minority language or cultural groups or reinforces stereotypes and discrimination, thereby promoting inequality.¹² The algorithms that underpin commercially motivated search engines are also designed with a structural incentive to bias the ordering of search results in a way that maximises user attention.¹³

Advertising models are at the core of these platform architectures because they are the main way that money is made. Social media platforms largely operate automatically through programmatic advertising that does not differentiate between the quality or veracity of the content. Instead, these platforms are designed to favour reach and scale. Advertising revenues are generated by getting people to view, click or tap through to an advertisement. Reaching as many people as possible and, more importantly, reaching the right target audience determines the value of the advertisement. Clickbait content is frequently used to elicit emotional responses and channel more traffic from an advertisement to a website.¹⁴

Alongside clickbait, the spread of false and misleading content produced by generative AI, including “AI slop”, is muddying the information environment, with few or no guardrails in place to curb its spread. For instance, research has found that generative AI platforms and chatbots vary widely in terms of whether they promote or push back on conspiracy theories.¹⁵ Several studies have shown that popular generative AI content “hallucinates” and produces vastly different information for different users even when the same prompts are used.¹⁶ This is particularly concerning since some people are starting to rely on AI chatbots at least in part because they have a conversational style that makes them feel like a trusted friend.¹⁷

What is clear is that the need to gain and sustain people’s attention online has increased the scale, speed and velocity of the production and spread of misinformation,¹⁸ even though that may not be the primary or intended purpose of profit-driven technology architectures.

Declining trust in authoritative information providers

Trust in institutions, particularly in parliament and governments, has been declining over the past two decades, driven by various factors including the

global financial crisis of 2008, the rise of populism, the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical power struggles.¹⁹ News and other authoritative sources of information have not been immune to this trust decline. Before the rise of social media platforms, commercial news platforms made most of their revenue from advertising.²⁰ As digital platforms started to win more of the overall advertising revenue, the revenue model of commercial news providers crumbled, placing them under extreme financial pressure.²¹

As a consequence of ongoing disruption to the industry, news organisations are grappling to find sustainable business models. A range of solutions has been implemented, from the introduction of paywalls and subscription models, to diversifying revenue streams through events and selling consumer data. However, many of these solutions have failed to receive wide or rapid uptake by news consumers. For instance, fewer than one in five global news consumers pay for online news.²² As a result, many news outlets are struggling to sustain their businesses.²³

In addition, news outlets are gradually losing control over how their content is discovered and consumed by audiences. A survey of 280 digital news leaders from 51 countries finds that publishers expect traffic from search engines to decline by more than 40% over the next 3 years.²⁴ News publishers have already been struggling to address the growing number of people who encounter their content on social media or search platforms and don't click through to their websites, thereby diminishing the opportunity for the publishers to monetise engagement. This is now being made much worse by generative AI platforms that offer real-time news summaries. These allow users to consume information from news providers without needing to visit publishers' websites. This means news organisations are facing a "zero-click" era, where a user finds news and information that they are looking for without having to visit the source.²⁵ Furthermore, news outlets have been responding to the economic downturn with layoffs of journalists, resulting in a more precarious environment of news production.²⁶ From an editorial and production perspective, traditional journalism has also been confronted by new kinds of news actors, including influencers, who often challenge distinctions between objective reporting and opinion or advertising. This further weakens the authority of news organisations as the arbiters of truth.²⁷

Bad actors take advantage of the gaps in high-quality news provision and in declining levels of trust. In Chapter 1, we discussed how misinformation actors looking to deepen the confusion and uncertainty surrounding the 2025 Bondi terror attack exploited the delays in reporting from news organisations who were adhering to editorial standards and ethical reporting practices by verifying details before publishing. Other examples of bad actors involved in the creation and dissemination of misinformation include "troll farms", which create false social media accounts to connect with people. These exploitative businesses employ people, or even force slave

labour, to get people to post and repost misinformation.²⁸ Real people are hired or bots (automated accounts) are deployed by marketing and other companies to inflate follower numbers and engagement metrics, potentially increasing perceptions of legitimacy.²⁹ For example, bot accounts and AI agents have been deployed to create fake reviews for e-commerce merchants.³⁰ “Pink slime” news websites – sites masquerading as credible news organisations – create misinformation that responds to what people are searching for online as a way to make money through advertising revenue generated from website visits.³¹

Concern about misinformation also has a direct negative correlation with trust in news. In Australia, the proportion of people who say that they do not trust news is gradually rising. People who don’t trust news have a much higher concern about misinformation, and those who are most concerned about misinformation are also more likely to avoid news.³² This suggests that panic and anxiety about misinformation can lead to mass confusion and at times blanket cynicism from people who avoid credible news sources because they don’t know who or what to believe. Concurrently, news organisations are now experimenting with AI tools to improve efficiency, but this risks more reporting errors, which may further erode audience trust.³³

In light of these many changes and disruptions, some people are moving further away from news and losing interest altogether.³⁴ In Australia, 6% of adults do not consume any mainstream news, and less than half of adults say they trust news.³⁵ In addition, more than half (57%) of people who don’t pay for news subscriptions say that they will never pay for news.³⁶ This trend is similar in other advanced democracies.³⁷

While independent public interest journalism has long provided access to trusted news that supports public understanding and informed civic participation, news publishers have now become one of the least trusted institutions in many countries around the world.³⁸ Actors who benefit from misinformation have been proactively fuelling this growing distrust in news and other expert information providers because they benefit from widespread distrust. When members of the public no longer have news sources they turn to as being reliable and trustworthy, there are greater opportunities for nefarious actors to reach and manipulate them, and it’s more likely that people will believe their misinformation.

As already noted, the widespread presence of misinformation contributes to broad distrust of institutions.³⁹ This decline in trust has contributed to weakened democracies around the world. In fact, democracies are now outnumbered by autocracies and have declined to numbers not seen since the 1970s.⁴⁰ This “democratic backsliding” has been inextricably linked to misinformation that seeks to use political polarisation and anti-elite discourse to deepen anti-institutional sentiment and undermine civic care, connection and engagement.⁴¹

The social nature of information consumption

The more time we spend online, especially on social media, the more likely we are to encounter a large volume of claims, and this can result in people feeling burdened with information overload.⁴² When confronted with an overwhelming volume of information, people often turn to social networks to help them make decisions about products, events, information or ideas.

Social networks play a critical role in society because they affirm the identity of individuals, groups and communities and help people to connect. These networks are established on the basis of familiarity and trust, and this trust means people are more likely to accept information provided to them at face value.⁴³ However, relying on social networks for information about important topics such as health or politics can create a vicious cycle when someone is exposed to misinformation: they are more likely to believe and share it since it came from a trusted source.⁴⁴

People's online social networks, which are often sustained using social media, consist of people and organisations they know from their offline interactions as well as people they know only online. Social media is often infiltrated by people who are strangers to the user and by bot accounts created by people unknown to the user. There has also been a surge of influencers online, social media content producers who attain credibility within a specific industry or interest group and build trust through their online presence and interactions with followers.⁴⁵ People are increasingly relying on influencers for news and for important information, including in the area of health.⁴⁶ Through parasocial relationships, influencers build audiences – and trust with those audiences – that can rival or exceed those of traditional journalists. The issue here is that many influencers lack journalistic rigour and rarely have access to professional fact-checking teams and resources. This results in relationships between audiences and influencers that can enable the spread of misinformation.

Since social networks are often linked to people's identities, people prefer to share and consume information that affirms and strengthens their political, social or cultural identities. At the same time, they are less likely to share or like information that challenges these identities.⁴⁷ A cognitive bias called motivated reasoning is where people selectively accept information that coincides with their beliefs. This can play an important role in exposure to misinformation as well as people's propensity to share it.⁴⁸ When cognitive biases are at play, accuracy is unlikely to be driving people's information seeking, processing or sharing.⁴⁹

The challenge of information overload

Search engines and social media have created a paradigm shift when it comes to people's information seeking and information diets.⁵⁰ As we entered the

21st century, people moved from having an information diet consisting of a few media sources that others around them likely also consumed to more individualised and fragmented consumption made up of many disparate sources. Most people now have a complex and hybrid style of media consumption that includes a combination of traditional news media, streaming media, social media, podcasts, messaging apps and, more recently, generative AI platforms.⁵¹ This shift away from mass media to online media means that people need to make choices about which media platforms and content they will use. Platforms are designed to respond to this hyper-competitive environment by keeping people engaged for longer.

Irrespective of how much misinformation people are exposed to, feeling highly threatened by misinformation can lead to insecurities about navigating online environments.⁵² The overwhelming volume of information online, coupled with people's lack of confidence in their abilities to discern misinformation (see Chapter 3), contributes to news and information fatigue. Information fatigue can then lead to news avoidance, setting off a vicious cycle where people feel concerned about misinformation, overwhelmed with information and confused about what to trust.⁵³ Those who rely on social media as their main source of news are more likely to report being worn out by the amount of news compared to those who mainly consume news on TV or through newspapers.⁵⁴ Encountering distressing news and information in a way you can't control on social media can also be upsetting and alarming. These and other factors are leading to a rise in news avoidance. The *Digital News Report: Australia* has been tracking news avoidance since 2017. Just over half (56%) of Australians were avoiding news when the study began, but this had risen to 69% in 2025. The vast majority (91%) of those who say they are worn out by the volume of news they encounter online say they intentionally avoid it.⁵⁵

In the longer term, when people turn away from information because they don't know if it can be trusted, the result is blanket distrust, suspicion and disengagement.⁵⁶ This blanket distrust can make people more vulnerable to misinformation because they don't have trusted information sources to turn to or the ability to discern what is trustworthy.

The ability to exploit how people process information

Misinformation can spread as a result of the way people process information. There are a range of psychological factors that come into play when people encounter information. When scrolling or swiping quickly through social media and consuming various types of information, including news and entertainment that friends and families share or that algorithms suggest, accuracy is not necessarily at the forefront of people's minds. Instead, people may be driven by fear or concern for others or by moral outrage. In fact, studies show that misinformation sources tend to evoke more outrage compared to trustworthy news sources.⁵⁷

When people are trying to process large volumes of information, they often devise mental shortcuts – heuristics – to manage this. These shortcuts are necessary since people don't have the cognitive bandwidth to attend to every single detail of every piece of information they encounter each day.⁵⁸ One mental shortcut people often rely on is referred to as processing fluency. This is the ease with which a statement is comprehended. Processing fluency can come into play when information presented to a person contradicts their stored knowledge. People rely on the feeling of fluency and what makes sense to them, rather than retrieving, reflecting on and re-examining their existing understanding of a topic because doing so would require additional effort and time.⁵⁹ For example, our diary study participants (see Chapter 3) often spoke about this in terms of having a “gut feeling” that something was off or looked suspicious. But they also said that they wouldn't investigate this further unless they were highly invested in the topic.

In addition, people are more likely to believe messages they have been repeatedly exposed to over time. This is called the illusory truth effect where repeated exposure to the same message makes it believable.⁶⁰ Relatedly, neural science research shows that people do not typically reason through information that challenges their beliefs. Accepting is easier than rejecting information because rejecting information as false involves an additional process that requires motivation and cognitive resources. The parts of people's brains associated with negative emotions also become active when they encounter information that is contrary to their beliefs.⁶¹ This is why people sometimes rely on confirmation bias – a tendency to interpret new information in a way that supports their existing beliefs – as a mechanism to protect themselves from discomfort. Confirmation bias helps people reduce discomfort when they are exposed to information that is contradictory to their existing beliefs.⁶²

Not only do we have a desire to encounter information that is consistent with our beliefs, but we also have a desire to feel we belong and are accepted by other people. A person's belief system is closely tied to their identity, and identity is how a person makes sense of the world and their relationship to it. One way to understand our identities is as sets of meanings tied to the roles we have, the social groups we belong to and the traits that make us unique.⁶³ For instance, political beliefs are rooted in a person's identity and often shaped within a group dynamic.⁶⁴ This is why anything that feels like a challenge to our identity can be perceived as a personal attack, whereas anything that affirms our identity can boost our self-esteem. This strong association between personal identity and beliefs is one of the reasons why people are often blindsided by their own beliefs and biases. Information that is congruent with a person's beliefs is easily accepted while information that opposes a person's beliefs is often perceived as incorrect and rejected.⁶⁵

Common responses to address misinformation

Over the past decade, governments and civil society organisations have repeatedly investigated the most effective ways to respond to misinformation. Studies typically argue that addressing misinformation requires a coordinated, multi-pronged, whole-of-society approach. Comprehensive responses usually discuss the following:

- Government regulation: Laws to ensure transparency and fair competition, and to ensure misinformation is monitored and minimised on online platforms.
- Changes to technologies: Transparency in the design of algorithms, labelling that signals untrustworthy sources or content, and content moderation.
- Improvements to information environments: Proper funding and support for public interest news, for fact-checking and for quality, trustworthy information sources.
- Public education: Campaigns to raise awareness and programmes to equip citizens with media literacy skills, both in and out of schools.
- Addressing the trust deficit: Building trusted relationships between citizens, democratic governments and public institutions.

For instance, a policy guide published by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace reviewed a vast amount of research related to ten different types of policy interventions that aimed to mitigate the impact of misinformation. These included supporting local journalism, media literacy education, fact-checking, labelling, counter-messaging strategies, cybersecurity for elections and campaigns, statecraft/deterrence, reducing data collection and targeted ads and changing recommendation algorithms. However, they conclude that there is no single “best” policy option, and the efforts need to be multi-pronged.⁶⁶

In the following sections, we examine the issues and evidence relating to a few of the most commonly recommended interventions.

Fact-checking

Fact-checking refers to the practice of verifying media content, including news items, political claims and content on social media, with an aim to correct false claims after they have been published.⁶⁷ Fact-checking can appear organically in comments or posts or in more formal, published fact-checking posts. Research shows that fact-checking is effective at correcting false beliefs when people have been misinformed about specific claims, particularly when

they are not deeply invested in the partisan aspects of those claims.⁶⁸ However, fact-checking faces structural disadvantages. Misinformation can be produced and disseminated rapidly at minimal cost using emerging technologies such as AI, whereas fact-checked corrective information requires substantial human labour and time to generate. Because of the sheer volume of misinformation and the speed at which it spreads, individuals and organisations are constantly playing catch-up in trying to verify it: misinformation spreads faster than it can effectively be corrected and labelled.

While fact-checking can help people reject false claims, changing behaviours tied to those beliefs is very hard. As such, correcting factual misconceptions does not always lead to changes in attitudes or behaviours.⁶⁹ For example, studies have shown that exposure to corrected information about viral diseases does not necessarily lead to increased vaccine uptake or improved public health practices.⁷⁰ It is likely that confirmation bias plays a role in people rejecting factual health information. People are more likely to accept misinformation that aligns with their existing beliefs and are more resistant to corrections that challenge these.⁷¹

Another challenge is that digital platforms need to cooperate in labelling and disseminating fact-checked content in order to make it widely accessible. However, history tells us that cooperation from digital platforms can be minimal and end abruptly depending on their business or political motives. For example, in early 2025, in line with views expressed by the new Republican government in the United States, Meta announced it would end its third-party fact-checking service in the United States and replace it with Community Notes, moving the onus of responsibility for fact-checking onto users and effectively absolving itself of responsibility for detection and response.⁷²

Another issue with fact-checking is that it has been politicised by vested interests. Fact-checkers have faced persecution, travel restrictions, hate mail, harassment and death threats, while fact-checking organisations have been accused of bias and faced calls for defunding.⁷³ This makes the work of fact-checking organisations difficult and precarious.

Without diminishing the inherent value of having access to careful and transparent assessments of claims that are gaining currency and popularity online, the overall effectiveness of fact-checking in different environments and with different population groups is difficult to assess. Much of the existing research comes from laboratory studies using unrepresentative samples, raising concerns about how well the findings apply to real-world settings.⁷⁴ For example, most studies measure outcomes immediately after exposure to fact-checked items, which is not necessarily a strong reflection of people's behaviour or their longer-term recall.⁷⁵ Future research should consider how and where people encounter fact-checked content and the timeliness and relevance of this information to their lives.

Labelling content

When information is fact-checked after it has been published online and determined to be false, it is not as simple as removing the content. While legislation has been introduced in a few countries to have content removed if it is deemed to be false, there is widespread disagreement on whether there should be regulation to remove content at all. One method to alert users when content has been fact-checked and determined as true or false is to attach labels to the content. There is a substantive body of evidence that labelling false or untrustworthy content with additional context can make users less likely to believe and share it.⁷⁶

There are many types of labels that can be applied in the digital space. They can range from a digital signature or badge that verifies content as published by a credible individual or organisation to nudging labels (e.g., “Did you want to read the post before re-sharing it?”) that prompt people to follow good practice. Nudging labels, in particular, are designed to bring people out of their routines online and promote reflective behaviour.⁷⁷ Available research, though limited, suggests most users value accuracy and find that labels reminding them to consider accuracy make them less likely to share misinformation.⁷⁸

However, labelling may not be helpful to everyone as different audiences may react differently. There are also inconsistencies around people’s understanding of what certain labels mean, indicating the vital importance of raising awareness about the meaning of labels before they are implemented. Some research suggests that labels can sometimes cause users to become overly credulous about labelled content or overly sceptical of unlabelled content. This, however, may be a result of a lack of understanding about how labels are devised and used.⁷⁹ Some studies also indicate that forewarnings are relatively ineffective in reducing persuasive misinformation effects.⁸⁰ This is because forewarning hampers the cognitive effort required to refute the information and people may simply disengage from the message.

Social media companies began to actively employ labels only in 2019.⁸¹ However, the application of these within platforms, let alone across them, has not been consistent and is often piecemeal. While labelling has been trialled in many countries, it has not been consistent or at scale, meaning that users are often unclear about how these systems work. Therefore, more research is needed to understand the impact of labelling in cases where users understand what labels mean and how they are being created.

Changing algorithms

Feeds on many social media platforms are ranked by machine-learning systems that predict what will keep users engaged. Here, audience engagement merely refers to time people spend looking at something, their clicks or

taps, shares and replies. That is why emotionally charged content, fuelled by algorithms, travels further and sticks for longer.⁸² More intense content, for example, about crime and disasters, tends to spread quickly and is prioritised by algorithms.

Since algorithms prioritise emotionally charged content, and this is gamed by actors seeking to manipulate and deceive, algorithmic changes have the potential to ameliorate the problem of misinformation. For example, algorithmic changes from engagement-based to reverse-chronological (most recent post) ranking significantly reduce the prevalence of angry or partisan content.⁸³ However, experimental studies exploring the impacts of these kinds of technical adjustments have been conducted at a small scale, and additional evidence is required. Additionally, these kinds of algorithmic changes will overtly affect platforms' business models and are unlikely to be adopted by profit-driven technology companies without enforced regulation.

Platforms could also expand their use of algorithms to reduce the prevalence of certain kinds of content through detection and demotion or removal. This too requires regulatory frameworks and independent oversight to be in place, as it is problematic for platforms to be the sole determiners of what is true and what should be censored.⁸⁴ This is in part because platforms benefit commercially from inaccurate content. Relying on algorithms for detecting and responding to misinformation is also problematic as the values programmed into these systems are unlikely to be universally shared by different governments or cultures. Therefore, the effectiveness of such measures will depend on the establishment of regulatory frameworks and governance systems that mandate transparency and disclosure of algorithmic changes.

Supporting public interest journalism and making it accessible

There is strong evidence that the decline of news outlets, particularly newspapers in regional areas, has eroded civic engagement, knowledge and trust, helping misinformation to proliferate.⁸⁵ Local news can foster greater community involvement and voter participation.⁸⁶ Local news consumption is also positively correlated with civic engagement and citizen connection.⁸⁷

Trust in mainstream news needs to be regained if audiences are to turn to news for quality information.⁸⁸ Low trust in news is due to a range of factors, but one cause is when communities believe the issues that matter to them are not included or are poorly or unfairly represented by news organisations.⁸⁹ In Australia, research suggests many children, even as young as 8 years old, begin to perceive biases when it comes to how women and cultural minority groups are represented by news media, while the majority of the 8–16 age group believe news has no idea what the lives of young people are like.⁹⁰ To address the trust deficit, some news organisations are now applying models

and frameworks to better connect with audiences, contribute to public good and rebuild trust.⁹¹ Further research is needed to understand the impact of these initiatives on rebuilding trust.

In an ideal world, where news media are reliable, high quality and responsive to community needs, news engagement can encourage citizens' participation in society as well as boost confidence in identifying false information. For instance, researchers have found a strong correlation between those who have access to quality news and the ability to verify political misinformation.⁹² Exposure to credible journalistic content also reduces reliance on alternative and partisan sources, even when misinformation remains present within the wider information ecosystem.⁹³ This is because audiences who express higher trust in journalism are less likely to endorse false claims and are more likely to consult multiple sources.⁹⁴

Producing high-quality news is expensive, and, as already discussed in this chapter, the industry has been facing serious financial challenges, primarily because their financial model was upended by a handful of very influential global technology companies who now receive the lion's share of advertising revenue. While philanthropy can help by funding new ideas or pilot projects, it is not a long-term fix, even for countries with an established philanthropic tradition. For countries without widespread philanthropy, this is a particularly unrealistic solution. To truly support local news and public interest journalism, government action or new business models are likely to be required.

Increasing media literacy

Regardless of what other interventions are implemented to address misinformation, unless people understand how media environments operate, and have some specific strategies for recognising and addressing misinformation, they are unlikely to feel confident to successfully live with it. Media literacy refers to the ability to critically understand, evaluate, create, edit or share media messages. A variety of media literacy interventions have focused on supporting people to identify and respond to misinformation. In this section, we outline some of the studies that have aimed to measure the impacts of these interventions.

One central component of media literacy is the development of critical thinking skills, which enable individuals to weigh up the validity and credibility of content to make informed decisions.⁹⁵ It is this focus on critical thinking skills and practices that some scholars argue improves misinformation discernment and decreases misinformation sharing.⁹⁶ Several meta reviews on studies of how media literacy interventions help people to discern misinformation have suggested media literacy interventions are effective overall, especially when multiple sessions are implemented.⁹⁷ A rapid evidence assessment of research conducted between 2011 and 2021 focusing on effective media literacy approaches for addressing misinformation identified that media literacy

interventions are more successful in helping people identify misinformation when they prompt conscious and rational engagement with content and develop critical thinking skills overall.⁹⁸

However, the kinds of initiatives included in reviews or meta studies that examine the capacity of media literacy interventions to address misinformation are extremely diverse: they range from showing people a checklist about how to fact-check information, to short quizzes or games, to the provision of a series of face-to-face or online workshops.⁹⁹ Some of the studies included in these reviews are in situ assessments of active media literacy interventions. However, many are experimental, and most use non-representative sampling methods, with respondents often recruited from university student cohorts or via online crowd-sourcing services like MTurk, which raises questions about who and what the results represent.¹⁰⁰ Further, not all these examples include what we would refer to as a sociocultural approach; that is, an approach that recognises that media and information are embedded in complicated everyday social and cultural contexts. We also believe that some examples are accompanied by problematic solutionist rhetoric, meaning they promote a specific one-off, singular educational solution to the misinformation problem. This approach, we believe, is inherently flawed: first, it is often based on the assumption that there is a “silver bullet” solution to misinformation; second, it fails to recognise that those deliberately spreading misinformation change techniques and tactics over time.

Different initiatives also define media literacy in different ways and use differing pedagogies.¹⁰¹ For example, some meta studies consider “pre-bunking” games to be a form of media literacy – these are games that focus on teaching people the techniques of disinformation narratives so they can recognise them later.¹⁰² However, as we discuss in Chapter 4, many media literacy scholars question the claims being made for these kinds of interventions,¹⁰³ some of which go so far as to claim that these initiatives lead to forms of “inoculation” against misinformation.¹⁰⁴

Therefore, it becomes difficult to compare or aggregate the evidence for the success of media literacy interventions in ways that might satisfy policymakers or those with an interest in evidence-based responses since interventions labelled as media literacy, or included in media literacy meta studies, are necessarily so varied. Robust evaluation of real-world media literacy interventions – by which we mean interventions actually being implemented in society as opposed to ones only tested on research participants – is also not very common. Further, most robust studies focus on school-based education with very few studies looking at informal adult education.¹⁰⁵ Finally, very often single workshops or interactions are being evaluated; this runs contrary to a comprehensive longitudinal media literacy approach, which understands that media literacy efforts should be lifelong with repeated exposure and interactions over time.¹⁰⁶

In recent years, different versions of media literacy initiatives have faced critique from scholars who have questioned if they adequately address learning needs when it comes to new technologies or the needs of diverse communities and cultures.¹⁰⁷ These scholars emphasise that, as technologies develop and community priorities change, media literacy approaches and initiatives need to respond. In addition, as scholarly understanding of new media systems develops, new skills need to be promoted: for instance, lateral reading, which refers to the act of leaving a webpage and opening a new tab to seek more information or check facts, or critical ignoring, which refers to the decision to strategically ignore rather than engage with content because it does not serve you.¹⁰⁸

Overall, though, the available evidence points to clear benefits for sustained media literacy education that emphasises critical thinking, media knowledge and digital skills. However, there is a need for more diverse, robust and longitudinal studies around interventions to understand how distinct kinds of initiatives benefit and impact different groups and communities over time. To achieve this, research is also needed to investigate the media literacy abilities of different groups and to consider how the different learning interests of respondents influence the appeal and impact of different kinds of interventions – these have been key areas of focus within our 3-year research project.

Responding to everyday misinformation experiences with media literacy education

This chapter has outlined five key underlying factors that produce and amplify misinformation in our society. These factors are mostly related to the design of digital platforms, which have developed rapidly and without adequate public consultation or sufficient regulatory safeguards. A few large, profit-driven, global technology companies dominate people's experiences of information; in addition, these technology companies are driven to attract and maintain attention on their platforms. This has created an environment that is conducive to the proliferation of misinformation.

There are many possible ways this problem can be addressed, but none are perfect solutions. Appropriate regulation, investments in journalism and fact-checking, consistent content labelling and enforced changes to algorithms all show great promise, if implemented well. Applying several evidence-based approaches in tandem and over time is more likely to be most effective. However, in this book, we argue that these kinds of responses should be accompanied by a holistic approach to media literacy education that goes beyond the development of a defined set of technical skills. As leading media education scholar David Buckingham (2026) has argued, recent educational responses to misinformation often fail to recognise how the media operate in society and how media are used by audiences in complex ways, in specific social and

cultural contexts and in ways that often rely on, and reinforce, existing power relationships.¹⁰⁹

Therefore, to address the challenge of misinformation online, in addition to technical, content and regulatory changes, people need to be provided with opportunities to develop their media literacy across their lifetimes. To achieve this, it's important that media literacy initiatives are informed by the everyday experiences people have as they use media and media technologies. This requires a deep understanding of how people work out who and what to trust online and what kinds of resources or initiatives they might be interested in engaging with to support this decision-making. These topics are the focus of the following chapter.

Notes

- 1 Altay, Berriche et al., 2023.
- 2 Murphy et al., 2023; Flynn et al., 2022.
- 3 Jack, 2017.
- 4 Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017.
- 5 Our definition is informed by that used in: Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2020.
- 6 Hourigan et al., 2026; Marwick & Lewis, 2017.
- 7 World Economic Forum, 2026.
- 8 Noam, 2016.
- 9 Andrejevic, 2013; Srnicek, 2017.
- 10 Hourigan et al., 2026; Nechushta, 2024.
- 11 Eubanks, 2018; Thomas & Thomson, 2025.
- 12 Hasimi & Poniszewska-Maraña, 2024; O'Neil, 2017.
- 13 Nechushta, 2024; Rieder & Sire, 2014.
- 14 Milli et al., 2025.
- 15 Fitzgerald et al., 2025.
- 16 Anh-Hoang et al., 2025.
- 17 Barchas-Lichtenstein et al., 2026.
- 18 Aimeur et al., 2023.
- 19 Valgarðsson et al., 2025.
- 20 Armitage et al., 2023.
- 21 Braun & Eklund, 2019.
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- 23 Newman, 2026.
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3 Experiencing misinformation

Mary wakes up and immediately scrolls through her main social media feed. Algorithms govern what she sees and present her with a very different feed than her partner, who sleeps nearby. In between occasional updates from friends and family, Mary scrolls through a glut of sponsored posts, ads and posts promoted mostly by unfamiliar sources. While driving to work an hour later, she listens to a podcast episode her partner sent her and it makes her wonder whether the constitutional referendum being discussed will help or hurt her interests. She discusses some of what she heard with a colleague during her morning break. Later that day, Mary receives a few online articles that her colleague thinks she will agree with. At lunch, Mary refreshes her email and sees a few news headlines from newsletters to which she's subscribed. She shares one of the headlines – on whether shark nets are effective – on a WhatsApp group of her swimming friends and adds her own take on the topic. Mary strongly believes shark nets work and feels vindicated when the article supports her position. During an afternoon break, she pauses for a post about a new diet pill a celebrity is endorsing and wonders what her life would be like if she were thinner. Throughout the day, she receives news alerts from an app on her phone. In bed later that evening, she scrolls her social media feeds to unwind, even though she is tired and overwhelmed by the volume of information she has encountered that day. Mary sees many more diet pill ads in her feed. She doesn't know how much of the information she has seen throughout that day is reliable and couldn't begin to recall even half of it if she tried.

This vignette – which draws on four interlinked studies we carried out with more than 4,000 adult Australians – underscores that everyday encounters with online information are complex, relational, cross-platform and multi-modal and shaped by many factors (see Figure 3.1). Some of these factors we can influence, while others are difficult, or even impossible, for us to control. In the previous chapter, we looked at how changes to media industries and technologies have diversified information environments and, in many cases, made our media experiences more fragmented and overwhelming. This is especially the case on social media platforms where interesting, moving, trustworthy and reliable information is served up alongside propaganda, clickbait, hate speech, AI slop and false or misleading claims.

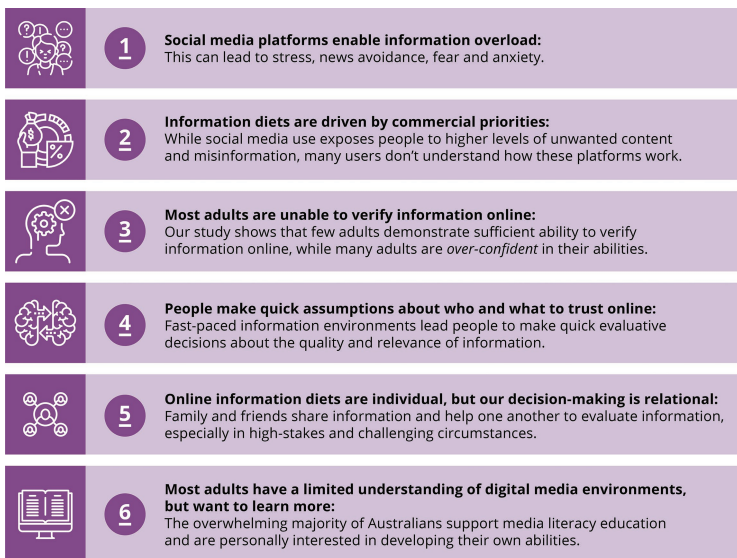


Figure 3.1 Six key findings from the research.

This chapter focuses on what it looks, sounds and feels like to be regularly encountering information online that we suspect may be untrue or unreliable. To better understand these experiences, we draw on survey research conducted with more than 4,000 adult Australians; a verification test completed by more than 2,000 of these adults; a diary study completed by 55 of the adults who completed the verification test and, finally, interviews with 20 of these adults (see Figure 3.2 for an explanation of these methods). Our research shows that people's perceptions about what constitutes misinformation – and their experiences encountering it – are shaped by a variety of factors: their education, knowledge and lived experience; influence from friends, family and coworkers; and the actions they and others around them take, both on- and offline.

People's encounters with misinformation are, for a range of reasons, often experienced reactively and emotively, while their decisions about who and what to trust online are often determined hastily or through habit. But our research also shows that when people are time-poor and swimming in a sea of information, they usually rely on past experiences and mental shortcuts or heuristics (see Chapter 2), rather than take the time to critically and methodically assess the truthfulness of every single claim or source they come across. This is because fact-checking every claim we encounter online each day is simply not feasible and there is largely no incentive to fact-check many of

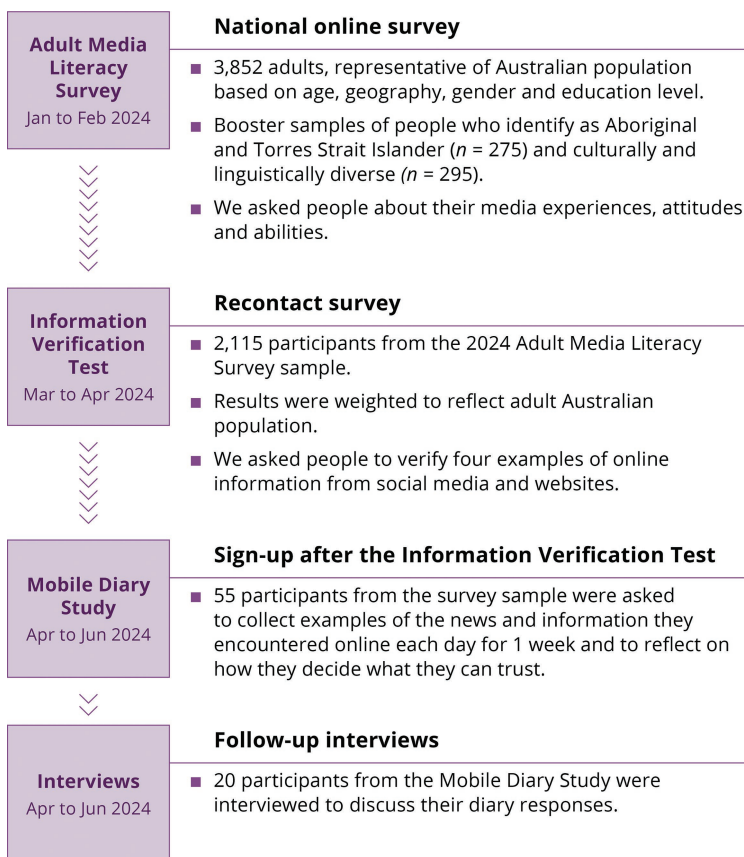


Figure 3.2 Overview of our project's research methods.

the questionable or dubious claims we encounter if we believe these have no direct bearing on our lives.

This isn't to say that false and misleading claims are something we should just accept. Misinformation can and does harm people's lives in a multitude of ways: it can lead to financial loss, loss of friendships and family connections, bullying and prejudice, poor health choices and more. No one wants to be lied to, manipulated or fooled; yet, encounters with misinformation are increasing people's mistrust and cynicism, factors associated with feelings of fear, anger, confusion and resentment.¹ Misinformation also undermines the reasons people use online media in the first place: to connect with friends, family and communities; to learn and be informed; and to access entertainment and

services. This reality leaves people with a conundrum: how can they spend the time they want to online but also feel capable of minimising their exposure to misinformation? That is, how can people learn to live with misinformation?

To help answer these questions, this chapter takes a deep dive into the complexity of people's everyday encounters with misinformation. After providing some background information about our research project and methods (see Figure 3.2), we provide an overview of six key findings that emerged from our research. We believe these findings provide a foundation for a holistic media literacy response that can help people identify and avoid misinformation in a digital age, by guiding them towards more proactive questioning and decision-making within their own information ecosystems.

Our research

In this chapter, we present key findings from our 3-year research project, *Addressing Misinformation with Media Literacy* (see Chapter 1). When we started to design our project, we were driven by a desire to understand whether increasing people's media literacy could help them to identify, avoid and respond to misinformation across their lifetimes. Before reaching this line of enquiry, we recognised that we needed to address some knowledge gaps.

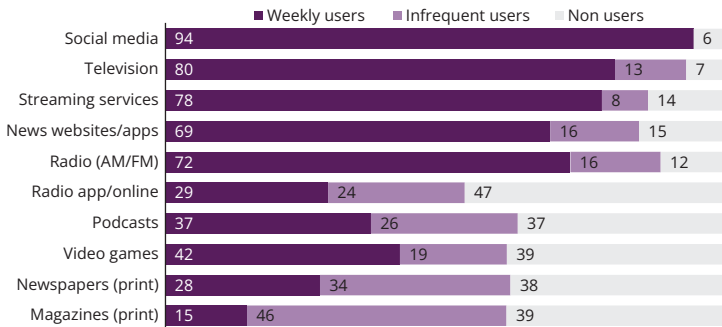
First, we wanted to ensure our project was informed by up-to-date information about people's media use, including their experiences with, and attitudes towards, misinformation. To achieve this, we ran a national Adult Media Literacy Survey of 4,442 people. This sample included a cohort of 3,852 adults who were representative of the Australian population based on age, gender, income, education level and geographic location, alongside extra responses (booster samples) from two groups who can be harder to reach in online surveys: First Nations Australians ($n = 275$) and culturally and linguistically diverse groups ($n = 295$).²

Second, we wanted to move beyond people's self-reporting of their own ability to identify misinformation. Here, we were guided by research that demonstrates that people often say they can do things in surveys that they cannot do, or do not do, and by research that finds people who perform poorly in specific domains often overestimate their abilities. Conversely, people with higher skills tend to underestimate their capacities.³ This is known as the Dunning–Kruger effect.⁴ Since we wanted to understand what people do when they are asked to decide whether online content is trustworthy, false or misleading, we implemented a test with more than 2,115 adult Australians who had already completed our Adult Media Literacy Survey. The approach we used is different to the one most commonly used by researchers to assess a person's ability to identify misinformation. The standard approach involves presenting a person with headlines or a partial news story and asking them to make a quick true/false determination about its validity, without providing any context or opportunity

to view the content in its complete and original form or to fact-check claims made.⁵ Our approach was, instead, inspired by a verification test developed by the Stanford History Education Group (now the Digital Inquiry Group).⁶ Using this approach, we presented participants with examples of online content. This included one Facebook post about voting during a state election, one Instagram post about a natural disaster, two website links about renewable energy and a screenshot of an IT news website that included sponsored content. We invited participants to verify this content by using the internet in any way they wanted and by taking as much time as they needed.⁷ We then asked people to explain what they had done to verify the information they were presented with and we analysed their responses. We believe this latter approach reveals far more than other approaches about people's actual abilities to critically reason, check sources and fact-check content online because it assesses what they did, rather than just whether they arrived at a correct answer.⁸

Third, we were concerned that too little is known about the everyday experiences people have with information of varying trustworthiness online. Most studies of misinformation tend to be topic-driven.⁹ For example, they focus on a disaster or specific hot button issue like an election or climate change, or they focus on content from a single source or platform. But people's encounters with misinformation are embedded within their own unique daily information ecosystems, which are very unlikely to be confined to a single topic, source or platform.¹⁰ Our national survey reveals that Australians use at least three types of media every day on average (see Figure 3.3) (social media, free-to-air TV and streaming TV are the most commonly used), and

THE TOP 10 MEDIA FORMATS (%)



N= 3,852

Figure 3.3 The most popular media formats for adult Australians.

they use an average of five social media platforms every week.¹¹ Research undertaken in other parts of the world shows that these media use behaviours aren't unique to Australians.¹²

The challenge with understanding the impact of personalised media diets as researchers, though, is that people's individual experiences are largely opaque. We can't really see what others are encountering online, and it's challenging for people to accurately recall their media diets, even when asked about this a short time later.¹³ To address this challenge, we designed a digital diary study where we asked a diverse group of 55 participants to save examples of news and information they came across online each day for a week as they did what they normally would online. This open framing also allowed the participants to decide what type of content and what topics to include. We then asked them to explain how they decided if each example they saved was trustworthy or untrustworthy so we could better understand people's decision-making processes. On average, each diary study participant submitted 27 examples of news and information they encountered during the 1-week timeframe (about four claims per day). Some 79% of these examples were determined by participants to be trustworthy, with the remaining 21% considered to be untrustworthy, false or misleading. To understand these encounters further, we followed up by interviewing 20 of the participants, asking them about how their experience of information online related to their own backgrounds and experiences.

After examining the results of each individual study, we integrated the data to develop comprehensive findings. In the following sections, we share six key findings that emerged from our integrated analysis that, we believe, need to underpin educational responses to the challenge of misinformation. These findings are explored using the research participants' own explanations about their online experiences (noting we use pseudonyms throughout to ensure our participants remain anonymous).

Social media platforms enable information overload

The sheer volume of information that people encounter online in a short amount of time can be completely overwhelming. Information overload can lead to stress, fear and anxiety.¹⁴ In the words of one of our participants, 56-year-old office manager Carolynne from an outer suburb of Melbourne:

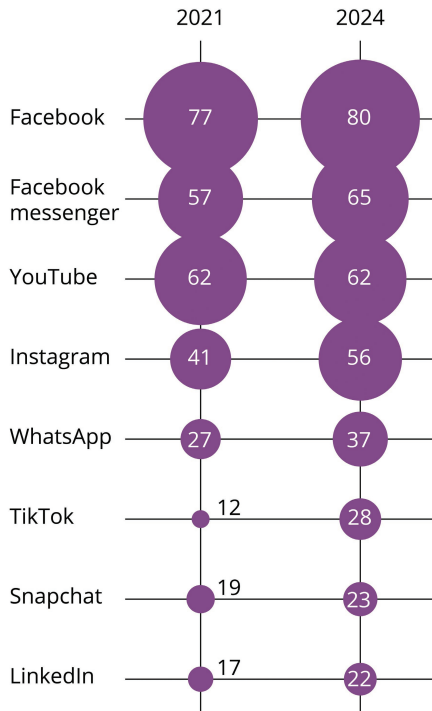
It was just so much, it was. It was really overwhelming when I thought about how much time and how much that came through in one day. Yeah, it was, it was mind blowing, I thought, "My goodness, do I get that much stuff coming through?"

(Carolynne, 56)

This experience was articulated by nearly all of our participants, including both older and younger adults.

Our 2024 survey reflects the Australian adult (18+) population based on age, gender, geography (states and territories) and education level. It shows that social media is now used by adult Australians more frequently than any other type of media, a finding replicated in a range of studies from other countries, including the United Kingdom and United States.¹⁵ More than nine out of ten (94%) Australian adults use social media on a regular basis (at least weekly), compared to 80% who watch free-to-air TV, 78% who watch streaming television and 69% who use a news website or app. Almost half of adults (48%) used five or more social media platforms in the week before we surveyed them – a significant increase from when we asked the same question 3 years earlier, suggesting that adult use of social media is increasing and diversifying.¹⁶ Adult Australians use Facebook the most (see Figure 3.4),

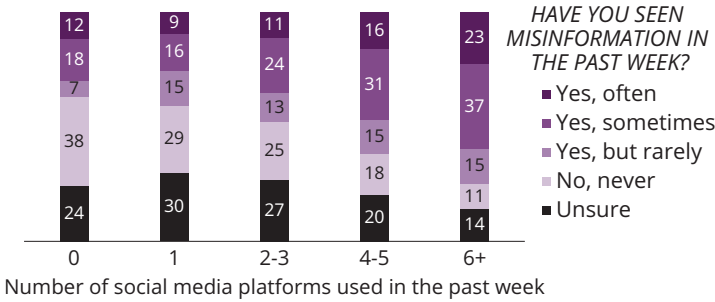
**THE TOP 8 SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS
USED IN THE PAST WEEK (%)**



2021: $N = 3,510$; 2024: $N = 3,852$

Figure 3.4 The top social media platforms used by adult Australians.

The more social media platforms people use, the more likely they are to report seeing misinformation



N = 3,852

Figure 3.5 Social media use and seeing misinformation: a strong correlation.

and it is the platform where Australians most frequently report experiencing misinformation.¹⁷

There is a direct association between the number of platforms people use and people reporting that they are regularly encountering misinformation online. More than two thirds (70%) of people who used six or more social media platforms reported seeing misinformation in the previous week, compared to one quarter (25%) of those who used only one social media platform.¹⁸ This means that people’s increased use of social media correlates with an increased exposure to misinformation (see Figure 3.5). This somewhat explains why people’s concern about misinformation appears to be high and growing over time.¹⁹

While most people say they can’t imagine living without the internet, the stressful experience of information overload can lead to people becoming news avoiders.²⁰ One of our participants, 52-year-old Gina, an educator living in a major regional town in Western Australia, recounted:

There was lots of stuff about Israel and Hamas, and a lot of that has sort of quietened down as far as what’s coming through to me. I’m not actively looking for that stuff anymore to find out what was going on. And that is the kind of information that is quite overwhelming for someone like me, but also for someone living in Australia, where we don’t have any, like most of us don’t have any firsthand experience with anything like that. Violence isn’t something that most of us come across where I live...it’s quite overwhelming, and I’m not sure of the difference I can make for those sorts of situations.

(Gina, 52)

The tension between people feeling like they are benefiting from information abundance and feeling completely overwhelmed by it was clear among most of our diary study participants. Gina, like many of the participants, explained that receiving distressing news on social media when she was not wanting to see this resulted in her avoiding news – a widespread and growing issue (see also Chapter 2). This development is a concern since avoiding news is likely to reduce people's exposure to fact-checked and more reliable sources of information.²¹

Harriet, a retired former hospitality worker in her 50s, who lives in a small regional town in New South Wales, told us that she has now become highly distrusting of all media she encounters online. She believes that a lot of the information she encounters, particularly on social media platforms like Facebook, is “just for the clicks”. Like Gina, Harriet is overwhelmed by the news she is presented with on social media that, she says, often leaves her feeling depressed or emotionally drained. Whereas in past decades Harriet could have prepared herself or made a choice about tuning in to a news broadcast, nowadays she can't switch off news content from her social media feed; consequently, Harriet explains, she chooses not to actively seek news out elsewhere:

It's all just too much. It's a very sad world that we live in, that we have to see and listen to this. That's why I like living in my bubble. Unless it's in my face or about me or directly impacts me, I don't, I know this is sad, but I don't care. I don't want to care. I don't want to hear it.

(Harriet, 56)

As we mentioned in the previous chapter, news avoidance has increased in Australia, as it has globally. In Australia, women are more likely to avoid news than men, while news avoidance among adults living in regional areas has increased more than any demographic group.²² To limit her interaction with negative and distressing news, Harriet sometimes avoids social media, or she proactively hides content or blocks sources she believes are untrustworthy, misleading or overly negative. She says other people should be encouraged to do the same to try to avoid the harms that can come from false and misleading information online:

Live in your bubble...watching [entertainment] shows is all well and good, but trying to get any real news from Facebook or from the internet...unless you're on the site for Channel 9, Channel 10, ABC, unless you're on the official sites, you're gonna come across a lot of scams. So, turn the computer off and pack it away. That's the only way you're gonna be 100% [safe].

(Harriet, 56)

While many diary study participants were quite critical of the amount of online information they encountered on a daily basis, a few perceived the abundance of information online as having a beneficial impact on their lives.

Ally, a single mother in her 40s, living with her young daughter in the capital city of Melbourne, relies heavily on social media to access current news and information. One of the reasons she engages with news and information via social media is because it allows her to bypass news paywalls. As noted in Chapter 2, news publications around the world have been forced to introduce subscriptions because of a massive decline in advertising revenue that has primarily shifted to online technology giants Google and Meta.²³ In this context, Ally values not only the way social media makes news accessible but also the way it diversifies journalism. She notes that many of the sources she turns to are everyday individuals who have stepped in to fill a void, particularly when it comes to local or community news.

It's like we're, I don't know, part of the news. Like we do make the news too, I guess. You know, there's people like journalists who post on social media and they'll take individuals' stories or updates of local kinds of things, you know, like "oh, there's a traffic accident here". And you know, we wouldn't know about that stuff, otherwise. There's that kind of gap in the industry that's being filled.

(Ally, 42)

Ally is concerned, though, about the impacts news and information online can have on people who might not have the skills to determine what is and isn't trustworthy content. She is particularly concerned about her mother and aunt who, she says, are often unable to differentiate between misinformation and factual, trustworthy information:

My mum is in her seventies and she's on Facebook, she's on Instagram, and she sees these things and she'll say to me, "oh look if you drink lemon, this will happen". Or, "oh, they're selling these pills" and I'll have a look and I'll go "no, no, don't buy that. Don't!" There's a lot of misinformation out there. There's a lot of potential for scams or fraud.

(Ally, 42)

Harriet's, Gina's and Ally's experiences reveal that information overabundance on social media is experienced differently by people. Our participants' distinct experiences show how people's news and information engagement on social media is closely intertwined with a range of interrelated social, cultural and economic factors, ranging from how busy they are to where they live, who they connect with online, their mental health and mood, their confidence in their ability to distinguish what is true and what is deceptive, right through to their use of community-based online networks for information sharing. What was common across the diary study participants, though, is a tension people feel between being informed and included online and feeling out of control and misled. This is a point we return to throughout this chapter.

to claims and messages – even ones people know are false or misleading – still has an impact. This is because the claims start to feel familiar, and through repeated exposure a person is more likely to accept them over time. This is referred to as the illusory truth effect.²⁴

For Karl, one of our diary study participants, social media has become a primary source of up-to-date and relevant news and information, not because this was necessarily his preference but because of changes in the news industry itself. Karl, who is in his 40s and receives a disability support pension, lives in a large regional town in northern Queensland where there is only one local news outlet that exclusively services the area. This single news outlet is behind a paywall, which Karl says is the main reason he's come to avoid mainstream news sources online.

They don't tell you about what the story actually is, and it's just to get you to click on there. I will not pay for online news. I refuse to. I think it's not worth the money you pay for it. It should be public knowledge.

(Karl, 43)

Karl's decision not to pay for any news is common: only 22% of Australians pay for a news subscription.²⁵ Karl points to specific content creators on YouTube as being more accessible and better sources of news and information than mainstream news outlets. He says these sources are more reliable and trustworthy as they discuss different topical issues in a more relatable and detailed way:

The YouTube accounts I get information off, get news off, I trust because they go into depth and talk about all aspects of what they're talking about. Usually goes for half an hour on each subject. I find that they're more trustworthy when they go in depth into the stories, what they're about, their own take on it. And then I can make my own decision about it.

(Karl, 43)

Slightly more than half (54%) of the examples labelled as untrustworthy, false or misleading by our 55 diary study participants were saved from social media platforms. Although we had predicted that these social media examples would be dominated by content from influencers or personal connections, they actually came from a range of sources. Indeed, much to our surprise, the majority of the examples the participants shared (62%) had been published by news organisations (Table 3.1). Eighty-two percent of the examples from news organisations came from domestic outlets that are Australian-owned or registered or are localised versions of international outlets (see Table 3.2). The vast majority of the domestic outlets included were mainstream news organisations (99%), with participants sharing examples from popular commercial

Table 3.1 Sources of content participants labelled as untrustworthy/false/misleading

<i>Source</i>	<i>Count (n)</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Mainstream and alternative news outlets	262	62
Social media (individuals and community groups)	82	19
Aggregators and browsers	30	7
Businesses	24	6
Blogs and websites	7	2
Politicians and political parties	10	2
Quoted individuals	5	1
Government and non-government organisations	3	1

Table 3.2 Ownership of news content participants labelled as untrustworthy, false or misleading

<i>Source</i>	<i>Count (n)</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
News Corp Australia	53	25
Seven West Media	37	17
Nine Entertainment Co.	32	15
Daily Mail	32	15
Yahoo! News	23	11
Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)	19	9
Alternative or independent news outlets (e.g., <i>Mamamia</i>)	12	6
Special Broadcasting Service (SBS)	4	2
Guardian Australia	4	2

Note: Percentages sum to greater than 100% due to rounding.

news outlets as well as public service broadcasters. Just under one in five (19%) were examples published by individuals or groups on social media.

A third (33%) of the examples were of opinion content or included claims that couldn't be verified. For instance, this included a product review posted on social media in which the author provided an opinion-based endorsement of certain baby and childcare items. Another example included an investigative news article from a reputable news outlet that was unable to be independently verified as source details – in particular, for a series of images around which the article hinged – were not provided.

When we fact-checked the remaining content with verifiable claims, we found only 12% were false or misleading, compared to 58% that were verifiably true. This suggests people are hypervigilant and perhaps overcautious

about content they come across on social media. Participants seemed to err on the side of caution when content contained markers they considered mistrustful, like hyperbolic language, or when they perceived the source itself to be unreliable.²⁶

We found that very few diary study participants took steps to verify the examples they considered to be untrustworthy, false or misleading. Instead, they reflected on how they mitigated engaging with content they viewed as false or misleading by simply ignoring it and moving to another platform or by continuing to scroll or swipe through their social media feeds. For example, Rick, a business analyst in his 30s who lives in the capital city of Adelaide, explained how being increasingly time-poor due to work responsibilities limited his capacity to actively seek out news and information. This had further increased his reliance on algorithmically recommended content to stay informed, while also constraining his capacity to verify untrustworthy content. In his words:

I guess based on what I look at, [my news feed] just pops up articles and I'll skim through the headlines and if something grabs my attention, I'll go to it. But these seem to be less mainstream sites and more just random sites that I click on, so it's a bit hit and miss whether it's trustworthy or not. I was really busy at work this week and so I was really only focusing on the articles that grabbed my attention. It tends to be once I've moved past those and I start clicking on links into random articles, that's when I find the less trustworthy information, which I just didn't have time to look into this week.

(Rick, 32)

Rick's experience was echoed across our diary study participant cohort: time-poor and overwhelmed with information, participants weren't engaging in fact-checking or other verification methods. Instead, they were making decisions about the veracity of content using their own heuristics (see Chapter 2) or loosely defined rules. Firstly, participants decided whether the content was relevant or important for their everyday lives. Secondly, they relied on cues that they believed indicated the content was either trustworthy or untrustworthy. However, as noted, this meant that many of the claims participants identified as being false, misleading or untrustworthy were accurate. This does not negate or discount the participants' perceptions and experiences of misinformation. Rather, this points to the need for information providers to better understand the way people develop trust and mistrust cues such that they reconsider the use of certain engagement techniques that may result in short-term gains – for example, clickbait or hyperbolic language – but which ultimately do long-term harm to their brands.

The diary study also showed how wider system and structural influences, such as algorithmic factors, are reshaping the way individuals identify,

interact with and respond to news and information within the contexts of their everyday lives. The shift towards encounters with news and information on social media rather than through other direct encounters with the companies producing news and information content means that news and information are increasingly curated by algorithmic recommendation systems. On the one hand, the News-Finds-Me mentality afforded by algorithmic systems allows people to navigate the seemingly endless information that exists online in a way that leads them to feel informed and up-to-date on current events with a relatively low level of effort.²⁷ Platforms, of course, claim that these recommender systems deliver tailored content that is personalised to each individual's interests. On the other hand, the algorithmic systems shaping the delivery of news and information to online audiences are primarily underpinned by overt commercial imperatives and are designed, in many cases, to drive measurable engagement that will make platforms money more than they are to meet individuals' needs for accurate, high-quality and trustworthy content.²⁸ In this way, algorithmic feeds often seem to be working against users, rather than for them.

In our national survey, 40% of adults say they don't understand the relationship between algorithms and news, while most of those who do have some understanding say they want to learn more.²⁹ Many of our diary study participants reflected on how they feel that the news and information they encounter on social media are increasingly irrelevant to them and unaligned with their interests or networks. Forty-year-old Rob, a public servant from a large regional town in Western Australia, discussed how he has started to feel like he has reduced control over the news and information he sees online:

It's curated what I interact with. I would say, Facebook... has [especially] started to suggest a few news articles and suggest some things which, just, they're really not my interest. It's got no relevance to me. There were a few things that popped up with news like car crashes or road traffic issues in Eastern states. I'm not driving over there. What do I care about what's happening?

(Rob, 39)

Some participants lamented that they felt stuck in a bind: being off social media made them feel anxious because they might miss out on news or events shared by friends, but being on social media had taken away their sense of control and choice over the information they were exposed to. Luke, an IT security manager in his 50s living in an outer suburb of Sydney, explained his deep frustration with this lack of control:

My big point, though, is that I did not ask for this. And this is typical of Facebook and I think endemic of social media in general and the sad way

that social media has been inclined over the past few years. In other words, it's all very well signing up and sending out friend requests and getting messages from them. But it's just gone a bit overboard where seemingly half of the things I receive in my feed are unsolicited, be they adverts, items by whatever, whomever private companies. I find this very objectionable and well, even offensive if you want to use that type of strong word. I didn't ask for this.

(Luke, 52)

As detailed in the previous chapter, the shift of advertising to digital platforms is associated with declining direct engagement with news brands. These developments, along with the more recent development of AI-enabled search engines, in turn mean that some people have lost or are in the process of losing the habit of engaging directly with news providers and have instead come to rely on a range of other (potentially questionable) sources to mediate access.³⁰ These developments may mean, for example, that people have come to accept social media or search engines as their primary source of news because they are not willing to pay for subscriptions to news providers, or they don't have the energy or drive to consume any news beyond what they are already seeing in their feeds (see Figure 3.7). This is despite research that shows both social media and AI-powered search engines are more likely to produce misinformation or lead to more homogenous news results.³¹

While exposure to low-quality news and misinformation on social media has likely diminished people's trust in news, the way news is delivered by non-traditional news providers is also likely to have changed some people's expectations of what news can and should look like; this is especially true for younger adults.³² At the same time, the participants in our study almost uniformly agreed that social media exposes people to higher levels of unwanted information and content and this is a real frustration that makes people feel exploited and gamed by digital platforms. Our research reveals, however, major differences in people's levels of understanding of how algorithms and AI work, and this lack of knowledge likely makes some people more exposed to misinformation and less able to respond to it.

Most adults are unable to verify information online

Our national media literacy survey shows that while most adult Australians (60%) are confident they can find the information they need online, less than half (42%) are confident they can check if this information is true or not (see Figure 3.8). This confidence drops to around one in four for adults who did not finish high school and for adults aged 65 and over.³³ What is, perhaps, of even greater concern is just how many adults are *overconfident* about their abilities to verify information online.

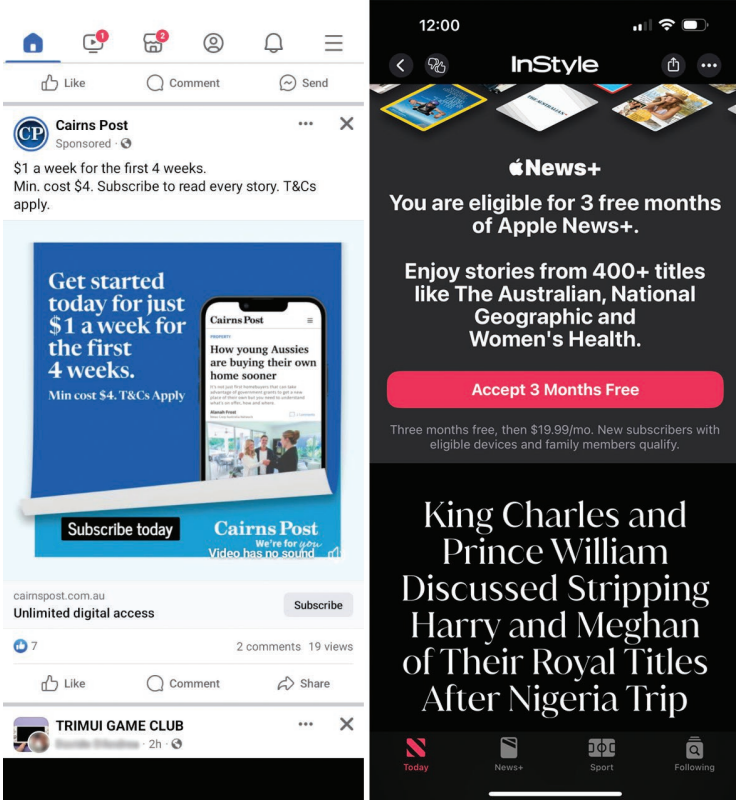


Figure 3.7 Examples of participants' engagement with news paywalls.

The second survey we implemented tested adults' abilities to verify information online. Participants were given four different tasks to test their abilities to verify information on websites and social media posts (see Figure 3.9). Participants were asked to evaluate the posts and articles; decide whether the content was true, reliable and trustworthy; and explain how they came to their conclusions. Participants were told that the posts and articles were sourced from various websites and social media, and they were asked to imagine that they encountered the examples online and wanted to check their accuracy. Participants were free to search online on any device they had at hand. They could also click or tap the two social media posts provided to see them in their original contexts. The first question for each task had a correct answer (yes/no) that related to the information they were being shown (e.g., "Does

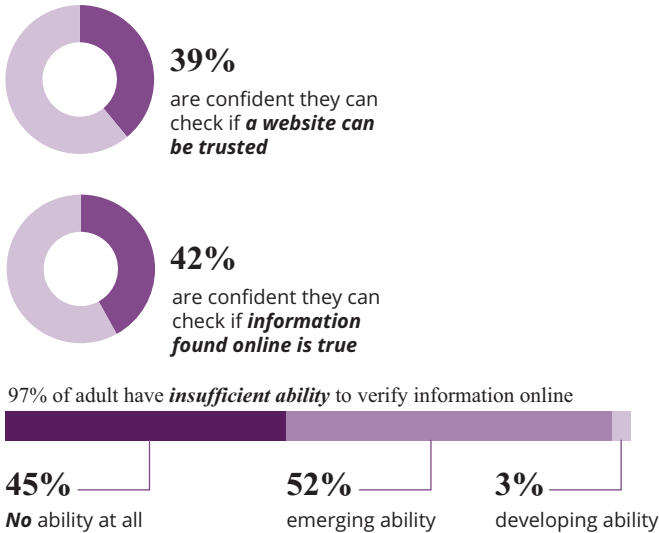


Figure 3.8 Most adults are not confident they can identify misinformation online and have insufficient ability to do this.

this post provide evidence of election misconduct?”). Those who selected the incorrect answer were classified as “disqualified” and were automatically assigned a zero score. The second question asked each participant to explain how they reached their conclusion in the first question. These open-text comments were then analysed to determine each respondent’s ability to apply useful and credible verification techniques.

We were shocked to find that only 3% of adults passed the verification test, meaning they scored 50% or more. Forty percent of the people who said they were confident they could verify information in the first survey scored zero on the test. Younger adults, males and people with a high level of general mistrust of news and information were all more likely to be overconfident about their abilities.³⁴ Most importantly, nearly everyone scored poorly, with very few people able to demonstrate basic digital verification skills: for example, checking and evaluating the source of the claim to consider reliability, expertise or vested interests; consulting other sources on the same topic; pasting a headline into a search engine to see if a fact-check had been performed; or performing a reverse image search. Instead, we found that people relied on assumptions about media and on mistrust cues to make decisions.³⁵

Michael is one of the many participants who was overconfident about his ability to verify information online. Aged in his mid-60s, Michael lives



Figure 3.9 Online content participants were asked to evaluate in the information verification test.

in a regional city in Western Australia, has a university degree, works in a highly skilled trade and migrated to Australia from another high-income, English-speaking country. While he did not score zero on the test, he did score under 50%. Given Michael's strong interest in psychology, his confidence in his media literacy ability and his claim that he is always alert and sceptical, it was a surprise to the research team that he scored so poorly on the verification test. When explaining his approach to verifying information online, he told us:

I've been a magician, ergo a sceptic, for about 50 years...I have studied psychology for quite some time, since I was 14 actually, and the

psychology of perception and deception have been my largest focus. So, learning key phrases and key concepts in the news which indicate fraud or less-than-reputable statements....Some things are not even worth bothering with. They've been proven to be, to use the technical term, bullshit, so thoroughly that you don't need to debunk them anymore. They're just known to be frauds.

(Michael, 62)

Michael's confidence in his own "bullshit" detector, as he put it, clearly emerges from his long-held belief in the importance of independent critical thinking and analysis when it comes to media consumption. He is, he said, looking out for "frauds" and "deception" while practising scepticism. The challenge here is that in the test we could see that Michael tended to resolutely make hard and fast decisions about what deceptive and untrustworthy content looked like to the extent that he felt that he did not need to second-guess or check information further, even though the test asked him to do so. Arguably, Michael's approach to making decisions quickly runs contrary to the sceptical approach he professes to follow, in that such an approach requires a person to be open-minded and curious before making a decision about what is true and trustworthy.³⁶ While Michael described his own verification approach to us in scientific and methodical terms, in practice, the way in which he determined whether content was trustworthy or not, by his own explanation, reflected what we would call blanket cynicism, rather than healthy scepticism. In a diary study reflection video, Michael explained his approach to us:

When you look at anything on the net, the first thing you have to remember is triangulate. Because if it's something important, like a scientific study or something that actually matters to a human being, you can usually get good data for the absolute garbage that's passing for news these days. It's [news stories] hardly worth triangulating on because it's saying nothing... The media as a standard genre, has lost most of its credibility because they no longer even try.

(Michael, 62)

In the verification test, Michael demonstrated using a verification technique, in this case triangulation, to determine the trustworthiness and credibility of the example he was given. He showed us how he looked at other credible websites to compare what they'd said about the claim being made. However, Michael verified only one of the examples he had been given. For the other tasks and examples, Michael took no further steps to justify his decisions other than to say that sources were using "obvious and standard scare tactics" or that the information was "uncredited, irrelevant and unverifiable" on the basis that it had been published on social media. While it's useful and desirable for people to have a high level of confidence in their abilities to spot

misinformation, our research shows that this can become problematic if it's based on unhelpful verification techniques, like relying on broad assumptions, general cynicism or "gut feeling" alone.

These types of unhelpful verification techniques were also demonstrated by Sandra, a pensioner in her 50s who lives in regional Victoria. Sandra said she was confident in her ability to verify information in our survey, but she scored zero on the verification test. Our interview with Sandra showed that, like most of the other diary study participants, she is overwhelmed with the amount of information she encounters on social media, but she says that she is investing time to try to work out what information and sources can be trusted. One of the useful techniques Sandra identifies is critical ignoring, whereby people resist having their attention hijacked by deciding what they want to see and actively choosing what to ignore.³⁷ In Sandra's words:

Well, basically, I just think that you've got to keep an eye on it yourself. You just look for what you can. And, yeah, just look for what you want to look for, and don't worry about the rest of this stuff.

(Sandra, 55)

Sandra also describes how she sometimes checks to see what multiple sources are saying to determine the accuracy of a claim:

To double-check, I will probably get online and have a look at a couple of different places where I think that I might be able to get some kind of answer. So, you can kind of get something from one place and another thing from somewhere else, and kind of put it together, and see if you can kind of work it out that way.

(Sandra, 55)

While cross-checking is an important and commonly recommended verification technique that underpins professional fact-checking processes, it is only effective if the sources used to cross-check claims are reliable and trustworthy. Sandra's knowledge of, and assumptions about, a source's reputation shapes the "gut feeling" that leads her to make decisions about different information claims, particularly on social media:

Most of it's made-up stuff. You can just tell with the wording and how they're saying it. And things like that, you can tell it's a scam. You just get a gut feeling. You can just kind of say, "no, that's just [false]"...they're just known to not tell the truth and to blow things out of proportion...So, you've got to put your feelers out and just be careful with stuff like that because there is a reputation of social media being a bit scammy and not telling the truth.

(Sandra, 55)

Despite being confident in her gut feeling and being able to describe different verification techniques, Sandra was unable to identify any of the false or misleading examples included in the information verification test. She reasoned that some examples were genuine because of a general feeling she got about the way they looked; for others, she intuitively accepted the content because “I have heard other stories of this happening to other people”. Sandra’s decisions demonstrate the limitations of being reliant on gut feelings or assumed knowledge when coming across information from unknown sources and the need for more generalised knowledge and understanding of how media environments operate.

People make quick assumptions to decide who and what to trust online

As we’ve highlighted throughout this chapter, online spaces are often experienced as overwhelming, fast-paced environments that present us with diverse content of varying levels of quality and trustworthiness. Our diary study shows that to navigate these environments people are forced to make quick evaluative decisions to determine not only the quality and purpose of news and information but also its relevance and value to their lives. This introduces a real conundrum since people’s willingness to take the time to critically assess information, rather than make immediate judgements, is an important element of scepticism. Scepticism is a desirable and important trait for helping people to live with misinformation, as a sceptical attitude often results in further engagement with the issue at hand, for example, by investigating similar news stories or seeking information from authoritative sources.³⁸

We examined the 322 examples of “false misleading and untrustworthy” content saved by the 55 diary participants and reviewed the explanations participants gave for labelling the content in this way.³⁹ The top five most commonly used mis- and distrust cues were as follows: (1) low trust in the source or (re)publisher of the content; (2) insufficient information to support claims made; (3) uses clickbait; (4) uses inflammatory/hyperbolic language and (5) perceived bias by the source (see Table 3.3).

When we fact-checked the content participants had labelled as “false, misleading or untrustworthy”, 39% of these examples were factually correct. This suggests the participants were hypervigilant in using mistrust cues, but ultimately this resulted in them categorising some content as untrustworthy, false or misleading when it was verifiably factual. This shows that while people need a way to make quick evaluative decisions when dealing with information overload, if their method is flawed, they will make flawed assessments. Another problem with participants using shortcuts to guide decisions about who and what to trust is that they rarely reflected on cognitive biases that may have influenced their quick decisions. As we explored in Chapter 2,

Table 3.3 The top five mistrust cues people used to decide what not to trust online

<i>Mistrust cue</i>	<i>Proportion</i>
Distrust of source	34
Insufficient information to support the claim	22
Clickbait (headline/claim/content)	16
Inflammatory/hyperbolic language	16
Perceived bias	15

Note: Total sums to greater than 100% as multiple codes were applied to examples whenever necessary.

people are often aroused and switched on by strong emotions like outrage. We tend to rely on and revert to what we already know and believe, leading to conformation bias; we're also attracted by simple explanations over complexity; and we're influenced by a desire to belong, which means we filter information through a lens that aims to avoid challenging our political, social and cultural identities. These psychological factors are human nature – it may not be easy, possible or necessarily desirable to switch off all of these instinctual responses. However, they can cloud our ability to make rapid decisions about who and what to trust. They're also factors that can be manipulated by disinformation actors. At the same time, we do need shortcuts if we are to live with misinformation online, and this is a dilemma media literacy educators need to grapple with.

Perhaps most importantly, our analysis finds a notable distinction between healthy scepticism and generalised or blanket cynicism. While the former was associated with higher confidence and ability to verify information, the latter was strongly associated with overconfidence.⁴⁰ We found that participants who applied high levels of mistrust (being cautious and deferring their judgement until more details are known or critical evaluation can occur) were more likely to score higher in the online verification test. This runs contrary to concerns expressed that encouraging critical thinking around media use will make people overly critical of trustworthy information sources such as news media. Instead, we found that a healthy scepticism supports media literacy confidence *and* ability when it comes to verifying misinformation.⁴¹

Participants in our research expressed cynicism about individuals, organisations and platforms, and digital technology and content features. Participants in the cynical camp thought that “everyone’s got an agenda”, that individual action couldn’t influence the future (“My nephew kept saying, ‘you need to know this, and you need to know that’, but I don’t care. They’re going to do what they want, no matter what I say”. – Harriet, 56) and that you can’t trust anything (“It’s just easier not to trust anything, you know, and I’ve been backed up on that and vindicated so

many times”. – Luke, 52). Participants with these views often ignored the source of the claim entirely or applied blanket cynicism to paint entire news organisations, media systems, digital platforms or big tech companies in a particular way. For instance, one participant reflected on how he felt US news media were one-sided compared to Asian news media, which he perceived as being more balanced. Many other participants shared that they felt that media owned by the Murdoch family produced partial and skewed journalism. Similarly, other participants thought certain platforms themselves, such as Facebook, were untrustworthy because they were full of false and sensationalised content. For these participants, the source and the content were irrelevant as the larger media system, organisation or platform publishing the content were more important and were criteria participants used to decide what content to engage with and how to regard it.

Regarding digital technology and content, participants frequently expressed blanket cynicism about certain technologies, such as generative AI, with the belief that it would “take over the world” and that social media platforms already “know too much” about us. This affected how participants said they behaved online in response to their growing distrust of these technologies and platforms and an increasing feeling of being out of control. For some participants, this meant avoiding commenting on social media posts or engaging in any behaviours that gave social media platforms more data about them because, as users, they wanted to limit the amount of information available in platforms’ digital dossiers of them. For example, Luke, who we introduced earlier, reflected on how he’d taken steps to reduce his digital footprint across social media by only logging into his account on two devices and by reporting or blocking content he disliked. Although he felt these steps were helping to curate his social media feeds in ways that reflected his interests, he was still pessimistic about their actual impact:

There is very, very little control that we have nowadays. It is just forced on us under the guise of “oh, but the algorithm said.” Yeah, but remember who created the algorithm in the first place...and despite all social media platforms saying, “oh, but you can change settings and do this and tweak that”, that’s all nonsense, really. You still get deluged with stuff.

(Luke, 52)

This cynicism also extended to technical features of digital technology and certain elements of content, such as headlines. Participants said headlines purposely lacked context to drive attention and engagement but were wary of following links due to the possibility of phishing scams (see Figure 3.10). Participants often then took headlines at face value because they did not want to click or tap through to the story. Twenty-four-year-old Tom, who works as an accountant in a major regional hub in the west of Australia, was particularly

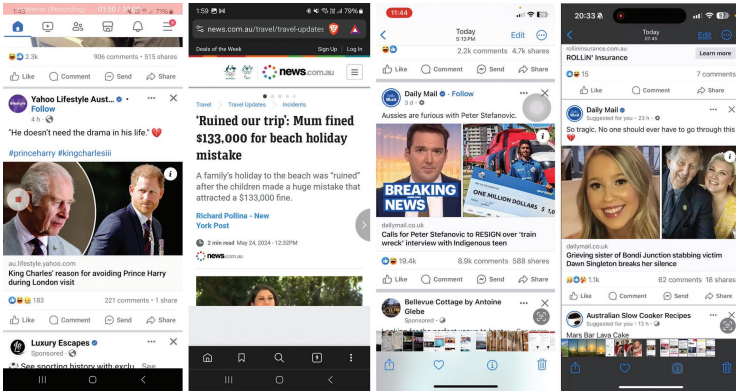


Figure 3.10 Headlines the participants identified as being “dodgy” or “clickbait”.

agitated by this. Reflecting on the practices of certain news outlets and digital platforms, he commented:

Normally if you see a lie, it's in the headline, isn't it? ... A lot of the stuff you see on social media, particularly from news.com.au, is all just clickbait stuff, isn't it? Clearly their main purpose isn't to spread news, it's to make money by people clicking on their things because it's mainly clickbait.

(Tom, 24)

In contrast, a number of participants expressed more nuanced takes on the trustworthiness of individuals, organisations, platforms and the attributes of content, revealing a productive form of scepticism that influenced their online behaviour. Thirty-nine-year-old Shiv, a manager working in government, who lives with his partner and two primary school-aged children in a regional industrial hub in Victoria, routinely applied a healthy scepticism to the news and information he encountered online. During our interview, Shiv shared how he cared about whether the source was a “rando who doesn't have any authority...or any sort of perceived knowledge on the issue” and that he much preferred to trust sources with qualifications, credentials or demonstrable experience in the topic. He felt confident about the active choices he made about who to trust, being wary of sources that made claims without providing evidence, sources that were being paid to advance a particular perspective and claims that used language to inflame emotions and try to invoke a particular response.

Shiv was also open-minded, intellectually humble, and curious; he wanted to know and understand what information others were seeing and how they were arriving at decisions. He knew various techniques for verifying

information and would use these before arriving at a decision on a new or emerging political, social or health-related issue. He also had a good grasp of knowledge about who owned and controlled the media and technology he engaged with and their motivations. In this way, Shiv demonstrates the value of curiosity and critical thinking, as coping mechanisms for complex media environments. His knowledge of media and technologies, informed questioning, digital skills and careful choices about information sources made him more relaxed, confident and capable of managing information overload.

Online information diets are individual, but our decision-making is relational

Studies about people’s ability to verify information focus almost exclusively on the practices and abilities of individuals.⁴² While this is important, it ignores the fact that family and friends share, discuss and help one another to find and evaluate information, especially during high-stakes and challenging circumstances, as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our media literacy survey shows that the most popular source of support adults have to help them develop media literacy after online resources are friends, with two thirds (63%) saying they have received support from friends “a lot” or “some” to access, use, analyse and create media and media technologies, and more than half (59%) saying they have turned to family for help. This was much higher than the figures for people who have received media literacy support from tertiary education (42%), secondary school (34%), libraries (35%) or community organisations (27%).⁴³ Further, when we asked people who had offered them “the most” support, family and friends came out on top, along with online resources (Figure 3.11). Our diary study and interviews show that

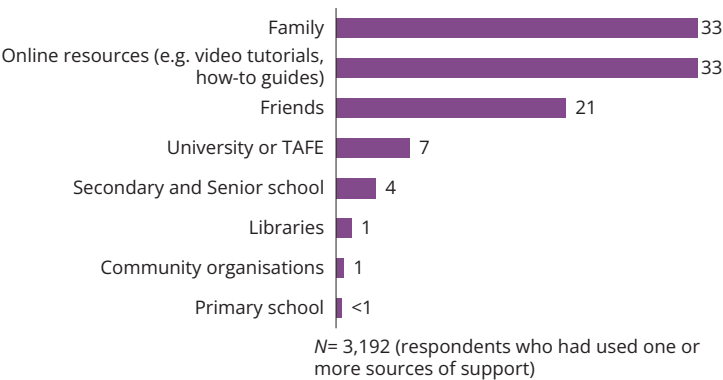


Figure 3.11 Who has provided adults with the most support to access, analyse, use and create media?.

family and friends often step in to help people to access, use and verify information as these activities are often not solitary endeavours. But our research also shows that family members can become sources of misinformation, and disagreements about who and what are trustworthy can lead to conflicts among families and friends.

This was the case for Carolynne, who we introduced earlier. Carolynne lives with her husband and two teenage children in Melbourne. Carolynne's work keeps her very busy: when we interviewed her, she had recently taken on casual cleaning work on top of her full-time office manager role to cover her family's increasing cost-of-living expenses. Despite being time-poor, Carolynne prides herself on her engagement with many different information and news sources. In addition to mainstream news sources like SBS, the country's multicultural public service broadcaster, a daily national newspaper and a television news channel owned by News Corp she consumes content from a number of what she calls "independent" news sources. These are sources deemed as far right and they have been accused of spreading anti-vaccination messages.⁴⁴ Although Carolynne describes these independent sources as "controversial", she believes they are often more accurate and transparent than mainstream news sources.

It helps you to think a bit more outside the square. Like when you're reading the mainstream news, it's sort of like they follow a narrative and it's all the same...following the same narrative, following the same view, wanting you to believe the same outcome. But when you go in and start looking at independent news, you start questioning the mainstream and you look at things from a different perspective.

(Carolynne, 56)

Carolynne says she often talks with her family members to make decisions about the information and news she encounters. By speaking with her husband and father, in particular, she feels like she can better "weigh up" and make sense of the truthfulness and credibility of different information claims. Her desire for breadth, balance and transparency in the news and information she consumes also leads her to talk with extended family members who she feels often have more conspiratorial views.

I've got some family members who go so deep down the rabbit hole, it's very scary. I find some of the stuff that they tell me is very well over my head. But I like to hear about it, you know, just to give me a balance of what could be true, what might not be true...And you know what? Some of these conspiracy theories make sense. They actually do. It's strange that they make sense. And it's scary. The thing is it's really scary.

(Carolynne, 56)

Carolynne believes that “doing your own research” and reading a variety of different sources with different viewpoints is essential to having good-quality information experiences online.⁴⁵ While her husband shares this view, Carolynne admits that it has caused some tension with their daughter:

My child thinks very differently from me. She’s very entrenched into all this new, what people like me call “woke” stuff. She hasn’t [adopted] a lot of what I believe. She’s got her own thoughts. She’s a very independent thinker on all sorts of things. We have a bit of a joke with each other. I call her “woke” and she calls me... a conspiracy theorist.

(Carolynne, 56)

Another participant, Ally, who we introduced earlier, also relies on her connections with other people to access and make sense of news and information. Although she is an active news seeker, Ally doesn’t pay for news; instead, she relies on family connections to navigate barriers like news paywalls:

My brother, he’s always all over the news, he’s got a subscription, and he’ll actually send me the screenshots of the article, and I can just flick through. So, he’ll just text it to me, and he’ll go “look at this”, and I’ll just flick through, and I go, “jeez, you know that’s not good”. So sometimes I can be sent the articles as well by people who’ve paid for it.

(Ally, 42)

As with many of the respondents in our study, Ally says she’ll first look at the comments beneath news content posted on social media not only to determine its relevance and reliability but also to avoid having to click through to the news source:

Generally the first few comments will tell you what the story’s about. Even if you can’t access it because it’s a paid story, people often comment and let you know what it’s about or you’ll see “this is clickbait”, “this is a scam, don’t click on it”.

(Ally, 42)

Ally’s point highlights that on social media many people are exposed to headlines and comments and may come to a conclusion about the claims being made based on these alone. This demonstrates the potential harm caused by news clickbait that is misleading. While Ally sometimes relies on comments to determine if something is legitimate, this is not an evidence-based approach to information evaluation and she did seem to be aware of how the comments can be manipulated and “gamed” by organisations who can use bots and other methods to provide specific feedback to suit their own interests.⁴⁶

Overall, our research shows that determining who and what to trust is a highly relational endeavour. We often listen to people we trust who share information and introduce us to new sources, and we take responsibility for sharing and vetting information with friends and family when we are introduced to new sources. Some people also rely on the comments of others on social media to engage with news they are shut out of because they don't have a subscription. These lived experiences must be factored into the design of media literacy responses to ensure they meet people where they are at and are relevant, relatable and achievable. While it is easy for media literacy scholars or initiatives to tell people to always apply best practice when it comes to evidence-based evaluation of information – for example, by telling them to check content in the same way a professional fact-checker does – this advice is not useful if it's not feasible or plausible for people to always do this. People might be able to perform a check of a source or fact-check claims being made when they are seeking out information on important topics, but this is unlikely to be something people are willing to do often, especially when they are scrolling or swiping through social media and encountering a barrage of content that is not what they are looking for and is not worthy of their attention. In these situations people can practice strategic ignoring, deferring any judgement and instead making a decision to not give this irrelevant content any more of their time and attention.

Most adults have a limited understanding of digital media environments but want to learn more

While people's low confidence and even lower ability to verify information online is a real concern, we are buoyed by the fact that the overwhelming majority of Australians support media literacy education and are personally interested in developing their own media literacy abilities. More than four in five adults (84%) agree there needs to be media literacy education in schools and close to the same amount (82%) believe this support needs to be offered to adults. More than half of adults are interested in learning about topics including "how to protect ourselves from online scams and predators", "how to find news that is reliable and trustworthy" and "how to identify and respond to misinformation" (see Figure 3.12).⁴⁷ This provides very strong evidence that people are willing to invest the time and energy into learning what they can to help address the problem of online misinformation.

By analysing the results from our various studies, we can see that a key challenge for educators, librarians, journalists and other intermediaries looking to deliver media literacy initiatives is that people often hold incorrect beliefs or misconceptions about media ownership, regulation or journalistic practices. For instance, Ryan, a construction worker in his late 20s from a regional town in South Australia, believes that because the national broadcaster

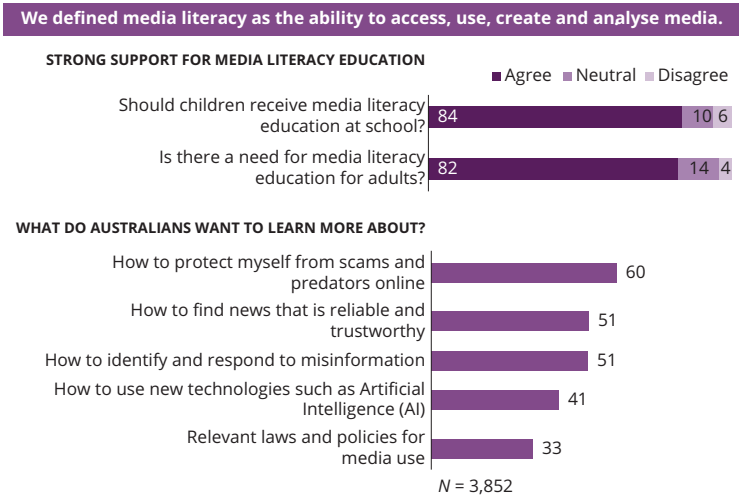


Figure 3.12 Support for media literacy education.

receives funding from government, it is beholden to the government and, therefore, can't be seen as an independent source. This is despite the fact that the broadcaster has strict editorial guidelines to maintain independence, integrity, accuracy and impartiality.⁴⁸ Conversely, Ryan believes not receiving government funding would make a news organisation independent. This, however, suggests a lack of understanding of the potential influence of commercial imperatives on news. In his words:

Looking at the article, I think it was pretty accurate and I don't think there was anything wrong with it. But, it is from ABC News, so there's a potential for it to be biased when it comes to government things because it's funded by the government. Then this [story] is from 9Now. It's an independent, like, news agent. It's not government funded or anything so my assumption would be that it's trustworthy...I like SkyNews. They're not biased. You know, they say what they need to say. They say what's true and they don't hold back. They don't give anyone, especially the government, like, certain government parties priority or preferences or anything. They just deliver the real news.

(Ryan, 29)

Other participants questioned the validity of anything ever published by News Corp, assuming that "things owned by the Murdoch press are going to be whatever Rupert Murdoch likes to hear" (Dan, 67, Melbourne). While research

has found that Murdoch-owned news outlets have denied science around climate change, have unfairly engaged in political-advocacy-disguised-as-news and tend to use lesser and different types of sources compared to other news organisations, dismissing content produced by a particular outlet out-of-hand because of its ownership fails to determine anything definitive about the reliability of any one piece of content the outlet has produced, even if it does offer a more manageable strategy for navigating online news.⁴⁹ Heuristic shortcuts – for example, using quick judgements about the credibility of a post based on past experience with the source who produced it – were often made without a consideration of contextual factors, such as if a post were labelled as “opinion”, “sponsored” or “recommended”.

Related to this, as we indicated earlier in this chapter, participants had varying levels of AI, algorithmic and media knowledge, and this affected their ability to know why they were seeing certain content or sources in their social media feeds or search results and what the implications of this were for trustworthiness. Sixty-two-year-old inclusive education teacher Ann, who lives in Melbourne, provides an example of this. Like many of the research participants, she struggled to articulate the influence of algorithms in governing what she saw online:

I think because I click on that and read it, I think I get more. I’m not sure.
I think that’s how it works.

(Ann, 62)

Comparatively, other respondents demonstrated greater understanding of the influence algorithms had in shaping their online information experiences. Sixty-year-old Jack, a retired naval officer who lives with his wife in a regional coastal town in New South Wales, shared how he enjoys watching videos on YouTube and reflected on how he largely relies on the YouTube algorithms to recommend relevant or interesting content. While Jack says he enjoys how the recommendation system enables him to engage with an array of diverse content, he says it’s important that he has an understanding of how algorithms work to remain in control of his online information encounters.

I think if you’re aware of the process that’s happening you can have control of it. Like, it’s quite obvious sometimes. You’ll see a video on YouTube and, particularly if I want to see how a different point of view is portraying an issue, I might click on some of those videos that I wouldn’t normally take an interest in. And I can see the algorithm then putting other material up. Recently, I’ve had a lot of right-wing reactionary videos that YouTube thinks I like. And if I don’t want my YouTube recommendations crowded with, you know, right-wing propaganda, I’ll just, for a period of time, not watch that. You know, go and watch more cat videos or something like that.

(Jack, 60)

Jack was less confident in his understanding of the commercial motivations behind algorithms and ruminated on how these incentives could have a more concerning impact on his online information experiences:

The cost is that there are so many rabbit burrows, and I'm scared there are influences, without being too conspiratorial, that there could be other mechanisms at play in the algorithms, that those algorithms are driven by financial concerns rather than just, "hey, Jack likes Siamese cats, here's a nice picture of one".

(Jack, 60)

Several participants were actively trying to develop their digital media and AI literacies to be able to search for news and information online more successfully. One of these individuals was 68-year-old Mathilde, a public servant living in a regional hub in Queensland, who shared that she subscribed to an AI course to learn more about AI-powered searches and their risks and benefits compared to other online search approaches, such as traditional web crawlers. For Mathilde, learning how to use AI-powered search approaches effectively, such as knowing how to craft clear search prompts, helped to make her online searches more efficient and helped her to access what she felt was more specific information and resources that she could use in her day-to-day life. During our interview, for example, she shared how she had used AI-powered search to produce step-by-step instructions on how to fix her TV speaker system.

Mathilde, as a retiree, had the time and flexibility to engage in formal education to build her knowledge about online information and media systems; for others, taking an online or in-person course may not be a viable option. In the next chapter, we outline how, in taking consideration of these factors, efforts to support people to build their critical dispositions, knowledge and skills about information and media must be responsive to individuals' learning needs, experiences and contexts.

Supporting people to move from stress, chaos and confusion

This chapter has outlined six key findings from our 3-year research study which was designed to understand people's everyday experiences with information online and to assess their abilities to mitigate or address misinformation.

Our findings emphasise how people's growing reliance on social media for news and information, more than any other form or type of digital media, is adversely leading individuals to feel overwhelmed by the amount of information they encounter on a day-to-day basis, and most now report being exposed to misinformation on a regular basis. The stressful experience of information

overload is leading people to avoid or disengage from news, which is a concern because it can reduce exposure to verified and fact-checked information, and this has implications for individuals, families, communities and democratic structures.

We found that people usually make quick decisions to decide who and what to trust online, relying on what we refer to as mistrust cues in lieu of practising critical media capabilities, like critical analysis and critical ignoring. Our study shows that people have developed decision-making shortcuts as coping mechanisms to allow them to live with information overload and to make split-second decisions about the content they come across online, especially on social media. These self-protective measures, while pragmatic, may have unintended consequences, potentially deepening individuals' disengagement from, and mistrust of, credible news, while increasing their cynicism about media, resulting in a belief that they can't trust any information sources at all.

Our diary study participants showed us that responding to misinformation is as much about our beliefs and relationships with others as it is about our ability to verify content or objectively critique it. While our online information experiences are increasingly individualised or siloed – influenced by invisible algorithms, opaque platform logics and commercial priorities – our processes of making decisions about what is true and trustworthy are often relational: many of our participants turned to their friends and families to make decisions about what online information they could trust.

Finally, our research highlights that while most adults have a limited understanding of digital media environments, as well as a lack of ability to verify information online, most want to learn more. In the next chapter, we explore how educators and others who want to support media literacy can respond.

Notes

- 1 Devine et al., 2020.
- 2 For more detail on the survey methodology, see Notley et al., 2024.
- 3 de Reuver & Bouwman, 2015.
- 4 Kruger & Dunning, 1999.
- 5 Notley, Hourigan et al., 2026; Notley, Park et al., 2026.
- 6 See <https://www.inquirygroup.org/>; Breakstone et al., 2021.
- 7 For more detail on our verification test method, see Park, Notley et al., 2024.
- 8 Notley, Hourigan et al., 2026; Notley, Park et al., 2026.
- 9 Murphy et al., 2023.
- 10 Yan & Schroeder, 2025.
- 11 Notley et al., 2024.
- 12 Ofcom, 2026; Gottfried & Park, 2025.
- 13 de Reuver & Bouwman, 2015; Burnell et al., 2021.
- 14 Vivion et al., 2024.
- 15 Ofcom, 2026; Gottfried & Park, 2025.
- 16 Notley et al., 2024.

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- 17 Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2025.
- 18 Notley et al., 2024.
- 19 Newman, Ross Arguedas, Mukherjee et al., 2025; Newman, Ross Arguedas, Robertson et al., 2025.
- 20 IPSOS, 2023; Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020.
- 21 Altay, 2026.
- 22 Park, Fisher, McGuinness et al., 2025.
- 23 Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2021.
- 24 Fazio et al., 2015.
- 25 Park, Fisher, McGuinness et al., 2025.
- 26 This finding comes from our own analysis; see Notley, Hourigan et al., 2026. See also, Edgerly et al., 2020; Kyriakidou et al., 2023.
- 27 Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017.
- 28 Pasquale, 2015.
- 29 Notley et al., 2024.
- 30 On AI-powered search engines, see Brantner et al. 2025.
- 31 Brantner et al., 2025.
- 32 Swart & Broersma, 2024.
- 33 Notley et al., 2024.
- 34 Notley, Park et al., 2026.
- 35 Hourigan et al., 2026; Notley, Park et al., 2026.
- 36 Li, 2023; Park, Fisher et al., 2025; Tsfatì & Barnoy, 2025.
- 37 Kozyreva et al., 2023.
- 38 Park, Fisher et al., 2025; Tsfatì & Barnoy, 2025.
- 39 Notley, Hourigan et al., 2026.
- 40 Park et al., 2026.
- 41 Park, Notley et al., 2024.
- 42 Murphy et al., 2023.
- 43 Notley et al., 2024.
- 44 Elmer & Burton, 2022; Institute for Strategic Dialogue Global, 2020.
- 45 While calls to “do your own research” can often allude to notions of more critical information consumption, the practice can be problematic in deepening individuals’ mistrust, anti-institutional sentiments and anti-expert attitudes and beliefs. See Birchall & Knight 2022; Chinn & Hasell, 2023; Tripodi et al., 2024.
- 46 Berger, 2024; Shao et al., 2018.
- 47 Notley et al., 2024.
- 48 Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983 (Cth).
- 49 Bacon, 2013; Fielding et al., 2025; Thomson et al., 2025.

4 Responding to misinformation

So far, we have outlined many of the key misinformation challenges people face as they use AI, social media, digital platforms and other internet services in their everyday lives. We have established that in the context of a vast and open internet where anyone can publish claims at any time, misinformation is somewhat inevitable. To address this, we have argued that rather than putting all our effort and hope into eradicating misinformation, we must learn to successfully live with it.

In this chapter, we argue that a holistic approach to media literacy education is central to how we can successfully co-exist with misinformation. As we have shown, people experience information in highly individualised, opaque and algorithmically mediated ways on commercial digital platforms. We have identified a tendency for some people simply to avoid news media, due to how overwhelming it has become to have news delivered online, especially on social media, at unexpected times and from unknown or untrustworthy sources. People also struggle to verify the accuracy of what they encounter online, while many are overconfident about their abilities. As we discussed in Chapter 3, this lack of ability is frequently related to a lack of understanding about how legacy and digital media operate, which can often manifest as generalised cynicism – that is, an immediate rejection and distrust of information and information sources – rather than healthy scepticism – suspending judgement until further critical evaluation is completed. We have shown that while media and information encounters are individualised, interpretation is often negotiated and contested in relational ways between family members and broader community and social networks. These findings suggest that it is important to provide people with some specific skills to deal with misinformation, such as lateral reading, where people evaluate source quality by looking outside of the source, and critical ignoring, where people choose where to invest their limited attentional capacities.¹ However, these kinds of skills alone are insufficient for learning to live with misinformation, particularly if they are encountered out of context.

Our approach differs from those who argue that it is possible to psychologically inoculate people against misinformation through a kind of “infodemic”

vaccination programme delivered via brief interventions.² We believe that such approaches do not take account of the complex and nuanced ways in which people experience misinformation across a range of media genres or the relational experience of misinformation. Instead, we support a holistic and ongoing approach to media literacy education which aims to develop an individual's capacity to respond critically to media and misinformation over time, as we outline in greater detail below. Where most inoculation approaches claim to be able to provide protection from misinformation with one-off training opportunities, our approach argues that media literacy education needs to be comprehensive and ongoing.

In his book *The End of Information*, David Buckingham (2026) makes a distinction between what he describes as an inadequate approach to media literacy that is geared towards policymakers wanting quick solutions to the “information disorder” and a more comprehensive “media education” that draws on decades of research. He suggests that not only should media education's history be understood, respected and extended but that:

Crucially, media education is also much more coherent, systematic and comprehensive than the superficial “checklist pedagogy” of tips and tools that has resurfaced in the wake of information disorder over the past decade.³

In line with this, our approach recognises that the problem of misinformation is connected to a range of other media literacy concerns, including how people, places and ideas are constructed through representation processes. It suggests that unless people understand how new technologies like social media and AI platforms function and their underlying business models, they are unlikely to appreciate why misinformation circulates online. As noted in Chapter 1, a great deal of polarising information is not created out of ideological belief but to attract audience attention and generate profit. A media literacy approach also acknowledges that misinformation has a complex relationship with different media genres; for instance, it does not just exist in informational genres. Rather, it is also often found embedded in lifestyle and entertainment content where people may have formed parasocial relationships with influencers.⁴ Therefore, misinformation must be addressed as an aspect of a more general media literacy education, which a range of international scholars argue should be a lifelong pursuit.⁵ Our position is that a more well-rounded media education will provide people with the disposition, strategies, resources and knowledge to critically question misinformation as they encounter it within the context of their everyday media engagement, whether this is for information, entertainment or social connection. As we noted in Chapter 1, a holistic approach should increase our knowledge about media environments and the techniques used by the misinformation industry; advance our critical thinking capabilities to support healthy scepticism about the information we encounter

and develop skills that will help us to verify claims and sources and exert more control over our information environments.

Our approach aims to support people to become Curious, Critical and Confident as they live alongside misinformation. The approach is underpinned by the well-established key concepts approach to media literacy education, which provides an enquiry-based framework for responding critically to media. Finally, we suggest that media literacy learning is best supported when it occurs across formal and informal places and spaces in local communities that can be thought of as Connected Learning ecosystems.⁶ The connections between these three are summarised in Figure 4.1.⁷

A holistic approach ensures that specific skills taught to help people verify or question the validity of information are more likely to be successful when individuals can apply these in the context of their knowledge about how media environments work. Our position is that these skills and knowledge need to be developed across school and work contexts: in school from a child's early years and through to high school, in tertiary education, in training contexts and through appropriate adult education opportunities. This lifelong approach is necessary because media literacy is not a skill to be attained but an ongoing

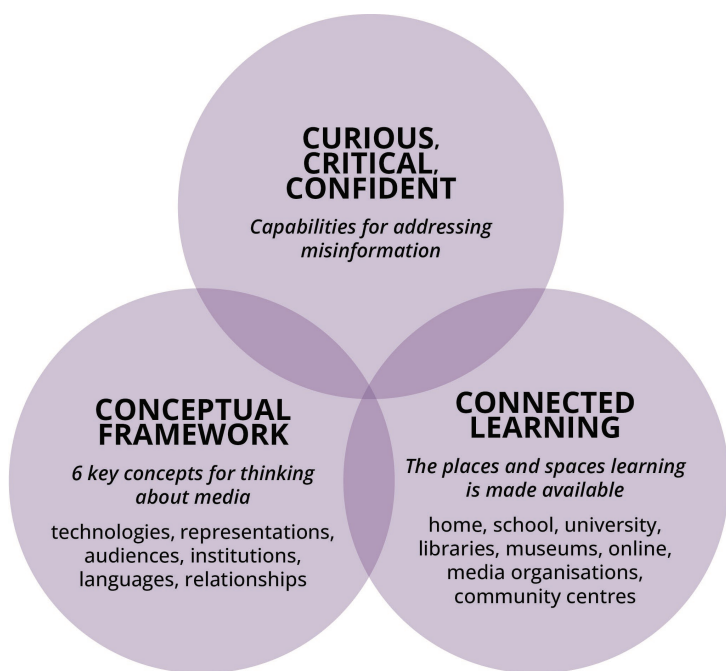


Figure 4.1 Three components of a holistic media literacy approach.

process.⁸ As the media and information environment frequently undergoes rapid change, as new technologies emerge and as social and cultural relations respond, individuals' critical questioning of media, media knowledge and digital skills also need to adapt.

Being curious, critical and confident

The *Addressing Misinformation with Media Literacy through Cultural Institutions* project provided a rare opportunity for media literacy researchers to work alongside prominent Australian national public institutions and organisations committed to promoting media literacy. The project's initial phase consisted of generating considerable data through the national Adult Media Literacy Survey, the information verification test, the digital diary study and interviews (see Chapter 3). These data were then used to inform our partners as part of the process of co-designing a pedagogical response. The research team, partners and project advisory group came together in a series of six workshops over 3 years to discuss the data and its implications for each partners' media literacy programmes and activities, and each partner made a commitment to piloting a new initiative as part of their response.

Through the workshop process, we produced a shared framework that established our understanding of how a media literacy approach can be used to address misinformation. The framework highlights three overlapping dispositions: Be Curious, Be Critical and Be Confident (Table 4.1). We came to a consensus on these dispositions because our research suggests they are prerequisites that are essential for people to be able to respond to misinformation. Curiosity about the media environment ensures people are willing to keep learning about how the media environments they use operate. A critical disposition ensures people ask important questions about media and technologies. Confidence comes from learning new knowledge, skills and techniques to inform decisions about media use. The framework consists of 11 capabilities that represent the knowledge, skills and attitudes we believe individuals need to develop to successfully respond to and productively live with misinformation. We appreciate that the framework is normative because it promotes a vision of an ideal media-literate citizen, and we acknowledge that our approach presents a particular version of what it means to be "media literate" in relation to misinformation. As noted earlier, we acknowledge that media literacy is a lifelong pursuit and that people will bring their own needs, abilities, personal histories and experiences to any media literacy learning opportunity that is based on this framework.

Each capability outlined in the framework represents a depth of knowledge and processes that may become the basis for workshops, experiences, resources and activities. Any one of the capabilities could be the focus of a single workshop, learning resource or series of workshops. Several capabilities

Table 4.1 A framework of capabilities for responding to misinformation with media literacy

Be Curious about media and technologies and how people respond to these.	Be Critical about our own media use and the impact of media in society.	Be Confident to support informed decision-making when using media.
Know how and why misinformation is created, edited and circulated in media environments.	Consider how your own and others' personal politics, biases and emotions influence media engagement.	Investigate the information and media you encounter, including who produced, edited or shared it and why, when warranted.
Understand techniques of media manipulation.	Recognise your own and others' motivations for engaging with media and information.	Analyse media and information to check for accuracy, fairness and credibility.
Understand how bias, stereotypes and prejudice influence how misinformation is produced.	Ask questions about how your own media participation impacts other people and society.	Create, adapt, and share media and information that are accurate, fair, responsible and credible.
Recognise the historic and current relationships among information, citizenship, democracy and the role of media in society.		Make active decisions about your use of technology and change security settings to protect your privacy.

could be combined to structure-specific learning pathways to meet the needs of different learners. The capabilities should be considered within the broader social, cultural and economic contexts in which they operate. It would be difficult to address all the capabilities in a single workshop. Instead, we see them as a roadmap for planning a holistic approach to addressing misinformation using a media literacy approach. The aim is for individuals to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes associated with each of the capabilities over time and to revisit them in different contexts to deepen, extend and update their knowledge and understanding via a “spiral curriculum” model. Bruner’s (1960) spiral curriculum is a foundational educational concept that argues that people learn by revisiting knowledge, concepts and strategies over time, in ever more sophisticated ways.⁹

Be curious

At the heart of a media literacy response to misinformation is the need to invite a sense of curiosity from people to encourage them to ask questions, specifically about misinformation but more broadly about media content and how the media environment operates. A key finding from our research is that

many adults have a limited understanding of digital media environments but want to learn more.¹⁰ The four capabilities in the Be Curious domain provide pathways for fostering people's curiosity about the creation, circulation and consumption of misinformation; its impacts on society; and how it is not just a contemporary problem associated with digital platforms but part of a longer history of how information relates to power.

Know how and why misinformation is created, edited and circulated in media environments

A foundational media literacy education idea is that media creations are not natural or somehow inevitable but are the result of clear intentions and choices on the part of media producers. Helping people to understand that misinformation is made for different economic, political and cultural purposes provides a counterpoint to the idea that misinformation occurs for purely ideological or nefarious purposes. In addition, an introduction to the idea that misinformation exists or manifests in many media forms – such as short entertainment videos, news stories, photographs, podcasts, data visualisations, memes and so on – enables people to distinguish between different types of misinformation and to see that it sits alongside, and within, their everyday media experiences with information, entertainment and other forms of persuasive media such as advertising. This process of categorisation can provide people with a sense of control over the media they encounter in their daily lives and help them manage the information overload that many of our research participants spoke about. It can also help people make judgements about which kinds of misinformation may warrant attention or call for a strategic response.

Understand techniques of media manipulation

An extension of the idea that media creations are constructed with intent is that media creators use established techniques to influence and sometimes manipulate audience members' responses. Piquing people's curiosity about these techniques can help them to deepen and extend their understanding of how misinformation is created or adapted. People might be provided with opportunities to explore how media influence and manipulation aim to garner emotional responses, to simplify or overgeneralise complex ideas, to frame ideas in misleading ways, to cherry-pick facts, to provide false context or claims around real content, to create deepfakes, to reinforce conspiratorial thinking or to frame an issue to change its meaning. They may also explore the mechanics of how media are constructed using camera framing, editing, visual manipulation and audio manipulation or are constructed or edited synthetically with AI.

People may also be assisted to understand that the design of online media environments changes how people are able to interact with them; for instance, that social media platforms have their own functions and affordances that

can make important differences to how misinformation is experienced and may be related to how it is circulated and made available in the first place. The presence of a reshare button on a social media platform can make a big difference to how quickly or widely misinformation can spread. How a platform's algorithm functions to recommend content to users also changes the kinds of information that users may encounter, and gaining a sense of how an algorithm functions to prioritise and deprioritise stories is likely to make a difference to the kinds of judgements users will make about information that they encounter. A social media platform's business model, including how content is monetised, will also make a difference to what kinds of stories are shared and popularised on the platform. Developing an understanding that a social media influencer is rewarded for sharing particular kinds of content, with certain characteristics, may be very important for making judgements about the kinds of information a person shares.

*Understand how bias, stereotypes and prejudice
influence how misinformation is produced*

One of the advantages of using a media literacy approach is that misinformation can be understood in parallel with other problematic and harmful media impacts. Gaining insights into how misinformation is often aligned with, or reinforces, social bias, stereotypes and prejudice can assist people to see that it is often purposely harmful and motivated by the power of "othering" and that this is destructive to people and communities. Learning to ask critical questions framed by the Representations key concept (discussed in more detail later in the chapter) can enable individuals to consider how fair or accurate a media portrayal is and to understand that misinformation often uses existing social and cultural tropes, hurtful perspectives and inaccurate and offensive assumptions. This understanding may extend to a consideration that those groups who have routinely been misrepresented, or under-represented, may be less trusting of media organisations.

*Recognise the historic and current relationships
among information, citizenship, democracy
and the role of media in society*

Being curious about the historical role that misinformation has played in different situations can provide people with important context for how to deal with misinformation today. The passage of time can often make the negative impacts of misinformation clearer and easier to identify; it is, therefore, useful to consider examples from both the distant and more recent past. It can also be easier to be critically reflective of a less familiar scenario rather than one's own.¹¹ Learning about the interdependent relationship between access to high-quality information, citizenship, human rights and democratic processes

can illustrate the harm that misinformation can do to healthy and inclusive democratic societies. Therefore, understanding historical context can help to illustrate the importance of being proactive in addressing misinformation. Ultimately, this is connected to the question of what kind of society we want to live in and the work that media organisations, individuals and communities need to undertake to achieve this vision.

Be Critical

The Be Critical domain was deemed to be important to our framework because our team agreed that the collective project data demonstrate that it is essential to enable individuals to consider how their own life experience, beliefs and expectations relate to misinformation and the assumptions they make about how they receive information. Developing nuanced understandings about the environmental contexts of information from a social perspective is essential to making a judgement about whether information might be considered trustworthy, fair, balanced or offensive and harmful. Subsequently, having an appreciation for how our media choices and practices impact other people and society in very direct ways, with ethical consequences, is core to responding to the role of misinformation.

Consider how our own and others' personal politics, biases and emotions influence media engagement

Along with understanding that media and information are constructed with intent, it can be powerful for people to gain an understanding that media are not consumed in a neutral way. Engaging in dialogue and reflection about how personal politics, biases and emotions play a role in how we interpret information and consider its accuracy and impact on society is as important as thinking about whether a specific piece of information is reliable.¹² A core media literacy tenet is developing an appreciation that we are located in social, cultural and political circumstances that influence our beliefs and values, and these in turn influence how we receive and respond to media and information. Reflecting on our biases, and how we respond to media and information emotionally as much as intellectually, can enable us to take stock of our relationships to other people and society. For instance, providing a person with opportunities to understand confirmation bias (that we tend to believe ideas that confirm our existing beliefs rather than ideas that challenge us) and familiarity bias (that we tend to favour people we identify with) can help them to pause and consider whether they consume media and information fairly and with an open mind. By extension, recognising that it is possible to see things from a different perspective is a powerful media literacy insight that can provide an important lens for considering media and information,

including misinformation. These strategies are particularly important for considering how political and cultural polarisation relates to misinformation. Helping people to understand that many media narratives are constructed to create conflict through an “us versus them” dynamic can support people to consider how misinformation is often deliberately aligned to group identities. Furthermore, gaining insights into how polarisation is exploited by some public identities, social media influencers and digital platforms to increase their own engagement may help people to see that misinformation is often shared for financial gain.

*Recognise our own and others’ motivations for
engaging with media and information*

Another important media literacy dimension related to audiences and consumption is a consideration of motivation and particularly thinking about why people use different kinds of media in different contexts and for different purposes. Unless we consider our relationship with media and information, why it is important to us and how this might differ from other people’s motivations, it is difficult to appreciate that media and information are not neutral resources; rather, they are deeply connected to how we see and interpret the world more generally. This has important implications for thinking about misinformation because not all instances of inaccurate, exaggerated or even unfair information are automatically harmful. Context matters and what might be considered misinformation in one community may differ from how it is considered in another community, either due to the values and beliefs of the community or because the information serves a different purpose in each community. For instance, information that is considered to be satirical and funny in one community may be offensive and considered a falsehood in another. A political meme might be considered to be presenting unreliable information in one community but believable information in another, depending on the political affiliations of each. This does not mean that any form of misinformation is justifiable. Rather, broader ethical frameworks of social responsibility demonstrate that harm can be caused by misinformation regardless of intent. People might be asked to consider how their own media consumption choices impact others and how these may potentially lead to polarisation or reinforce existing social and cultural power structures.

Thinking about audience motivation also relates to expectations for media that people turn to for reliable information. When a person uses an online news app from a mainstream news organisation to learn about an event or occurrence, there is a reasonable expectation that the information they encounter on the platform will uphold journalistic expectations related to accuracy and fairness. However, in the context of political and cultural polarisation and different audience expectations, this can become complicated by the assumed

political leanings of journalists or certain news outlets. Claims and counter-claims that fake news exists on particular sites may reflect broader social and political biases. People can learn to discuss how these claims are justifiable or not based on the content produced by different news outlets. They may also be encouraged to reflect on whether their favourite news outlet promotes a particular political perspective.

Ask questions about how our own media participation impacts other people and society

One of the key challenges for media literacy and critical thinking is helping people to navigate the nuances of their own personal politics and bias and the complex ways that misinformation exists in different social and cultural circumstances. Central to this is the idea that media and information use come with ethical questions related to the kind of society a person wants to live in. Being critical, therefore, means not only being critical about media and information and how they are presented but also being critical about our own practices and our relationships with other people and society. People might be asked to consider whether their own enjoyment of media comes at a cost. This necessitates being honest with ourselves about the impact of our media use on ourselves, others and society. From this perspective, “being critical” is not only about asking critical questions about the media we consume and understanding how media environments operate. It also means being willing to reflect on and change our media use, make different choices and seek to change the media environment. This includes through financially supporting trustworthy news sources and actively engaging in debates about media and digital platform regulation. Frameworks for thinking about how media literacy can enable civic participation or community agency relates to media use or how media literacy can support a healthier communication ecosystem open up opportunities for discussions about the relationships between media, people, places, ideas and power.¹³

Be Confident

The Be Confident domain is a crucial dimension of the framework because media literacy includes not only becoming confident on a personal level but also taking action to make a positive difference in our communities and in society more widely. Media literacy supports people to strategically and actively ask questions and make decisions about the media and information they encounter in their daily lives. An assumed outcome from this kind of media literacy is that individuals will be able to analyse and create media using a range of strategies to check for accuracy, fairness and credibility. In addition, individuals benefit from a broader knowledge about how the media environment functions.

Investigate the information and media we encounter, including who produced, edited or shared it and why

Assisting people to develop the confidence to investigate the media and information they encounter in everyday life is an essential media literacy goal. Helping them to form a critically reflective disposition towards both media content and the people and organisations who make and share it is a formative step towards employing a healthy scepticism when using media. A key strategy is taking the time to pause and consider, to ask a range of questions and to be purposeful in our media use, rather than allowing the volume of information available to us to become overwhelming. Being empowered to ask these questions confidently and fairly as we consume, or when we make, adapt and share our own media, should become part of our everyday media literacy capabilities. Part of this process is being able to make decisions about which media and information deserve or require more or less attention, given that it is not possible to apply the same level of scrutiny to the vast volume of information that we encounter. Making decisions about who and what gets our attention allows us to exert control over our media experiences. Therefore, learning to be selective and to critically ignore media can be as empowering as asking questions about it.¹⁴ Having a broader knowledge of the media environment and a framework for critical analysis will provide the confidence to know when it is desirable to pay attention and when it is best to critically ignore content or a particular media source or environment.

Analyse media and information to check for accuracy, fairness and credibility

Along with being able to ask questions in a strategic manner, having skills to analyse media and information content, and the contexts in which it is produced and used, is vital to developing the confidence to navigate the digital media landscape. Enabling people to undertake lateral reading rather than vertical reading when they encounter an unfamiliar source – that is, reading across sources rather than staying within the source to determine its credibility – is an evidence-based approach that provides people with the ability to more effectively determine the trustworthiness of a source.¹⁵ Providing people with the confidence to fact-check claims – for example, by searching across other sources of information to confirm if a claim is accurate or by using a reverse image search to see how an image may have been used in different contexts – can also provide powerful strategies. Other forms of analysis are equally important and should form part of the toolkit that people have to critically read the media. The skills of image and language analysis can enable people to see how media producers have used codified techniques (established or consistent approaches) to invite preferred readings or to elicit emotional responses. Learning that the use of a low camera angle may make someone

look more powerful or that framing may exclude information from the frame to create a particular version of reality can provide important capabilities to enhance media literacy confidence. Likewise, being able to identify that a media narrative is constructed to emphasise conflict between two groups or to portray another group as “the enemy” can provide people with the ability to critically read the media. In addition, it can be powerful to be able to analyse media context. Knowing that much media, including many social media posts, are produced to generate profit and that this is aligned to different business models that can be analysed and understood is highly enlightening. Likewise, understanding that media content is often produced within specific social, cultural and political contexts can help people understand why misinformation is created and for what purposes.

Create and share media and information that are accurate, fair, responsible and credible

Media literacy confidence should extend to reflecting critically when creating and sharing media and information, not just when consuming it. That is, all the understandings included in the framework and explained in the sections above should extend to the decisions that people make, and the questions they ask themselves, when they are the ones making, editing, transforming and sharing media. Part of learning to live with misinformation, from a media literacy perspective, involves a commitment to improving the quality of information available to us, with the aim of creating a better and fairer society. This involves undertaking a commitment to creating, transforming or sharing media and information that make positive contributions to our communities and society and do so by being fair and honest, rather than relying on manipulation or deception. When creating and sharing information, this means taking the time to be accurate, fair, responsible and credible. It means pausing before sharing something that might seem humorous in one context, but which may be harmful, offensive or misleading in another. It also means being able to defend the ethical choices we make when we produce and share media and information.

Make active decisions about our use of technology and changing security settings to protect our privacy

On a practical level, part of the response to misinformation should be acting purposefully about media consumption and making active decisions about what kind of media to engage with in the first place and when this occurs in daily life. This extends beyond the critical ignoring strategy outlined above, to include making active decisions about our broader media diet. Media literacy interventions can assist people to reflect on their media consumption habits to consider where they get their entertainment, information and

social interaction and the risks, benefits and challenges associated with these choices. They may also help people to consider if they are ignoring, or have forgotten about, particular examples that may make a positive contribution to their media diets. One issue we identified in our research was the problem of unwarranted cynicism about media, including a cynicism towards mainstream media and expert sources it often relies on. While cynicism can be based on critical questions about the media, our research shows that it is often based on misplaced beliefs or a lack of understanding about how the media operate and the role they play in society, or it results from a more passive media experience where people come to rely on the news they inadvertently see on social media rather than making active decisions about where to get news and information from.

Finally, it can be empowering to assist people to understand how they can use the tools available on digital platforms to be proactive about their security settings or to use features such as blocking users, muting conversations or keywords, reporting offensive or misleading content and using any other available measures to actively train the algorithm to recommend different kinds of content. This requires different knowledge and understandings for different platforms and can be challenging when platforms often update their features and processes without due notice or transparency. Having a broad understanding, though, that users have some control over the content they encounter has the potential to enhance a person's confidence when using digital platforms and, importantly, can give people some control back over their information engagement experiences.

Key concepts: enquiry-based media engagement

The Be Curious, Be Critical and Be Confident framework provides a set of capabilities – a mix of critical reflection, media knowledge and media skills – that, we believe, people need to develop to successfully live with misinformation. The overview we have provided for each capability describes the actions people can take as they engage with media. These descriptions, though, are specific to the topic of misinformation. They do not necessarily provide a transferable way of thinking about all forms of media. Developing an adaptable and transferable system for thinking about media, however, is essential as it provides people with a set of mental shortcuts, or heuristics, to guide enquiry so that they do not need to start from scratch each time they encounter a new media example. A heuristic can be internalised and applied habitually, enabling it to be adaptable across different examples and contexts.¹⁶

The well-established media literacy key concepts approach provides a set of mental shortcuts that enable individuals to ask themselves familiar questions when creating, editing, consuming, sharing or otherwise using media.¹⁷ We draw on the framework created by the Australian Media Literacy Alliance which uses six concepts: Technologies, Representations, Audiences,

Institutions and Producers, Languages and Relationships. These same concepts underpin the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority's Media Consumers and Creators Connection, which aims to assist teachers to include media literacy in their classrooms.¹⁸ These concepts extend from a long tradition within media and cultural studies in the United Kingdom¹⁹ and within media education.²⁰

Our development of the Be Curious, Be Critical and Be Confident framework is, therefore, underpinned by the media literacy key concepts: while the capabilities provide tangible actions for people that will support them to live with misinformation, the concepts provide the portable and adaptable system for thinking about media. The strength of this enquiry-based approach, when developed over time, is that it provides people with a familiar set of questions to draw on when consuming or creating media. The goal is to

Table 4.2 Critical questions to ask about misinformation – a media literacy key concepts approach

<i>Concept</i>	<i>Example questions</i>
Technologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did the platform algorithm decide to present me with this story? • How has my previous online behaviour influenced the algorithm to share this story with me? • Has my device type or location influenced the information being shared with me?
Representations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the story portray a person, group or idea in an unfair, stereotypical or inaccurate way? • Does this story use reliable, trustworthy or verifiable evidence? • Has the community or group included been given a right of reply?
Audiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is the intended audience for this story? • How is the story trying to influence me or others?
Institutions/Producers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who created this media and why did they create it? • How do they benefit from other people engaging with the story? • Will the producer or sharer benefit financially from the story?
Languages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What visual, audio and/or written techniques does this story use to communicate? • What conventions (such as genre, style or language) does this story use to inform, entertain or persuade?
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I share this story with my network, what impact might it have on my family and friends? • Could this story have an impact on the community or society more generally? • Is this story good for society?

encourage critical reflection about both the media example being encountered and the contexts of its production and use. The approach not only encourages people to pause on a media example to consider its features but also encourages them to consider why it was made, who it was made for, who benefits from its existence and other related questions. That is, each key concept acts as a catalyst for asking questions, no matter if a person is making and sharing their own media, adapting or sharing someone else's media or consuming media. The approach is most effective when someone can ask critically reflective questions across several concepts simultaneously to provide a rounded response to the example at hand. Table 4.2 outlines the kinds of questions a person might ask themselves when they encounter a social media story they suspect is not trustworthy. These questions are indicative and would change according to the specific example at hand.

As an individual asks themselves these questions, they may also use some specific strategies to verify if the media example is trustworthy, such as lateral reading or critical ignoring, mentioned earlier in the chapter, or undertake other forms of media analysis, including looking at who owns a particular media outlet or fact-checking claims made. The following example (Table 4.3) demonstrates how this approach may be used to design a learning opportunity to develop a capability.

Importantly, the media literacy key concepts approach does not just relate to learning experiences that focus on analysis or critical discussion. It can also be used alongside creative and practice-based approaches. Take as an example people involved in a community news production project: they can ask themselves questions about how they are representing other members of the community, how they are meeting their audience's needs, what technologies

Table 4.3 The relationship between media literacy capabilities, key concepts and learning opportunities – an example

<i>Capability</i>	<i>Key concepts</i>	<i>Learning opportunity</i>
Be Confident Analyse media and information to check for accuracy, fairness and credibility.	Representations: Does this story use reliable, trustworthy or verifiable evidence? Audiences: How is the story trying to influence me or others? Institutions: Who created this content and why did they create it? Note: Any of the six concepts may be applied, depending on the example and learning goal.	In a community workshop on the media environment and misinformation, participants are introduced to lateral reading as a fact-checking strategy. Participants interrogate a misleading social media post about a prominent person by applying each of the key concept questions. Participants apply lateral reading as a strategy by asking the same key concept questions about other stories on the prominent person in order to make a judgement about the reliability of the original post.

they will use and their ethical implications, how their project will enable the development of relationships and so on.

A strength of the key concepts approach, then, is that it provides a system for thinking to enhance the use of specific strategies or skills. It also provides confidence that people's everyday decision-making is based on a critical understanding of the media environment rather than misunderstanding, bias or the result of feeling overwhelmed. For instance, if a person chooses to undertake critical ignoring because they do not believe content added to their feed serves them or is worthy of their attention, they would do so with the confidence that they understand how the example relates to the media environment they are using.²¹ That is, they would ignore the example from the perspective of an informed sceptic, who has a critical awareness of the underlying motivations and mechanisms that underpin a social media platform.

A key challenge for using the media key concepts approach is that an individual's knowledge and ability to successfully apply the concepts needs to be developed over time in light of social and technological change. The Representations concept, for example, draws on knowledge about how media production and consumption relate to stereotyping, cultural "othering" and social power structures related to gender, race, sexuality, ability and cultural difference as well as how these evolve and change over time in different social and cultural contexts. The Technologies concept brings its own challenges because associated knowledge continues to change as new technologies emerge and existing technologies adapt. Applying the key concepts recognises that the work of becoming media literate never ends because it must be responsive to new technologies, practices and media techniques as they evolve.

Another important consideration is that our holistic approach locates media literacy within broader literacy theories that argue that literacy is not a set of neutral skills to be attained, but that it is ideologically based and socially practised.²² This matters because the approach recognises that people encounter misinformation in the context of their everyday lives and within the existing social relations and power structures in which they are located. In this sense, media literacy practices are never neutral or decontextualised. Instead, they are deeply embedded in individuals' prior and ongoing experiences and the places, spaces and social relationships in which they are experienced. This was very clear from the stories that emerged from the diary study discussed in Chapter 3. For this reason, media literacy education must be socially situated and responsive to local circumstances and people's past experiences. It must also be available to people in their everyday lives and in their communities in accessible ways. In the next section, we discuss the idea of Connected Learning to think about how communities may respond to individuals' needs by providing multiple opportunities to encounter media literacy education.

Connected Learning and media literacy

If media literacy education should occur in ongoing ways to become part of our “learning lives”, it is necessary to have a wider understanding of what learning is and where it can take place.²³ Rather than thinking about learning as something that primarily takes place in schools, via formal adult education offerings or in one-off workshops, it is productive to think about media literacy learning as *any* opportunity that promotes engagement with knowledge about media environments and strategies for responding to misinformation.

Connected Learning provides a useful model for thinking about how media literacy learning can occur in informal spaces, across communities and online. Kumpulainen and Sefton-Green (2014) argue that Connected Learning aims to describe learning as crossing the boundaries between home, school, peer cultures and formal and informal learning.²⁴ They suggest:

Connected learning is realized when the learner is able to pursue a personal interest or passion with the support of friends, caring adults, and/or expert communities and is in turn able to link this learning and interest to academic achievement, career success, or civic engagement.²⁵

Connected Learning is particularly useful for thinking about how community-based social infrastructure such as libraries, community centres, museums and galleries, news organisations and public broadcasters, and other cultural institutions may become part of an individual’s “learning life”. Libraries act as vital social infrastructure in many communities, providing opportunities for discussion, debate and knowledge development and often have learning programmes for different age groups. Museums, galleries and archives are important public cultural institutions that have a remit to educate and inform, and news organisations and public broadcasters can produce high-quality media content to promote media literacy. Notably, Australians place great trust in museums, libraries and other cultural institutions.²⁶ Many frontline community organisations, such as not-for-profits, advocacy groups and community support groups, also play an essential role in providing people with access to learning opportunities and trusted information, including for media literacy. In particular, these organisations often meet the needs of people who may be digitally excluded and, therefore, less confident with media literacy.²⁷ In addition, Connected Learning can happen among family and friends, in workplaces and through other social learning opportunities.

Connected Learning opportunities are also directly available to people online, both through direct learning opportunities, for instance, with video tutorials and within online communities of practice. Media literacy learning may happen, for instance, via media stories about technology and the media, including about scams and inaccurate information, and media organisations may themselves aim to promote media literacy. It is now well established

that a great deal of learning occurs via what Henry Giroux (1994) describes as “media pedagogies”,²⁸ and in practical terms the popularity of tutorial and “life hack” genres on YouTube and TikTok illustrate that a great deal of learning occurs in online spaces.²⁹ Ito and colleagues (2019) argue that online affinity spaces focused on passions and interests become important opportunities for Connected Learning.³⁰ Our Australian Adult Media Literacy Survey also shows that most people want to learn about media literacy via online opportunities, possibly because it allows for an on-demand approach that meets interested individuals at times and locations that are convenient for them.³¹

There are several key challenges, however, for promoting media literacy education online, particularly when it comes to ensuring quality and trustworthiness. It is often difficult to discover quality (and freely available) educational content online. We acknowledge, for instance, that examples of media literacy-like resources found online may promote problematic content. One version of critical thinking about the media found online is sometimes connected to conspiracy theories, unethical social stories and inaccuracies. As people turn to generative AI for answers, they may also be exposed to inaccurate or harmful information that is not visible to others. Despite these challenges, we believe it is essential to note that online sources are likely to be an important part of a person’s Connected Learning media literacy experiences.

Mediators such as library workers, facilitators, teachers, journalists, mentors, community educators and, indeed, online influencers are essential to Connected Learning and for promoting media literacy. We see mediators as a key audience for a media literacy response to misinformation and recognise that it is essential to support mediators so they can update and develop their own media literacy knowledge and skills. A key challenge for mediators, however, is having access to a consistent approach to media literacy education that they can trust is effective. While there are considerable media literacy resources available online, they can provide contradictory approaches or frameworks, become quickly out of date due to their focus on specific technologies and might not be evidence-based.

It can also be difficult to know how to approach media literacy education, particularly in community contexts. Therefore, having access to an engaging and consistent pedagogical approach is likely to increase mediators’ confidence. In research we have done with teachers about digital citizenship education, we found that access to a well-designed learning framework and resources significantly increased teachers’ confidence.³² Finally, having access to illustrations of successful practice such as case studies and high-quality resources is also likely to bolster mediators’ willingness to implement media literacy opportunities in their local communities or online. In the concluding chapter we indicate how different community actors can support media literacy education. Meanwhile, in the next section of this chapter, we provide

a practical example of a workshop which draws on our holistic approach to media literacy.

Implementing the framework: the ABC Education workshop

This final section of this chapter outlines an example of how the key concepts model, Connected Learning approach, and the Be Curious, Be Critical, Be Confident frameworks were used to underpin and inform a media literacy experience designed for young adults aged 18–25. In early 2025, ABC Education (part of the national public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation), with support from the Parramatta City Council Library and Western Sydney University, piloted a four-part news media education programme aimed at strengthening young adults' understanding of misinformation and news media environments in Australia. Through sessions of 60–90 minutes each, 15 young adults from Western Sydney were supported to extend their abilities to evaluate news and information online, to take steps to verify information and to embed critical thinking into their everyday media practices, interests and experiences.

ABC Education has a long-standing role in media literacy advocacy and support in Australia. Its work largely focuses on supporting school and education sector audiences, such as by providing free, high-quality teaching and learning resources for students and educators that are mapped to the Australian Curriculum. However, as part of Australia's national public broadcaster, it also has a responsibility to support and improve the media literacy of all Australians, to bolster their media engagement and to provide Australian communities with the opportunities to develop key skills, knowledge and capabilities that can help them flourish.

As an industry partner on our research project, ABC Education was, therefore, invited to reflect on and think about how a media literacy initiative they would develop could address the everyday information and media interests, needs and desires of Australians in an evidence-informed, responsive way. ABC Education elected to focus on young adults to expand on its current remit to support children, teenagers and young people in Australia to develop their media literacy knowledge and capabilities. ABC Education's myriad education resources and learning opportunities are primarily tailored to suit an Australian primary and secondary school audience; however, in drawing on the project's research findings and a wider understanding of young people's changing everyday news, information and media experiences, ABC Education sought to address a growing gap in young adults' opportunities to strengthen their media literacy capabilities. More explicitly, its staff were motivated to think about how they can support young adults to gain the skills and knowledge to identify and respond to different types of information online, particularly news. Young people often lack the opportunity to develop knowledge about the news media that reflects their everyday experiences, attitudes and beliefs.

In line with the broad-based media literacy and Connected Learning approach we've advocated for throughout this chapter, the ABC Education team sought to design and implement a programme that would address the real-world news and information challenges that young people are facing, a programme that would reflect and respond to young people's actual interests, needs and everyday experiences.

The programme, which involved three 1.5-hour workshops and an industry panel event, invited a group of young people to learn about misinformation and its connection to the news (the event was promoted via university email lists and the public library). The session also supported participants to discuss relationships between politics, media representation, digital and social media, and wider community advocacy and civic action. These intersecting issues deeply resonated with the participants who were able to make this learning tangible by relating it to various aspects of their everyday lives.

The workshop delivery model supported the ABC Education team's goal not only to provide young people with new knowledge about misinformation, news media and civic participation in Australia but also to create a space where they could build trust, engage in rich two-way dialogue and support one another to build practical skills that they could proactively and easily enact as part of their everyday media practices. To this end, each workshop followed the overarching Be Curious, Be Critical, Be Confident process. The ABC Education facilitator started each workshop by introducing and defining a big issue or topic relating to news and information, such as identifying how algorithms shape online media environments or understanding the civic role of journalism. The facilitator then provided activities and opportunities for discussion where the group could start to link this knowledge to their own thoughts, views, biases and experiences. In each workshop, the group was also provided with the support and opportunities to put new, relevant skills or critical thinking processes into practice, in ways that demonstrated how these could be translated into the different contexts of their day-to-day lives.

This approach resonated with the group who reported in a post-event evaluation survey and follow-up interviews that their media knowledge and critical thinking skills had been further developed through peer-to-peer learning. For instance, the group's members said they appreciated being able to hear about each other's online news experiences, including others' news engagement habits, interests and routines. As part of an activity about finding news on social media, one participant reflected on how he received news from a particular reputable news organisation and how he felt that he was quite active in his news-seeking behaviours, especially of political news and political opinion. Another participant reflected on getting news from a non-profit organisation and noted that she found the organisation's rigour and use of clear journalistic principles, like balance and independence, as factors that drew her into that news content. A third participant explained that he enjoyed getting news from an individual content creator on YouTube because

he appreciated the honesty and critical thinking that the individual used in their news analysis videos. The group's discussion of their lived experiences with online news sources helped actualise an earlier conceptual discussion led by the workshop facilitator relating to the civic and social role of news and journalism in society. The group's reflections on their own news practices further deepened their awareness and understanding of how structural and technological changes brought about by social media had changed the way news is produced, distributed and consumed and that this has an impact on how people are being informed and the decisions they are making based on the information they come across each day. During an evaluation interview conducted to gather feedback after the programme was complete, Lina, a first-year university student living in Western Sydney, reflected on how this activity had led her to realise that:

It's so easy to mindlessly scroll through social media without really taking notice of what it is we are actually consuming. Since the workshops, I've been trying to take note of what it actually takes to produce the content I'm seeing. Regardless of whether or not it's "news", I still find myself taking time to stop and think about the intentions behind every post.

(Lina, 18)

The ABC Education workshop series demonstrates the value that comes from facilitating a broad-based and Connected Learning approach to media education. As a more resource intensive initiative – involving considerable planning, time and staffing commitments – the ABC Education series may not be the most suitable approach to support the media literacy education of all audiences or be feasible for all scales of delivery (for example, for a larger participant group or for online delivery). Despite these considerations, by building learning opportunities that reflect people's lived experiences, interests and needs, by engaging in rich and meaningful dialogue with them and by encouraging a wider culture of learning, reflection and action, it shows how we can purposefully, empathetically and collectively move forward to address informational challenges like misinformation.³³

Enabling a broad-based media literacy approach

We have outlined in this chapter a media literacy approach that supports people to live with misinformation. This approach promotes a broad-based media literacy education where people are provided with opportunities to engage with media learning throughout their lives. Sitting behind this approach is an understanding that while misinformation comes with specific challenges, it is often associated with other problematic media content, systems and processes. On the one hand, misinformation is often present when problematic narratives are constructed to be culturally, socially and politically harmful. It

is often part of broader efforts related to cultural and political polarisation that seek to pit people against each other. On the other hand, misinformation is often enabled by the business models that underpin social, AI and other forms of digital media platforms. These are business models that reward engagement, thereby prioritising content that creates outrage and conflict.

For these reasons, educational responses to misinformation should not be isolated from broader media literacy efforts that aim to provide people with the ability to successfully navigate digital media environments. Our framework provides 11 capabilities, organised under the interconnected headings of Be Curious, Be Critical and Be Confident to provide practical ideas for working with people to co-design and deliver media literacy interventions that will ultimately support people to successfully live with misinformation. This framework is informed by media literacy research, research on misinformation and our own project research and by the work we carried out in our workshops with industry partners. Additionally, we draw on the Connected Learning approach and recognise that media literacy learning must be life-long. This means that opportunities for learning should be made available in formal and informal settings, within popular and public media and across media systems. In the final chapter of this book, we bring together our principles for learning to live with misinformation and outline the need for future practical and research interventions to ensure media literacy education is made widely available and its impacts are further understood.

Notes

- 1 On lateral reading, see Wineburg et al., 2022; on critical ignoring, see Kozyreva et al., 2023.
- 2 For example, van der Linden, 2023; Zhang et al., 2025.
- 3 Buckingham, 2026, p. 142.
- 4 See Bahar & Hasan, 2025.
- 5 Buckingham, 2019; Potter & McDougall, 2017; Mihailidis, 2018; McDougall, 2019.
- 6 Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2014.
- 7 Mihailidis et al., 2026.
- 8 Erstad, 2013; Dezuanni, 2015.
- 9 Bruner, 1960.
- 10 Notley et al., 2024.
- 11 Altay & Acerbi, 2024.
- 12 See, for example, Weismueller et al., 2022.
- 13 Mihailidis, 2018; Mihailidis et al., 2026; McDougall, 2024.
- 14 Kozyreva et al., 2023.
- 15 Breakstone et al., 2021; Wineburg et al., 2022; McGrew, 2024.
- 16 Reisman, 2012.
- 17 Buckingham, 2026, pp. 138–140.
- 18 Australian Media Literacy Alliance, 2025; Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, n.d.
- 19 du Gay et al., 1997.
- 20 Bazalgette, 1992.

- 21 Kozyreva et al., 2023.
- 22 Street, 1984, 1995.
- 23 Erstad, 2013.
- 24 Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2014.
- 25 Kumpulainen & Sefton-Green, 2014, p. 10.
- 26 Hui & Fielding, 2025.
- 27 Dezuanni et al., 2023.
- 28 See Giroux, 1994, 2011.
- 29 Dezuanni, 2020.
- 30 Ito et al., 2019.
- 31 Notley et al., 2024.
- 32 Dezuanni & Corser, 2023.
- 33 More information about this workshop is available as a case study in *Living with Misinformation: A Guide for Media Literacy Action*: see Dezuanni et al., 2026.

5 Conclusion

As we have been writing this book, generative AI has been evolving at an alarming pace. Each week, new developments and examples of generative AI misinformation expand our understanding of the many risks associated with this technology and raise new questions about the ways that individuals, communities, governments and organisations should respond. For instance, users have asked AI tools to unmask protestors or law enforcement officers and reveal partially redacted images of sexual abuse victims, leading to dangerous vigilante responses.¹ Search engines have integrated AI capabilities not only to summarise news stories but also to rewrite the original news headlines.² Foreign actors have created and circulated troves of AI-generated photorealistic content of politicians to try to influence attitudes and sway voters.³ Meanwhile, OpenAI, the company behind ChatGPT, announced in March 2026 that it was shutting down its synthetic video app, Sora, amidst growing concerns and public advocacy about its use for perpetrating image-based abuse less than a year after it was launched.⁴ Amid all these developments, our research team, alongside millions of social media users around the world, experienced the horror of not being immediately sure what was real and what was not as we scrolled through our feeds. These examples and developments highlight that while AI raises important questions about ethics, rights, regulation and other matters, it's also changing and challenging our everyday experience of media and is, therefore, the latest frontier for media literacy education.

While AI-generated media is the latest media form people are grappling with, misinformation is something we as humans have long had to deal with. New technologies do change things: they shift the way misinformation is created, used, shared and circulated. This constant evolution of misinformation is why we argue that it is more powerful to equip the public with knowledge about broader media environments and systems, and to provide a conceptual framework for thinking about misinformation, than it is to focus solely on developing technology-specific skillsets. After all, these skills may quickly become redundant over time. A holistic media literacy approach, instead, not only increases digital skills but also provides people with a way of thinking about media and technologies that is based on knowledge about them and

encourages them to exercise critical thinking that can be applied over time and across different technologies and contexts.

It's important to reiterate that our research clearly demonstrates that people are highly invested in making informed decisions – they don't want to be duped. People do spend time looking for additional information when they need it. They resent being manipulated. They update their media knowledge when they need to. And when they are let down by the information systems they rely on – whether that's a social media platform delivering them misinformation, a news organisation using clickbait to get audiences to navigate through to their paywalled content or a company or influencer making false promises about their product or service – their trust is diminished. The cumulative impact of this is that many people are losing confidence that they can use the internet to make sound and informed decisions: they are no longer sure if they can identify what is trustworthy and what is not. This growing distrust is bad for us all because it can lead to confusion, chaos, disengagement, anxiety, fear and broad cynicism. While many things are needed to address this, sustained investments in education are essential.

We end this book by reflecting on what various actors, from individuals at the micro level to governments at the macro level, can do to support media literacy education as part of a holistic response to living with misinformation. We hope this will be an ongoing and evolving conversation that takes place in different social, cultural and national contexts to ensure media literacy responses meet people where they are at and are informed by the varied ways people in these contexts consume, create, transform and share media.

First, it is important that we recognise the fundamental reason why we need to work together to address the problem of misinformation and why we believe that the media and media technologies matter so much that they need to be protected. As media scholar Mark Deuze (2023) puts it, "Media are to us as water is to fish".⁵ We live our lives in and through media. Media can bring us understanding, joy and happiness. Media can help us to learn, play, connect and tell stories about the world we have and want to have. We use media to work, think and express who we are. We use media to document what has happened and to hold our memories for us. That is why we all need to act to ensure we have healthy, fair and inclusive media ecosystems and that citizens are able to competently access, use, navigate and create media that contributes to their own development and to a better and fairer society. While we need to learn to live with misinformation, we can do this in a way that continually strives to improve our digital information and media environments.

What governments can do

One of the first things that governments can do to support media literacy is to ensure they have a national strategic plan or policy that sets out how citizens will be afforded access to media literacy support and what the government

will do to enable this. A clear policy or plan is needed to ensure that media literacy is treated as a priority public issue because it is needed for communities to participate, survive and thrive. National media literacy strategies and policies exist in a number of countries, including Finland, Sweden, Brazil and the United Kingdom. However, this is far from being the norm, with fewer than 10% of the 194 UNESCO Member States having standalone media and information literacy policies.⁶

In late 2024, the Australian Government announced that it would invest in co-developing a national media literacy strategy. Eighteen months later, in mid-2026, the government assigned a consultancy agency as the co-design partner to begin the process of widespread stakeholder and public consultation.⁷ While having a policy at the national level is an important first step, this needs to be accompanied by sustained federal funding available to support media literacy, including professional development for educators, and to foster a research culture where media literacy is measured and tracked longitudinally to assess how citizens are faring over time. A comprehensive policy can also ensure government departments are collaborating on this issue and are embedding media literacy across relevant policy areas including education, health, the environment and media regulation.

While many countries now offer some form of media literacy education for primary and secondary school students, comprehensive media literacy education is patchy, at best, at the tertiary level, depending on which degrees are pursued. It is often entirely absent for adults across their lifetimes. There is also often a lack of support and investment in media literacy mediators, like parents and carers, teachers, librarians and health workers.

National governments are also responsible for legal and regulatory changes and these can be used to complement media literacy policies by promoting transparency and accountability among technology companies. For instance, by ensuring that consumers have the right to know how a product or service is made.

What schools can do

As we have argued throughout this book, media literacy education should be available to individuals throughout their lives, including from their earliest years. Schools have an essential role to play. As with literacy more generally, schools should provide the foundations for media literacy, on which further educational effort can build.

Media literacy is a fundamental form of literacy because media provide avenues for communication, expression and meaning-making, including across digital and non-digital forms. As most contemporary literacy approaches acknowledge, multi-modal communication is as important as traditional alphabetic literacy.

It is a significant problem that media literacy is too seldom seen as a priority for schools in Australia and many other countries and that media literacy

education is not offered equitably,⁸ even if teachers support its inclusion.⁹ This may change with the introduction of the PISA Media and Artificial Intelligence Literacy assessment to be introduced to OECD member countries in 2029, which will likely force schools to pay more attention to these areas of learning.¹⁰ Along with making media literacy a priority, two other things are also necessary for media literacy to be successfully implemented in schools. First, teachers need to be able to access high-quality and up-to-date media literacy resources. Second, teachers need appropriate training and support in both pre-service teacher education and in-service professional learning once they are in the classroom. This is critical to ensure teachers are provided with the knowledge, skills and pedagogical processes to confidently and successfully implement media literacy in the classroom. It is also vital to recognise the expertise teacher librarians can bring to school-wide efforts including an ability to ensure media literacy efforts are delivered in a coherent and consistent way.

What communities can do

Communities can leverage their existing resources and infrastructures, including council buildings, libraries, museums, archives, historical societies and community centres to develop, promote and deliver a connected learning ecosystem that provides communities with ongoing, sustained and high-quality media literacy learning opportunities. These opportunities can be developed in partnership with communities to ensure they meet people where they are at – including people who are less confident or who require more support – by offering learning experiences that connect with their needs, concerns and interests.

Similarly, communities, including community influencers and leaders, can help to articulate and respond to community needs for high-quality news and information while advocating for media literacy. Community foundations in Australia have, for example, supported commercial news outlets in their local areas that would otherwise be news deserts.¹¹ These outlets provide alternative news and information sources to online social media groups that are often rife with misinformation, speculation and vitriol. These types of initiatives and investments can also help preserve the history of a community and bring people together through stories that allow the community to collectively think through its past, present and future. For instance, as discussed in Chapter 4, libraries across Australia, as in many other countries, are delivering media literacy workshops and training to meet the needs of different communities.¹²

What journalists and news organisations can do

Journalists, fact-checkers and news organisations also have a role to play in contributing to a holistic and lifelong media literacy education approach. For example, objective and factual news “explainers” that break down complex

stories or provide clarity on contested community responses can make it easier for people to understand complex news stories that are associated with new media technologies, misinformation and polarisation. To increase knowledge about how journalism is carried out, journalists can be more transparent about how they select what stories to cover; how they gather, edit, report, fact-check and frame the news; and some of the decisions that go into these processes. Journalists and news organisations should use care when depicting others and writing headlines, to ensure that they are not using sensationalist language or stereotyped or biased images for clickbait purposes: our research shows that clickbait may be effective in gaining attention, but it deeply erodes trust and causes brand and news disengagement.

News organisations also need to invest in audience feedback and to listen to news audiences to better understand what they want and expect. Being more attentive to these needs can help, in part, address declining levels of trust by ensuring that audiences feel represented by news and more in control of their news and information diets.

What technology companies can do

A small number of global platforms now exert significant control over access to news and information, and they generate enormous profits from the saturated, chaotic, emotive, risky and confusing information ecosystems they build and sustain. Despite their outsized influence in the digital public sphere, big tech companies have very little legal responsibility and often demonstrate poor transparency and accountability. As many scholars have written, this in part stems from a legal decision in the United States made in 1996 to amend the Communication Act, called Section 230. This statute says platforms will not be treated as publishers and generally finds they can't be held responsible for information or content posted on the platform by a user or external person.¹³ Since US companies dominate the global technology market, there have been limited legal avenues to hold companies to account for the design of their platforms in relation to misinformation.

Added to this, these platforms have also shown an overall lack of concern for the trustworthiness of content they surface and prioritise on their services. This is evidenced by decisions to pull funding for independent fact-checking on social media platforms and a pointed lack of action on addressing the scams from which they indirectly make money.¹⁴ Our research shows that Australian citizens do not accept this lack of accountability and they want platforms to show responsibility by addressing the problem of misinformation on their platforms.¹⁵

Platforms and technology companies, including AI companies, need to provide good-faith commitments to improve the quality of information they offer to users and to give users more control over their information experiences by allowing them to make decisions about the content they encounter

and when. These companies should invest some of their enormous profits into funding independent media literacy education programmes. Given that platforms have little incentive to make these commitments or sacrifice some of their profits, however, governments can regulate the technology sector to ensure that it contributes a fair share to educational efforts that are being developed, to enable citizens to use their platforms safely and productively.

What researchers can do

Throughout the project that informed this book, we sought to connect new research on misinformation with our media literacy approach. An important insight from our project is that despite the vast amount of research that exists on misinformation, there is still a lack of research about how people's everyday encounters with information and misinformation online connect with their broader media experiences. Misinformation cannot be isolated from people's more general media experiences, whether these be streaming or gaming for entertainment, using social media, seeking news and information or using search engines. Understanding the relationship between people's online activities and misinformation requires time-consuming and resource-intensive forms of qualitative and participatory research in localised social and cultural contexts. We call on researchers to assist with the broader project of exploring how media literacy education can respond to people's everyday experiences with misinformation within the complex media ecosystems in which people encounter misinformation online. There are long histories of sociocultural methodological approaches being applied across media and communications studies, educational research and sociology to understand embedded sociocultural experiences.

It is also vitally important that researchers develop rigorous evaluations of media literacy interventions to support initiatives being adapted, improved, localised and scaled up. Further, meaningful media literacy assessment tools are needed for different contexts. For instance, tools appropriate for assessing media literacy in schools will necessarily differ from those assessing informal adult interventions.

What each of us can do

Each of us can start with querying our own media consumption and habits to assess how useful, productive, diverse and healthy they are. We can consider, for example, how much control we have over our news and information consumption and identify opportunities to optimise our settings and use of digital platforms to ensure we invest our time in trustworthy media, while decreasing our experience of information overload.

Likewise, we can recognise that high-quality news and information don't materialise out of thin air. It takes real human labour, effort, care and critical thinking to produce, source, verify and publish. Some individuals might want

to support a local, state or national news outlet they believe plays an important role in their community with a subscription, while others might advocate for appropriate support for high-quality and independent public media as a counterbalance to commercial media.

Recalling that our media use is highly relational, we can think about our roles and affiliations with others in our environments. As parents, carers, children, teachers, mentors, peers, co-workers and more, are we taking advantage of everyday opportunities to have critical and constructive conversations about the media we create and consume? Are we asking questions about the media technologies, representations, audiences, institutions, languages and relationships enabled through and embedded in media?

From there, we can look outward to more macro-level forces in the media environment. While few of us are decision-makers at big tech companies or politicians capable of directing legislative change, we can become informed about the changes that are needed to address misinformation and advocate for these to our local political representatives. We can also use complaints mechanisms that are available to us, whether on platforms or via regulatory agencies (such as the Australian Communications and Media Authority or the Office of the eSafety Commissioner in Australia). Our research shows that very few Australians make use of the complaints mechanisms available to them¹⁶; yet, these systems and structures are intentionally set up to support our rights as active participants and consumers within digital spaces.

We can also take small daily steps as individuals to affect larger social institutions and structures. For example, we can ask ourselves if a certain platform or service is worthy of our time, attention and data given that each of these things makes platforms money. If the platform doesn't serve our interests or changes over time for the worse, can we connect with our social network in other ways, migrate to other platforms or delete our accounts to deprive platforms of the data and attention they need to sustain themselves?

A multi-pronged collaborative effort

The research we've presented in this book demonstrates that most people want action to address misinformation because it can and does cause harm, confusion, panic and distrust in society. Our empirical research has focused on the Australian context, and we know that media practices and experiences with misinformation can vary depending on different sociocultural factors. Even so, our findings are likely to be relevant in other contexts, especially in countries that share characteristics with Australia, including democratic governance and legislated commitments to human development and human rights.

Ultimately, achieving wider, positive transformation of the media and information ecosystems we engage with cannot be a siloed, individualised

or piecemealed effort. The actions we've outlined in this chapter are necessarily interconnected, calling on an array of individuals, organisations and institutions to play their parts. It is only through a whole-of-society response that individuals and communities can be supported to thrive, rather than only reluctantly navigate overwhelming waves of information and media that are increasingly unrelated to their day-to-day lives.

Against this backdrop, media literacy education must play an essential role as a foundation type of literacy. It must not be considered as an option in the curriculum or in broader community education. In our digitally mediated world, media literacy is required to participate and be successful in all aspects of life. Just as we strive to eradicate illiteracy in contemporary societies, we must ensure that all citizens have the opportunity to develop their media literacy in an ongoing way. After all, we will only learn to successfully live with misinformation, and blunt its power, when all citizens have the opportunity to learn about the media environments they use and that impact their lives from the earliest age and throughout life.

Notes

- 1 Daniel, 2026; Koltai, 2026.
- 2 Hollister, 2026.
- 3 Workman et al., 2026.
- 4 Kerr, 2026.
- 5 Deuze, 2012.
- 6 UNESCO, 2025.
- 7 McCarthy & Rowland, 2024; Wells, 2026.
- 8 Notley et al., 2023.
- 9 Corser et al., 2022.
- 10 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2025.
- 11 Community Foundations Australia, 2023.
- 12 On library workshops, see, for example, Australian Media Literacy Alliance, 2026.
- 13 United States Congress, 2024.
- 14 See Watt et al., 2025; ABC News, 2025.
- 15 Notley et al., 2024.
- 16 Notley et al., 2024.



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