

**Australian Associated Press Ltd (AAP)**  
**Submission on the Draft Code of**  
**Practice on Disinformation**

**Introductory Statement**

AAP is Australia's trusted, independent newswire service with an 85-year commitment to unbiased and reliable newsgathering.

AAP has been an integral part of the Australian media landscape since its inception, providing the foundation of news content for newspapers, radio news and talkback programs, television news and more recently, the digital versions of all of the above, as well as new market entrants.

Earlier this year AAP was facing closure which would have resulted in the loss of tens of thousands of stories each year covering all aspects of Australian life. AAP was saved from closure by a small group of philanthropists and, as a result, is now a not-for-profit news organisation dedicated to covering news and sport around Australia and the globe for all Australians.

AAP's news comes in the form of words and images. AAP currently offers more than 130 subscribers an average of 200 text stories a day across news, politics, finance and sport. AAP also offers over 400 domestic images and more than 10,000 images from international partner agencies each day.

AAP's content is licensed for publication on hundreds of websites in Australia, including half of the top news sites in the country. It is printed in major newspapers through metropolitan and regional areas, and is broadcast across radio news bulletins around the country. AAP has a shared audience of millions of Australians who consume our news daily in various formats.

In early 2019, AAP established AAP FactCheck, a self-contained factchecking unit inside our newsgathering business giving priority to debunking false information.

AAP FactCheck has been working to minimise the impact of false content in traditional news media since January 2019, and officially became a Facebook third-party factchecking partner in August 2019, broadening our focus to online platforms Facebook and later, Instagram.

Under our not-for-profit model, AAP has an even greater focus on promoting accurate, ethical and sustainable newsgathering in Australia. We are also committed to advancing education to support and develop the use of accurate, fact-based communications in social media and public discourse.

**AAP has a unique position in the media, and as such offers this submission in respect of Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation.**

### **Opt-in model and reporting measures**

The Draft Code is designed around an ‘opt-in’ model, and it is understood this is to accommodate the need for diverse signatories to choose only relevant and applicable measures for adherence. This model has been adopted in similar codes in other jurisdictions - for example, the EU’s Code of Practice on Disinformation. Early criticism of the EU code pointed to a perceived lack of clear and meaningful commitments forming common guidelines for signatories. It is essential that the common purpose is clearly identified in Australia’s code, and accepted by all signatories.

Section 7.1 of the Draft Code states “A signatory is not bound to comply with commitments it has not nominated”, and while this aligns with the need for flexibility, it may avail some organisations of the reputational or other benefits of being a signatory while allowing them to avoid those objectives they may find too stringent, or otherwise unpalatable. Expectations around engaging with the code to the fullest extent possible should be clearly stated, and independently reviewed by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) or a delegated authority as part of the opt-in process.

Likewise, signatories’ reporting on progress towards the Code’s objectives and specific key performance indicators must be collated and made as widely available as possible. Some redaction may be necessary for public release, for example, in circumstances where publicising the manner in which disinformation is being fought may undermine those very efforts. However, the goal should be to remain as transparent as possible, and those efforts to remain transparent must be subject to independent review.

This will allow proper scrutiny of the effectiveness of the Australian code, ensuring a greater level of accountability and visibility over whether a voluntary code is in fact the most effective way to address disinformation.

### **Funding FactChecking**

Third-party factchecking is a crucial weapon against false information on digital platforms. AAP FactCheck conducts factchecking as a Facebook partner in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands, examining content on Facebook and Instagram. AAP FactCheck has also undertaken election factchecking supported by Google in both Australia and New Zealand, and independently conducts ad hoc factchecks of content published by Australian news media.

Factchecking is a complicated and time consuming manual process requiring experienced journalists in the writing, editing and production phases. This means it is a high cost, low-volume operation that suffers demonstrably when not funded reliably and adequately.

Experienced factcheckers know how to surface the content that most requires addressing, avoiding the reliance on referrals. Factchecking outfits also have established publishing networks to give greater exposure to the outcomes of those factchecks. Digital platforms also need the credibility that underpins the work done by established independent factcheckers in order to gain notice.

According to the Discussion Paper on the Australian Disinformation Code, platforms and providers of online content “have expressed a strong desire to not become ‘the arbiters of truth’, highlighting the complexities of this role...”.

Consideration should therefore be given to enshrining an ongoing financial commitment to independent fact-checking operations as an opt-in measure related to Objective 1:

Safeguards against Disinformation.

This is logical given platforms do not want to own factchecking work, and that the work is fundamental to addressing and minimising the impact of digital misinformation and disinformation. Short-term commercial contracts and general financial uncertainty hinder the operation of independent fact-checkers by limiting their opportunities to confidently scale-up in order to address growing levels of problematic material.

The work should instead be viewed along the lines of a Public Good, made available to all members of society and funded collectively, as opposed to a traditional commercial service model.

During election campaign periods in particular factcheckers should be funded to scrutinise political statements and advertising, with the ultimate goal of raising the overall standard of debate and supporting healthy democratic processes. This is to the non-excludable benefit of all citizens, satisfying the definition of a Public Good.

Adding further weight to this argument is the example of Google’s financial support of AAP FactCheck’s 10-week factchecking project centred on the New Zealand election. The project’s impact was considerable, with AAP FactCheck articles published by every major news outlet in NZ. They became a significant part of the coverage of the national broadcaster, RNZ, and television-based news service, Newshub, and their impact on the campaign was notable. (For example, a National Party candidate [was forced to apologise and admit he was wrong](#) after AAP FactCheck analysed his statement about the impact of the government’s oil and gas exploration ban.)

The factchecks received significant engagement on social media, with hundreds of shares on Facebook, retweets on Twitter and thousands of comments. AAP FactCheck gave a mass audience reliable, factual information regarding claims made by all sides of politics - and this information would not have existed without external funding.

All signatories should also commit to increasing the prominence of factchecks to aid people in finding impartial, accurate information. This addresses the federal government’s requirement that the Code “address concerns” around credibility signalling. Google’s ClaimReview system is a leader here - prominently featuring factcheck results in their search returns when people look for related terms. Other platforms could be encouraged, via the Code, to do more in this vein as a means of empowering users to make informed choices, and to promote media literacy and independent research among as broad a group of people as possible.

A culture of cooperation and collaboration between signatories, government or other regulators, and independent factcheckers like AAP FactCheck would also help to address many of the issues hindering effective, high-quality, high-volume factchecking.

## **Advertising**

Regarding advertising on digital platforms, more uniform collection and disclosure of data by digital platforms, particularly around political advertising, would be a huge step forward. Greater visibility of the advertising activities would result in greater accountability and may discourage bad actors. Factcheck services could also be used to analyse and give context to this data, as well as to scrutinise the content of the ads. This would strengthen Measure 5.15 but is also relevant to Objective 3.

## **Education**

Objective 4 aims to empower consumers to make better informed choices about digital news and factual content. Objective 5 is to strengthen public understanding of disinformation through support of strategic research.

Neither objective specifically references the critical role of improving media literacy through education initiatives but this is fundamental to the ability to satisfy both above-mentioned objectives and must be given a high priority by all digital platforms, especially signatories.

Funding should be allocated to specifically-targeted media literacy campaigns that aim to create a critical mindset. The duty and obligation to appropriately fund initiatives to improve digital media literacy should be referenced specifically in the Measures contained in the Code.

Helping people to understand what they are seeing online, and the impact of what they post, is an important way to reduce the power of misinformation and disinformation.

Research commissioned by AAP in November 2020 examined best practices in media literacy and noted “factchecking is not enough. People need to be prepared for misinformation since factchecking often comes too late to be corrective or it does not reach the right people.”

The same research also identified significant gaps in media literacy education resources - and funding must be made available to target these gaps as part of a holistic approach to reducing false content and its impact. The Code would be flawed if it did not make specific reference to, and encourage or require provision for, education initiatives.