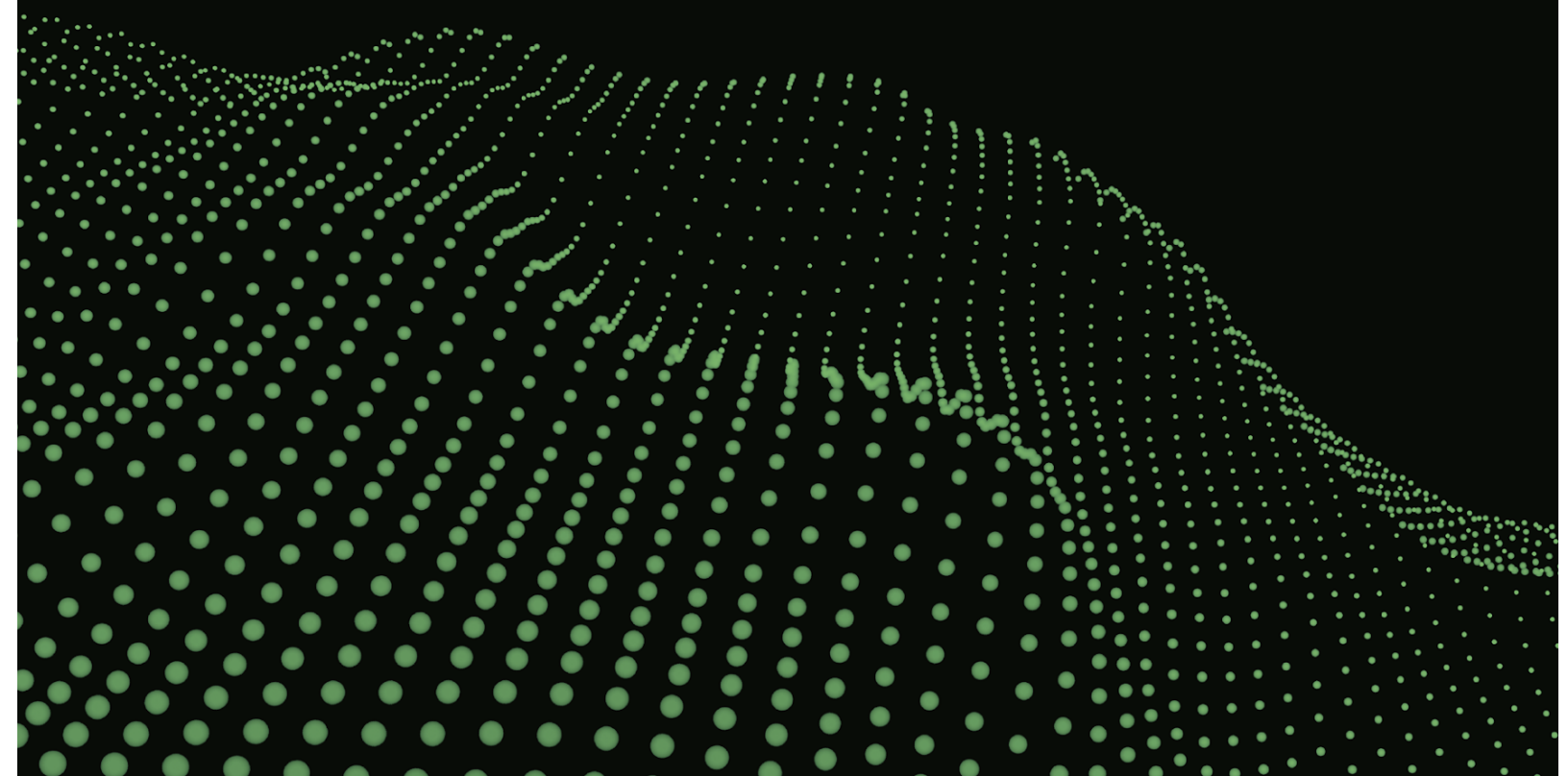




# Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation | **Annual Report**

Published June 6, 2022



## Background

*DIGI is a non-profit industry association that advocates for the interests of the digital industry in Australia. DIGI's founding members are Apple, eBay, Google, Linktree, Meta, TikTok, Twitter, Snap and Yahoo, and its associate members are Change.org, Gofundme, ProductReview.com.au and Redbubble. DIGI's vision is a thriving Australian digitally-enabled economy that fosters innovation, a growing selection of digital products and services, and where online safety and privacy are protected.*

*The Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation (ACPDM) was developed in response to Australian Government policy announced in December 2019, in response to the ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry, where the digital industry was asked to develop a voluntary code of practice on disinformation.*

*DIGI developed the ACPDM with assistance from the University of Technology Sydney's Centre for Media Transition, and First Draft, a global organisation that specialises in helping societies overcome false and misleading information. In October 2020, DIGI opened a six-week public consultation on the draft code and proactively identified interested civil society, consumer and academic stakeholders, who were invited to comment. DIGI published a report on its website<sup>1</sup> outlining how the final code was updated to incorporate stakeholder feedback.*

*The final code was launched in February 2021 and its signatories are Apple, Adobe, Google, Meta, Microsoft, Redbubble, TikTok and Twitter. Mandatory code commitments include publishing & implementing policies on misinformation and disinformation, providing users with a way to report content against those policies and implementing a range of scalable measures that reduce its spread & visibility (Mandatory commitment #1). Every signatory has agreed to annual transparency reports about those efforts to improve understanding of both the management and scale of mis- and disinformation in Australia (Mandatory commitment #7).*

*Additionally, there are a series of opt-in commitments that platforms adopt if relevant to their business model: (Commitment #2) Addressing disinformation in paid content; (#3) addressing fake bots and accounts; (#4) transparency about source of content in news and factual information (e.g. promotion of media literacy, partnerships with fact-checkers) and (#5) political advertising; and (#6) partnering with universities/researchers to improve understanding of mis and disinformation.*

*DIGI has produced this annual report as part of its governance of the ACPDM.*

---

<sup>1</sup>DIGI (22/02/21), Submission report: Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation, <https://digi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/DIGI-Submission-report-ACPDM-Feb-22-2021-FINAL.pdf>

# Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation | Annual Report

Published June 6, 2022

## Managing Director's statement



**By: Sunita Bose**

Managing Director, DIGI

When the Government asked the digital industry to develop a code of practice on disinformation, back in December 2019, the world was a very different place. A few months later, as the Digital Industry Group (DIGI) began developing *The Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation* (ACPD) it was the start of Australia's first wave of COVID-19. The pandemic stress-tested this code in a way that we may not have achieved outside of a time of crisis.

Launched in February 2021, this code provides a blueprint for best practice for any digital company in relation to any issue – not just in relation to coronavirus – where harmful misinformation or disinformation may proliferate online. The code has so far been adopted by eight signatories – Apple, Adobe, Google, Meta, Microsoft, Redbubble, TikTok and Twitter – that have cemented their mandatory commitments, and nominated additional opt-in commitments, through public disclosures on the DIGI website.

They have all committed to safeguards to protect against online disinformation and misinformation, such as publishing and implementing policies on their approach, and providing a way for their users to report content that may violate those policies. They have committed to scalable measures that reduce its spread and visibility, such as content labelling and removal, restricting inauthentic accounts and behaviours, partnerships with fact-checking organisations, and technology to help people to check the authenticity of digital content. Their work in these areas is detailed in the first two sets of signatories' mandatory transparency reports, released in May 2021 and May 2022.

And while the pandemic has seen increasing agreement that combating mis- and disinformation to protect public health and democracy is essential, there is not always agreement on what constitutes misinformation. In 2022, DIGI commissioned a nationally representative survey, undertaken by Resolve Strategic, that presented Australians with twenty cases of potential misinformation. None of the cases received a clear and unequivocal rating as 'misinformation' by participants, with significant skews in the perceptions based on respondents' personal characteristics, political or media preferences. While most had heard of the term misinformation, their explanations of it were varied and inconsistent with industry and academic definitions. We have released this research in this annual report.

This goes to show that the digital industry's test with this code can't be to rid the Internet of what people consider to be misinformation. That is why this principles-based code's goal is about incentivising better practice by companies, through driving greater transparency, consistency and public accountability around their approaches to misinformation.

Since the code was first launched, we have taken several steps to support that goal, which are all detailed in this report. In October 2021, we appointed an independent complaints committee to resolve complaints about possible breaches by signatories of their code commitments, and a portal on DIGI's website for the public to raise such complaints. We appointed an independent reviewer to fact check and attest all signatories' transparency reports prior to publication, who also developed best practice reporting guidelines to drive improvements and consistency in 2022 transparency reports.

Today, we're launching a review of the code and are inviting views from the public, civil society and Government on how it can be improved. We've closely examined the Australian Media & Communications Authority (the ACMA) June 2021 report assessing the code<sup>2</sup> and today DIGI has released a separate discussion paper seeking views on specific questions, and we encourage you to have your say.

DIGI is also supportive in principle of the ACMA's five key recommendations in that report to strengthen their oversight of the code and their work on misinformation and disinformation<sup>3</sup>, and would contribute to any forthcoming consultation<sup>4</sup> on the legislative details.

Sustained shifts in the fight against mis- and disinformation rely on a widespread and multi-stakeholder approach. We look forward to continuing our shared work with many of you in contributing to those shifts, and maximising the ACPDM's role in that effort.



Sunita Bose  
Managing Director, DIGI

---

<sup>2</sup> ACMA (21/03/2022), *Report to government on the adequacy of digital platforms' disinformation and news quality measures*,  
<https://www.acma.gov.au/report-government-adequacy-digital-platforms-disinformation-and-news-quality-measures>  
(ACMA Report to Government)

<sup>3</sup> DIGI (21/03/2022), *DIGI welcomes release of ACMA report on Mis/Disinformation Code and supports its five key recommendations*,  
<https://digi.org.au/digi-welcomes-release-of-acma-report-on-misdisinformation-code-and-supports-its-five-key-recommendations/>

<sup>4</sup> Former Minister Paul Fletcher (21/03/2022), *New disinformation laws*,  
<https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20220405140842/https://minister.infrastructure.gov.au/fletcher/media-release/new-disinformation-laws>

<b>Managing Director's statement</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Part 1   Australians' perceptions of misinformation</b>	<b>7</b>
Introduction	7
Key findings	8
<b>Part 2   Governance arrangements</b>	<b>10</b>
Complaints sub-committee	10
Signatory steering Group	10
Independent review of transparency reports	10
Complaints portal	12
Overview of complaints received	13
Promotion of portal	14
<b>Part 3   Transparency reporting process</b>	<b>15</b>
Background	15
2021 Reports	15
ACMA's assessment of the 2021 reports	15
Best practice reporting guidelines for ACPDM	16
Independent review process	17
2022 Reports	18
<b>Appendix A   Resolve Strategic Research on Australians' Misinformation Perceptions</b>	<b>19</b>
Executive summary	19
Project introduction	20
Findings	21
<b>Appendix B   Best Practice Reporting Guidelines</b>	<b>28</b>

## Part 1 | **Australians' perceptions of misinformation**



**By: Dr Jennifer Duxbury**

Director of Regulatory Affairs, Policy & Research, DIGI

### Introduction

In March 2022, DIGI commissioned Resolve Strategic to conduct a nationally representative survey of Australians' perceptions of misinformation. The survey used a mix of online and telephone interviews (totalling n=2,303) and was designed to identify Australians' views on the meaning of the term 'misinformation', its prevalence and sources, and the impacts of political biases and media preferences on their perceptions.

Comparable surveys about Australians' perceptions of misinformation have largely been conducted by academic researchers, the most extensive of which was conducted by the News and Media Research Centre of the University of Canberra (the N&MRC)<sup>5</sup>. These studies conclude that Australians share widespread concern about misinformation, and are regularly being exposed to it online.

However, a limitation of studies of Australians' experience of misinformation to date is that they assume that people have a shared understanding of what kinds of information and news sources should be categorised as misinformation, regardless of differences in their attitudes and beliefs. It is therefore unclear whether these surveys support the conclusion that Australians' concern about misinformation is based on a shared understanding of the subject, or whether there are important differences in their viewpoints that have been overlooked.

This challenge is acknowledged in the ACPDM:

*Disinformation and misinformation are aspects of a wider, multifaceted social problem which involves a range of offline and online behaviours which propagate information that threatens to undermine established democratic processes or public goods such as public health. Concepts such as 'disinformation', 'misinformation', and 'fake news' mean different things to different people and*

---

<sup>5</sup> Sora Park, Caroline Fischer, Kieran McGuinness, Jee Young Lee and Kerry McCallum, (23/06/2021), *Digital News Report Australia: 2021*, <https://www.canberra.edu.au/about-uc/media/newsroom/2021/june/digital-news-report-australia-2021-trust-in-news-is-up>. See also research commissioned by ACMA referenced in ACMA (21/03/2022), *Report to government on the adequacy of digital platforms' disinformation and news quality measures*, <https://www.acma.gov.au/report-government-adequacy-digital-platforms-disinformation-and-news-quality-measures>

*can become politically charged when they are used by people to attack others who hold different opinions on value-laden political issues on which reasonable people may disagree. The understanding and effects of these concepts varies amongst individuals and is also under-researched<sup>6</sup>.*

The potential for there to be significant differences in public views on the meaning of the terms 'misinformation' and 'disinformation' was reinforced by the feedback DIGI received from interested stakeholders in the course of the public consultation which informed the code's development<sup>7</sup>.

As the administrator of the code, DIGI's work needs to be supported by credible independent evidence about how Australians perceive the issues of misinformation and disinformation. In conducting this survey, DIGI wanted to explore the gap in the current Australian research, by investigating whether the diversity of understanding about misinformation, that we encountered amongst stakeholders during the development of the ACPDM, existed amongst ordinary Australians. The research findings and methodology are included in full in Appendix A.

## Key findings

- Most participants had heard the term 'misinformation' and were confident they could define it. However, their explanations were both varied and differed from accepted academic and industry definitions. For example, the vast majority of participants believed the term applies to all false or incorrect information and/or that it relates to intentional sharing of such information. Further, the meaning participants gave to misinformation was not commonly connected to the idea of harm.
- Most participants who used online and social media channels to obtain current news were accessing traditional media sources. Less than 1% of participants source news from fringe news sites. Therefore, participants' understanding of online news is primarily equated to traditional sources. This is important when considering concerns about the possibility Australian audiences may find it difficult to distinguish between so-called 'fake news' and authoritative news sources.
- Participants were presented with 20 example cases of potential misinformation, each related to particular channels, sources, targets and topics which they were asked to rate as 'intentional misinformation', 'unintentional misinformation', 'truthful' or 'unsure'. The cases ranged from examples of misinformation concerning the adverse health impacts of 5G to strong examples of accurate information about the health benefits of mask wearing during the COVID-19 pandemic, and a range of examples in between. None of the cases received a clear and unequivocal rating, with significant variances in participants' perceptions based on their personal characteristics, political or media preferences. In many cases there was a significant split of opinion on how to rate the cases. When analysed, these variances correlated to differences in personal characteristics, political or media preferences. When information came from a source that was contrary to a participant's beliefs, they were inclined to classify it as 'misinformation', rather than recognising their assessment was based on subjective opinion.
- Participants were asked to rank the influence of traditional media and the influence of digital media (including social media) in their lives against a range of policy issues ranging from health, and employment to freedom of speech. Most participants considered the influence of the media to be far less important than other issues. Further, more participants believed that freedom of speech was more important than concerns about the influence of online media in their lives. This

<sup>6</sup> DIGI (2021), *Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation*, <https://digi.org.au/disinformation-code/>

<sup>7</sup> DIGI (22/02/21), *Submission report: Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation*, <https://digi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/DIGI-Submission-report-ACPDM-Feb-22-2021-FINAL.pdf>

highlights the importance of ensuring freedom of speech concerns are taken into account when designing policy interventions that aim to reduce the exposure of Australians to online misinformation or that aim to regulate the content on digital media more generally.

- A clear majority of participants believed they had been exposed to misinformation, with around half reporting this occurred within the last week. This finding is consistent with other major Australian surveys on the topic. However, it is important to situate this finding in the context of the findings above that show the subjectivity and lack of consensus that characterises Australians' perceptions of what constitutes misinformation.

The findings of the Resolve Strategic research underscore the challenge of defining and responding to misinformation in light of the difficulties of making objective determinations of claims by the public that online material is 'misinformation'. Policy-makers, researchers and platforms alike therefore need to take great care in drawing conclusions based on the public's self-reported exposure to misinformation. DIGI hopes that the results of the survey can help inform signatories' and other stakeholders' efforts to tackle online misinformation in Australia.



## Part 2 | Governance arrangements

In October 2021, DIGI announced the governance arrangements for the ACPDM in order to strengthen the code and its effectiveness. This occurred after the launch of the ACPDM in February 2021 in order to enable DIGI to take into account the final design of the code, the initial signatories and their code commitments, into the design of the governance arrangements.

The governance arrangements draw on well established principles for administering industry codes and complaints facilities, including the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman and Communications Compliance models developed for the Australian telecommunications industry. The Code is a novel self regulatory mechanism that aims to drive improvements through increased transparency about how platforms tackle mis and disinformation; DIGI's governance arrangements have been tailored with that aim in mind.

DIGI's announcement of the governance model was made after the ACMA conducted its formal review of the ACPDM, submitted to the Government in June 2021 and published in March 2022. Therefore, the ACMA's assessment does not take into account the code's governance arrangements.

### Complaints sub-committee

The Complaints Sub-Committee is independent and resolves complaints about possible breaches by signatories of their commitments under the code. DIGI acts as secretary on this committee, but has no vote on decisions in order to avoid conflicts of interest. The committee meets to hear complaints of material code breaches that cannot be resolved by signatories and complainants. The Terms of Reference for the Complaints Sub-committee can be found on the DIGI website<sup>8</sup>, and the three independent members of the Complaints Sub-committee are detailed below.

### Administration sub-committee

The Administration Sub-Committee brings together the three independent representatives from the Complaints Sub-Committee with signatories of the code. This committee monitors the various actions taken by signatories to meet their obligations under the Code, such as the operation of the complaints facility.

### Signatory steering group

As any digital company can adopt the code, not just DIGI's members, this group enables companies that are not members of DIGI to have an equal say in decisions that are made about the code, if they choose. This group serves to separate DIGI's advocacy work on behalf of its members from the code governance functions.

### Independent review of transparency reports

An independent expert fact checks all signatories' transparency reports and provides an attestation of them, in order to incentivise best practice and compliance. The reviewer provides advice to the Administration Sub-committee if it cannot provide an attestation of claims in a transparency report.

---

<sup>8</sup> DIGI, *Terms of reference for Complaints Facility and Complaints Sub-committee* | *The Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation*, <https://digi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/DIGI-TOR-for-Complaints-Facility-and-Complaints-Sub-committee--ACPD- -FINAL-NE-1.pdf>



Dr. Anne Kruger

**Dr Anne Kruger sits on the Complaints Sub-Committee and the Administration Sub-committee.**

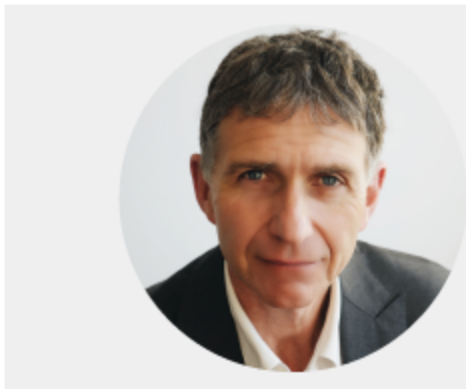
Anne launched the Australian and now Asia Pacific bureau of First Draft, a global organisation that specialises in helping societies overcome false and misleading information. Throughout 2020, the APAC bureau's investigations formed the backbone of analysis reports by a wide range of high profile outlets such as the New York Times, Washington Post, NBC, South China Morning Post, and across the ABC in Australia. Anne is co-chief investigator at the University of Technology Sydney's Centre for Media Transition which, together with First Draft, assisted DIGI with the development of its disinformation industry code. She has a PhD in social media verification education, has established verification and media literacy programs internationally including with UNESCO. Anne was previously a journalist and presenter at CNN Hong Kong during SARS, Bloomberg and ABC TV.



Victoria Rubensohn AM

**Victoria Rubensohn AM sits on the Complaints Sub-Committee and the Administration Sub-committee.**

Victoria has extensive experience in media and communications regulation in Australia and overseas, and with codes of practice in broadcasting, telecommunications, content classification and advertising. Victoria is currently Consumer Director of Communications Compliance Ltd and Principal of Omni Media. From 2011 to late 2020, Victoria was an Independent Reviewer for Ad Standards Australia; From 2015 to 2019, she was a Consumer Member of the Code Authority of ADMA; and from 2009 to 2015, she was Convenor of the Classification Review Board. Victoria has chaired federal government policy review committees on copyright convergence and digital radio. From 1994 to 2009, Victoria chaired the Telephone Information Services Standards Council regulating value-added telecommunications services. Victoria is a Director of the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN), the Centre for Inclusive Design, chair of the Communications Law Centre Ltd and is an Advisory Board Member of the Centre For Media Transition at UTS. She also serves on the advisory committee of the International Institute of Communications Australian Chapter, and was formerly President of the Communications and Media Law Association and Chair of the National Film and Sound Archive.



### Christopher Zinn

**Christopher Zinn sits on the Complaints Sub-Committee and the Administration Sub-committee.**

Christopher has led various successful and disruptive campaigns to help consumers make better decisions in complex markets such as energy, private health insurance and financial services. Christopher heads the [www.determinedconsumer.com](http://www.determinedconsumer.com) initiative, is the CEO of the Private Health Insurance Intermediaries Association, sits on the statutory authority reforming the funeral industry, and is on a self-regulatory code committee for the charitable sector. He was also director of communications and campaigns for consumer group CHOICE and has been a reporter and producer for TV, radio and newspapers both in Australia and overseas including the ABC, the Daily Telegraph, Channel Nine, and the UK Guardian.



### Hal Crawford

**Hal Crawford is the independent reviewer of the 2021 transparency reports, and author of the Best Practice Guidelines.**

Hal is a news executive and consultant with 25 years' experience in digital and broadcast media, and currently runs Crawford Media Consulting. He was recently the News Director at one of New Zealand's biggest newsrooms, Newshub, managing news and current affairs on TV, online and radio platforms. Hal was previously Editor-in-chief at ninemsn, and a non-executive director of youth content publisher Pedestrian. Hal is currently chair of the Advisory Board for the Centre for Media Transition at UTS, and has made other contributions to industry and regulatory frameworks for broadcast and digital media. Hal was the co-founder of a social media news sharing project, Sharewars, which gathered and analysed content data from the world's biggest news publishers. He co-authored the book *All Your Friends Like This*, published by HarperCollins in 2015, about social media and news.

## Complaints portal

A key component of the governance arrangements is the public complaints portal, that is available on DIGI's website<sup>9</sup>. The operation of the portal is detailed publicly in the complaints facility terms of reference<sup>10</sup>, which explains the processes for how complaints are resolved. The resolution measures have been designed to provide incentives for signatories to address breaches of the code, which is considered a better outcome than more punitive resolution measures.

<sup>9</sup> DIGI, *Complaints*, <https://digi.org.au/disinformation-code/complaints/>

<sup>10</sup> DIGI, *Terms of reference for Complaints Facility and Complaints Sub-committee* | *The Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation*, <https://digi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/DIGI-TOR-for-Complaints-Facility-and-Complaints-Sub-committee--ACPDM--FINAL-NE-1.pdf>

When a complaint is made through the portal, DIGI assesses its eligibility and escalates the complaint according to a standardised internal process that is overseen and approved by the complaints sub-committee. The complaints form enables members of the public to make complaints where they believe a signatory has breached a code commitment. This approach is consistent with the recommendations of the final report from the ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry, which recommended an approach to complaints that centres on code breaches through a focus on 'assessing the response of the digital platforms to complaints against the terms of the code'<sup>11</sup>.

Signatories to the ACPDM also commit to providing an avenue for the public to make complaints about instances of mis- and disinformation on their platforms. DIGI does not accept complaints about individual items of content on signatories' products or services, and encourages members of the Australian public to report misinformation or materials that violate specific platform policies directly to the code signatories via their reporting mechanisms.



#### Example of **eligible** complaint

A failure to implement and publish policies and/or reporting that will enable users to report the types of behaviours and content that violates their policies under section 5.10 of the Code.



#### Example of **ineligible** complaint

A determination by a signatory that specific items of content or categories of content is or is not disinformation or misinformation, or a decision to remove an individual's account. Those complaints will be handled by the signatories under the policies and procedures for reporting issues they are committed to implement under section 5.11 of the code.

## Overview of complaints received

The complaints facility is designed to provide an added layer of public accountability for signatories to the ACPDM; as discussed above, its goal is to provide a mechanism for Australians to escalate concerns about signatories' commitments to addressing mis- and disinformation, rather than providing an additional avenue for complaints about specific items of online content.

As of June 2, 2022, DIGI has received eight complaints through the complaints portal since it launched in October 2021. DIGI routinely contacts complainants for more information, so as to make assessments as to whether the complaints are in scope for resolution in consultation with our independent complaints sub-committee. DIGI's responses often direct complainants to report content and account issues to the relevant signatory, and where appropriate we refer complainants to relevant Government agencies, such as the Australian Electoral Commission and the ACCC Scamwatch program. Based on the information provided by complainants to date, complaints have related to individual items of content on signatories' products or services, and none of the complaints have been eligible as potential breaches of the signatories' ACPDM commitments.

Complaints received to date include:

- A complaint in relation to TikTok pertaining to the removal of content by an Australian Member of Parliament.
- A complaint about the removal of the complainant's TikTok account.
- A complaint about a scam on Facebook.
- Two complaints about false or misleading content on Facebook or Instagram.

<sup>11</sup> ACCC (2019), *Digital Platforms Inquiry Final Report*, <https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Digital%20platforms%20inquiry%20-%20final%20report.pdf>, p. 371

- A complaint about content by an Australian Member of Parliament on Twitter that the complainant considered to have been manipulated.
- A complaint about a false or misleading website available via Google Search.
- A complaint directed at Google alleging that a candidate standing in the Australian Federal Election was not a real person.

Noting that three of the eight complaints related to content from members of parliament or electoral candidates, it is worth highlighting that the ACPDM exempts content authorised by an Australian state or federal government or political advertising or content authorised by a political party registered under Australian law. These exemptions form part of the ACPDM's protections for freedom of expression, and also recognise that the code is designed for the digital industry, and that separate mechanisms should exist in relation to truth in political advertising.

Given DIGI's oversight of the code, we occasionally receive emails of a general nature outside of the complaints portal in relation to content considered to be misinformation. DIGI's replies to such emails usually involve directing the senders to the complaints portal, or suggesting they raise the issue directly with the signatory.

## Promotion of portal

When the complaints portal was launched in October 2021, DIGI issued a media release that resulted in extensive media coverage in mainstream and trade media. DIGI also sent a targeted email to individuals and organisations who provided submissions in response to the draft ACPDM's public consultation period, as well as the public consultation list. We also sent a newsletter to DIGI's wider email list, and posted on our social media accounts.

On the code's one year anniversary, on February 22, 2022, DIGI further encouraged the public to avail themselves of the complaints portal on DIGI's website through proactive stakeholder communications including working with the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) to promote the complaints portal to consumers, which they did via a blog on their website<sup>12</sup>. DIGI intends to further promote the complaints portal in 2022.

---

<sup>12</sup> ACCAN (22/02/2022), *Disinformation and Misinformation on Digital Platforms*, <https://accan.org.au/media-centre/hot-issues-blog/1960-disinformation-and-misinformation-on-digital-platforms>

## Part 3 | Transparency reporting process

The transparency reports are a critical aspect of the ACPDM that aims to drive improvements in the approach of major digital platforms to safeguarding the community from harmful misinformation and disinformation online, through an outcomes based approach that requires annual reporting on signatories' progress. The purpose of this section is to detail the evolution of the transparency reporting requirements of the Code, including new Best Practice Reporting Guidelines that are included in full in this report in Appendix B.

### Background

Objective 7 of the ACPDM states: 'Signatories publicise the measures they take to combat Disinformation and Misinformation' and the corresponding outcome states: 'The public can access information about the measures Signatories have taken to combat Disinformation and Misinformation'. Therefore the purpose of the transparency reports is to give the Australian public, the ACMA, and the Australian Government the tools to assess how the signatories are adhering to their commitments under the ACPDM. The goal of the reports is to also help improve understanding of online misinformation and disinformation in Australia over time.

In 2021, signatories were provided with a template and guidance for drafting the first round of transparency reports in Appendix 2 in the ACPDM. Outcome 7.3 commits signatories to develop and implement 'an agreed format for future annual reports and a guideline that will inform the data and other information to be included in subsequent reports' within six months of the commencement of the ACPDM.

### 2021 reports

The first set of reports were filed by eight signatories on May 22, 2021 and can be found on the DIGI website<sup>13</sup>. DIGI promoted the release of the transparency reports with proactive stakeholder communications, a media release and an opinion piece in *The Australian*<sup>14</sup>.

The reports outline the extensive work being undertaken across the industry to remove harmful content, flag false claims, address fake accounts, elevate reputable content, improve Australians' media literacy and partner with researchers to better understand these complex challenges. The reports show that the approaches to address disinformation and misinformation are multi-faceted and evolving in response to changes in the online environment, and that these efforts have had to rise to new challenges arising from the pandemic over the past two years.

### ACMA's assessment of the 2021 reports

An assessment of each signatory's report is provided in the ACMA Report to Government. Overall, the ACMA found that 'signatories' reports provide a large range of information on the actions they have taken to address disinformation, misinformation and news quality, and their investments in collaborative initiatives'<sup>15</sup>. However, it also concluded that 'the initial reporting by signatories was inconsistent and, in

<sup>13</sup> DIGI, *Transparency Reports*, <https://digi.org.au/disinformation-code/transparency/>

<sup>14</sup> Bose, Sunita, (22/05/21), *Many players needed in disinformation fight*, [https://www.theaustralian.com.au/subscribe/news/1/?sourceCode=TAWEB\\_WRE170\\_a\\_GGL&dest=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theaustralian.com.au%2Fbusiness%2Ftechnology%2Fagility-and-many-players-needed-in-disinformation-fight%2Fnews-story%2Fa505a308fd8e71fd555297c9a7ca1ce0&mentype=anonymous&mode=premium&v21=dynamic-war-m-test-score&V21spcbehaviour=append](https://www.theaustralian.com.au/subscribe/news/1/?sourceCode=TAWEB_WRE170_a_GGL&dest=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theaustralian.com.au%2Fbusiness%2Ftechnology%2Fagility-and-many-players-needed-in-disinformation-fight%2Fnews-story%2Fa505a308fd8e71fd555297c9a7ca1ce0&mentype=anonymous&mode=premium&v21=dynamic-war-m-test-score&V21spcbehaviour=append)

<sup>15</sup> ACMA Report to Government, p.4

general, lacked the level of detail necessary to benchmark performance or assess the effectiveness of individual platform measures'.<sup>16</sup> The feedback included calls for:

- **Measurable and comparable Key Product Indicators (KPIs)** to track progress over time and among signatories.  
*Platforms should move quickly to identify KPIs specific to their services and work together to establish industry-wide KPIs to demonstrate the effectiveness of the code as an industry-wide initiative*<sup>17</sup>
- **More continuity in terminology and processes** in the reports. The ACM Report to Government found it difficult to keep up with each platform's individual terminology and definitions.  
*The reports show inconsistencies in the interpretation and use of key code terms between signatories... This presents a fundamental issue in the construction of the code, hampering assessment of signatories' performance against the code and any industry-wide comparisons.*<sup>18</sup>
- **More quantitative and qualitative data** to add detail and rigour to the reports. The ACMA would like this data to be Australia focused and show big picture disinformation trends.  
*While disinformation and misinformation are global issues, and signatories operate on an international scale, reporting should include Australia-specific data and signatories should establish a reporting regime against the Australian code.*<sup>19</sup>  
  
*Trend-related data would contribute to a greater understanding of the extent and impact of disinformation and misinformation in Australia. Importantly, systematic treatment of such data would create greater transparency in the effectiveness of signatories' actions in addressing emerging issues.*<sup>20</sup>
- **Making reports more user-friendly** and accessible to the general public, with greater clarity and consistency.  
*Future reporting would benefit from an agreed, uniform approach across all signatories, to aid direct comparison.*<sup>21</sup>  
  
*The ACMA considers that signatories should be required, in future annual reporting, to provide a list of which services and products are covered by the code.*<sup>22</sup>

## Best Practice Reporting Guidelines

The Best Practice Reporting Guidelines were developed by independent expert Hal Crawford, an independent expert in digital news media, appointed under the ACPDM governance arrangement. The guidelines outline the recommendations for the content, construction, and publication of the second set of transparency reports. While they are recommendations and the signatories are not bound to adhere to these recommendations when drafting their reports, they aim to support the outcomes based approach of the ACPDM.

<sup>16</sup> ACMA Report to Government, p. 79

<sup>17</sup> ACMA Report to Government, p. 4

<sup>18</sup> ACMA Report to Government, p. 68

<sup>19</sup> ACMA Report to Government, p. 74

<sup>20</sup> ACMA Report to Government, p. 74

<sup>21</sup> ACMA Report to Government, p. 66

<sup>22</sup> ACMA Report to Government, p. 66



The development of the Best Practice Guidelines included deep dives into the signatories' transparency reports from 2021 and a landscape analysis of precedents from the The EU Code of Practice on Disinformation and the criticisms and recommendations for bettering those transparency reports. The Best Practice Reporting Guidelines were finalised in March 2022. The signatories then used the Best Practice Reporting Guidelines when drafting and publishing their second annual reports. These guidelines are included in Appendix B.

## Independent review process

Included in the ACPDM's governance arrangements, announced in October 2021, were changes for the reporting requirements going forward. These changes include:

1. An independent expert fact checks all signatories' transparency reports and provides an attestation of them, in order to incentivise best practice and compliance.
2. The reviewer provides advice to the Administration Sub-committee if they cannot provide an attestation of claims in a transparency report.
3. This reviewer also makes recommendations to signatories about best practice reporting.

As noted, Hal Crawford serves as the independent reviewer, and his role is to provide an expert independent attestation of each transparency report provided by signatories prior to the publication of the reports. This process does not involve an evaluation of the quality of the reports or the compliance with the Code, but provides independent confirmation that certain publicly verifiable information is provided in accordance with agreed reporting guidelines. Signatories may also provide an internal contact with whom the reviewer can confidentially verify any internal policies and processes that are not publicly verifiable. The reviewer's role entails:

1. Verifying if each signatory has published and implemented policies and processes that comply with their obligations in sections 5. 8, 5.10, 5.11 and 5.13 that pertain to Objective 1 (Safeguards against Disinformation and Misinformation) and Outcomes 1a, b, c and d of the Code. These sections contain the baselines requirements to implement measures that contribute to reducing the risk of users exposure to Disinformation and Misinformation, explain prohibited behaviors, provide mechanisms to report Disinformation and Misinformation, and provide general information on actions taken in response to reports.
2. Verifying if each signatory has published and implemented policies and processes that comply with their obligations in relation to any optional commitments they have made under the Code.
3. Verifying if the policies and processes mentioned in the transparency report are accessible to Australian users.
4. Verification of 1, 2 and 3 involves checking information provided in the transparency report against public sources.
5. Verifying if each signatory is meeting the ACPDM's commitments regarding the form of the reports including the Best Practice Guidelines.
6. Verification will not involve review of sensitive or proprietary information such as the deployment of technological solutions to detect and remove accounts propagating disinformation.
7. Advising each signatory on a confidential basis if they can attest that the report meets these review requirements, or if there are any gaps.
8. Providing advice to the Administration Sub-committee if they cannot provide an attestation in relation to a signatory's reports, in which case the signatory/ies must either amend and resubmit the reports to the reviewer for further assessment or provide written reasons as to why they dispute the reviewer's assessment.
9. Providing a generalised assessment of the reports, which has been included below in this annual report.



## 2022 reports

The second round of annual reports were published on May 30, 2022. This timing was adjusted from last year's date of May 22 so as not to coincide with the Australian Federal Election held on May 21, 2022. The reports are available on DIGI's website<sup>23</sup>. The reports were promoted through proactive stakeholder communications and a media release.

In addition to providing individual signatories with recommendations for their final report, Hal Crawford provided an overall assessment of the reports and the extent to which they have reflected the Best Practice Reporting Guidelines, included below.

### Independent assessment of the 2022 ACPDM transparency reports

**By: Hal Crawford**, Crawford Media Consulting

*This year's transparency reports represent the next step in an iterative process that began with the inaugural reports last year. It is clear that considerable work has gone into assembling the reports and either complying or moving in directions requested in the Reporting Guidelines.*

*In broad terms, the reports provide substantial and detailed information on dis/misinformation countermeasures, policies and processes of the Signatories. Case studies and graphics have been supplied, and the reports are noticeably more concise and information-dense than last year.*

*The trended data requested by the Reporting Guidelines is mostly absent, or limited to reporting metrics over at most two years. I look forward to this situation improving in future reports. A view of data over time is essential for a public understanding, as numbers mean little in isolation. Seeing the trends and the commentary that goes with changes will shed light on the very real and difficult task of defining and reducing dis/misinformation.*

*I can verify that all signatories have fulfilled the formal requirements of the reporting regime, and have been open and responsive in communications with me through the process.*

---

<sup>23</sup> DIGI, Transparency Reports, <https://digi.org.au/disinformation-code/transparency/>

## Appendix A | **Resolve Strategic Research on Australians' Misinformation Perceptions**



**By: Jim Reed**

Founder, Resolve Strategic



### Executive summary

This nationally representative survey exercise – conducted in early March 2022 using a mix of on-line and telephone interviews – was designed to identify knowledge of misinformation, the prevalence of exposure, its sources, and the impacts of political biases and media preferences on perceptions of misinformation.

The study found that most Australians are unfamiliar with the nature of misinformation: While most have heard the term 'misinformation' and are willing to at least try to define it, their spontaneous explanations are both varied (inconsistent) and at variance with accepted industry definitions.

For example, the vast majority believe the term applies to all false or incorrect information and/or that it relates to intentional sharing of such information and views. The idea that misinformation might cause harm is not common.

When provided with example channels, sources, targets and topics, the public demonstrate an inability to identify misinformation, with personal characteristics, political and media preferences colouring views.

When presented with twenty cases of potential misinformation, not one case received a clear and unequivocal rating, and in many cases there was both a high level of indecision and a split opinion on how to regard the shared information. Analysis of these cases by political leanings, media preferences, geo-demographics and lifestyle characteristics shows a clear pattern of channel, source – and

particularly target and topics – influencing perceptions of what is misinformation and disinformation. There is no objective frame of reference.

Given this, we must take great care in interpreting public views on this topic, including their self-reported exposure and complaints under the code. With this important caveat in mind: A clear majority believe they have been exposed to misinformation, with around half reporting this occurred within the last week. However, few report that a recent experience had any impact, and most simply ignored it or even disseminated it further (to people who may agree or disagree with it) even though they regard it as misinformation.

This, coupled with low importance ratings for media influence, strongly suggest this is not an important topic for most people, perhaps in part because most already report avoiding channels and sources they distrust and/or using a balanced range of sources. This proactive prevention is borne out by their stated media preferences.

Most Australians believe misinformation is difficult to identify and police and, if anything, would prefer that efforts are concentrated on coordinated and/or political misinformation (mostly disinformation) as the priority. In forming this judgement, we note that more people believe freedom of speech to be more important than the influence of media in their lives.

## Project introduction

### Background & aims

In early 2021, DIGI launched a new code of practice to cover misinformation and, after one year of operation, DIGI sought to better understand the community's evolving understanding and experiences of it to inform the code's development and application. In particular, they were interested in identifying knowledge, the prevalence of exposure, both on and off-line, its sources and the impacts of political biases and media preferences on perceptions of misinformation.

### Research methodology

This independent research was undertaken by Resolve Strategic in early March 2022 using a nationally representative survey. This survey comprised an n=2,303 nationwide sample of adults aged 18+ years, with data gathered between 3rd – 10th March 2022. This sample was gathered using a mix of phone and on-line interviews to maximise reach, and is accurate to within +/-2% overall, but also allows for significant segmentation of sub-samples, including; geo-demographics, political views and media preferences. The questionnaire was in three parts:

Profiling & Behaviours	Understanding & Attitudes	Experiences & Influences
Detailed geo-demographic, lifestyle and media use questions for profiling and segmentation.	An investigation of the public's knowledge of and feelings towards misinformation. This included:	Personal exposure to misinformation, the effects of that exposure and actions taken (including avoiding sources and using recommended sources).
These included; age, sex, media use and preferences, education, income, political views and	Public understanding of the term 'misinformation', including familiarity and spontaneous	The perceived sources of misinformation, both channel and specific sources.

behaviours.

This was used (in conjunction with mixed interview methods) to ensure a representative sample.

It also allowed us to breakdown other results to determine the impact of political views and media use.

ability to explain it.

Reactions to examples that may or may not be misinformation, determining accurate identification.

Reactions to prompted statements about misinformation and its treatment.

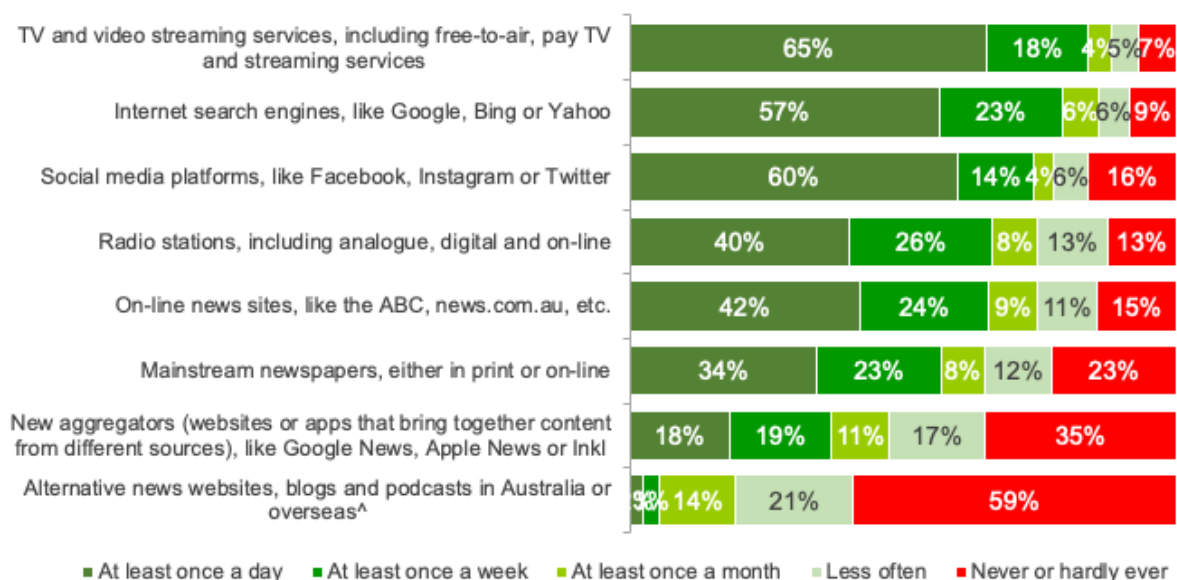
The breakdown of sources of exposure and perceived sources of misinformation by media use and political leanings to understand any biases and influences at play.

## Findings

### Media use & influence

#### Channels used

Most Australians naturally use multiple channels to access news and current affairs, with a majority using TV, search engine and social media platforms daily, and radio, news websites and newspapers also used frequently. Few are regularly using questionable alternative online channels and sources.

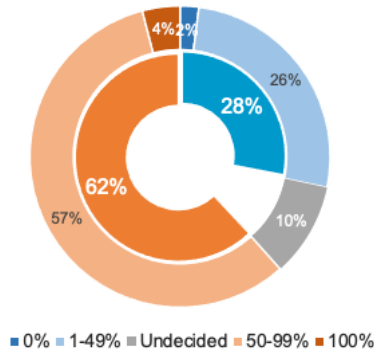


Q12) First, I'm going to read out a number of media channels. For each, please tell me how frequently, if at all, do you use them for accessing news and current affairs. Base: n=2,303 (All). N.B. Ordered by Frequent Use. <sup>^</sup> Includes coded responses from verbatim examples.

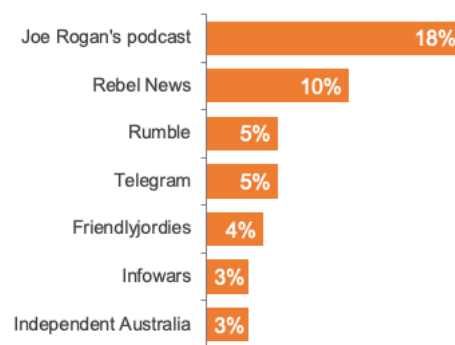
## Digital sources

Significantly, we find that a majority of news received via online and social media channels is actually sourced from traditional media. That is, when people speak of online news they are often talking about traditional sources. Of the few using 'alternatives', no single channel or source accounts for a fifth of mentions (equating to <1% of the population); such sources are 'fringe interests'.

**Digital Leading to Traditional Sources  
(Regular On-line Users)**



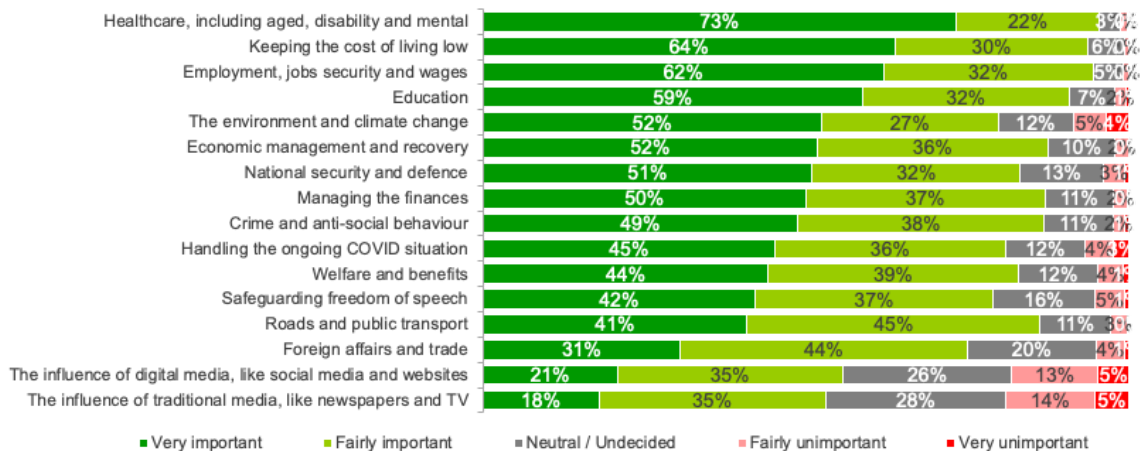
**Alternative Websites & Podcasts  
(Regular Alternatives Users)**



Q16) Thinking about the news you might get on-line from social media, search engines or news aggregators, what proportion would you say is ultimately sourced from mainstream news sources, such as newspaper articles or TV news sites? Base: n=1,724. (Use On-line). Q15) Which alternative news websites, blogs and podcasts do you use on a regular basis for your news? Base: n=131 (Use Alternative Regularly).

## Media influence

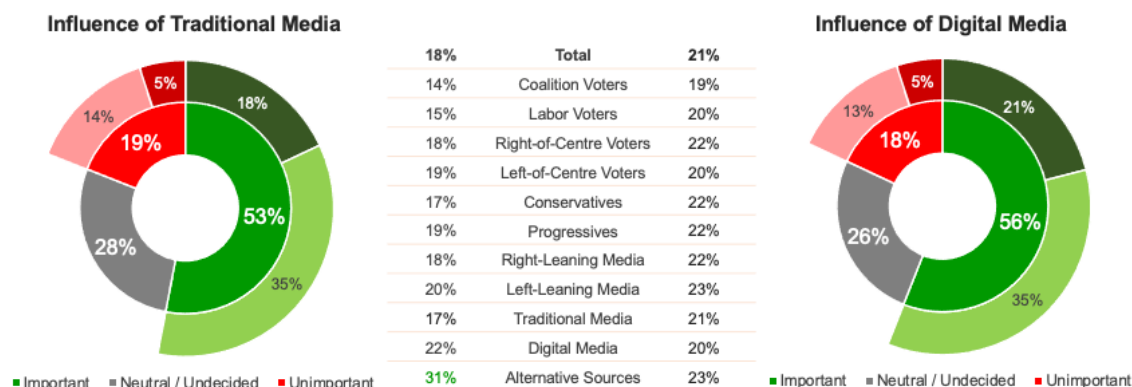
While it goes without saying the media plays an important role in society, Australians consider the influence of the media to be far less important than other issues; notably, freedom of speech is rated as 'very important' by double the number. This observation applies equally to both traditional and digital media, and suggests many people do not think they are being influenced detrimentally.



Q10) Below are some issues that other people have said are important to them and their vote. For each, please tell us how important it is to you. Base: n=1,900 (All On-line). N.B. Ordered by Very Important.

Focusing on the influence of media specifically, we see no significant difference in the low number assigning importance to this across different voting blocs, political ideologies or media use. Those few

using 'alternative' sources are more concerned about the influence of traditional media, hence their rejection of it, but those using digital media frequently are not of the same view.

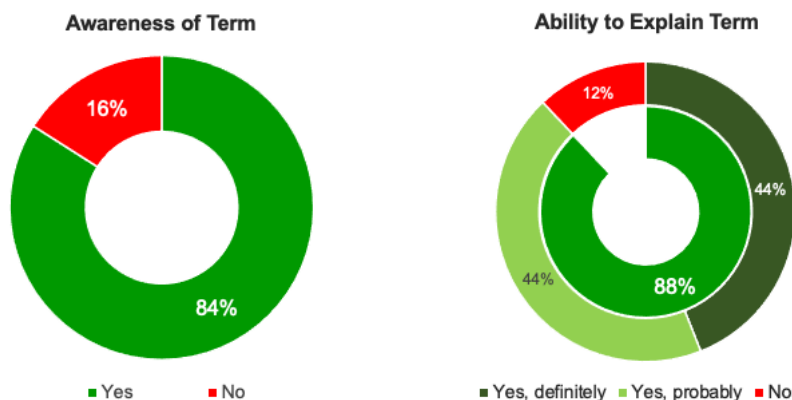


Q10) Below are some issues that other people have said are important to them and their vote. For each, please tell us how important it is to you. Base: n=1,902 (All On-line). N.B. Ordered by agreement.

## Understanding misinformation

### Awareness

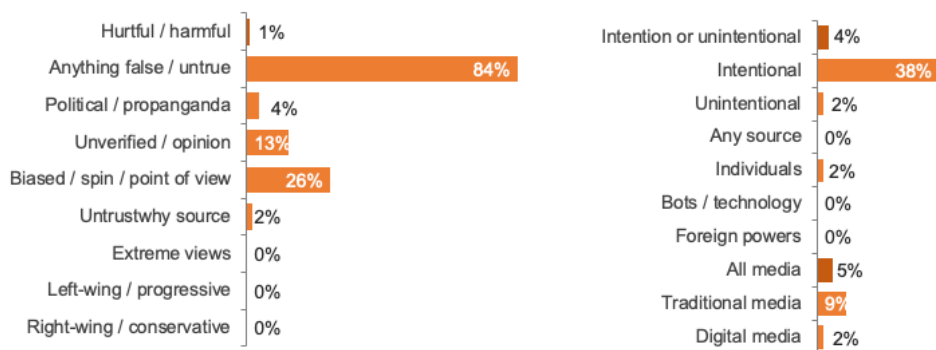
At first glance, it would appear that the Australian public are well-versed in all that is misinformation. The vast majority say they have at least heard of the term, and almost nine-in-ten believe they could explain it to someone else (though under half definitely could, i.e. are confident in their understanding).



Q17) Have you ever come across the term 'misinformation' before? Base: n=2,303 (All). Q18) Even if you've never heard it before, if you were asked to explain the term 'misinformation' to someone do you think you could? Base: n=2,303 (All). Q19) Please explain what you think 'misinformation' refers to or includes. Try to be as specific as possible. Base: n=1,694 (Can Explain Term).

### Understanding

That weakness in understanding is borne out when we asked respondents to explain the term using an open-ended question. Coding their varied (inconsistent) comments for common themes, we find a strong belief that misinformation is anything false or untrue, that it is intentional, i.e. more akin to disinformation, or at least presents a one-sided, biased and opinion-laden view. Very few define it as being harmful, as including unintentional sharing, can be found on any source or channel.



Q19) Please explain what you think 'misinformation' refers to or includes. Try to be as specific as possible. Base: n=1,694 (Can Explain Term).

## Perceptions

The combination of high confidence in defining misinformation and scant ability to do so in reality, means that we must treat public assessments of misinformation with great care and suspicion.

This applies to simple polling that seeks to assert public experiences and opinions on this issue, but also has obvious repercussions for the reporting, regulation and policing of misinformation. That is, if a majority of people complaining about misinformation are getting it wrong, how does DIGI best address this in the ACPDM?

For the remainder of these survey questions respondents were asked to use DIGI's agreed definition of 'misinformation', though we find indications that respondents' own prejudices about what this means likely remain: *'Misinformation can be understood as false or misleading information which can, but may not be intended to, cause serious harm. For example, individuals can share harmful false information on social media that they genuinely believe to be true, and this is still misinformation.'*

## Perceptions of channels and sources

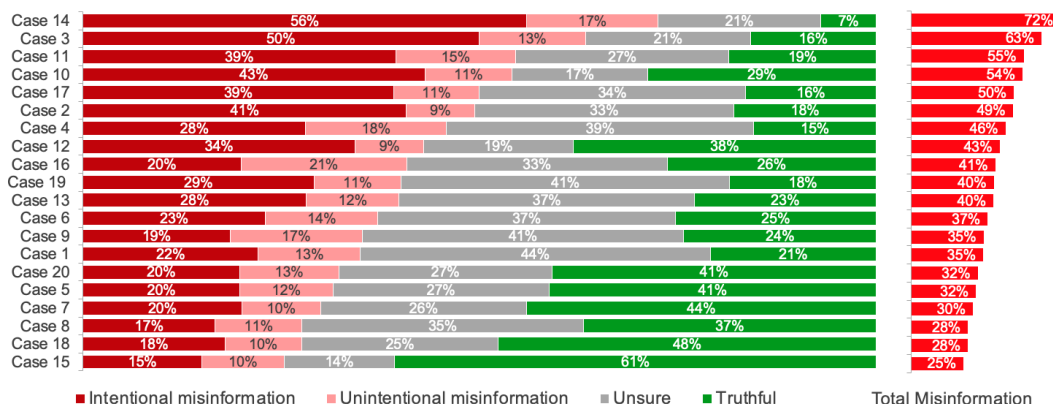
With this in mind, 68% of people do believe that social media platforms are prone to above average misinformation, whereas other traditional sources are considered to have 'average' levels of misinformation, such as radio (12-16%), TV (16-20%), and mainstream newspapers (26-31%) with variations by outlet type.

Q23) First, I'm going to read out a number of channels for accessing news and current affairs. For each, please tell me whether you think they contain above, at or below average misinformation in this news and current affairs. Base: n=2,303 (All).

## Identification of misinformation

As a practical test on assessing misinformation, respondents were given 20 case studies – each containing a channel or source, a target and topic – some of these were considered to be misinformation, and some were not. There are majority views on what is misinformation and not in some cases, but in all cases there are a spread of views, what is intentional and unintentional, and significant indecision.

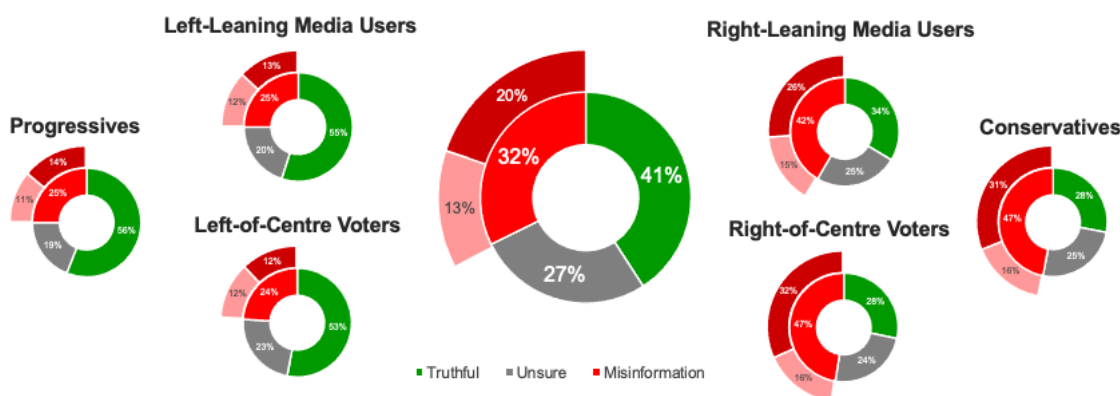




Q27: Below are some examples that may or may not be misinformation, including examples where the source is sharing false information intentionally or unintentionally. For each, please tell us whether you think the source (which is underlined) reporting the statement is sharing misinformation intentionally, unintentionally, or whether the source it's reporting the truth. This is not a test, so if you're not sure pick the 'unsure' at option.

#### Case 20: Guardian on climate change

Taking a closer look at a range of case studies, we find a major source of this disagreement is audience prejudice. This example of The Guardian highlighting catastrophic climate change being regarded as misinformation (often intentional) by right-of-centre Australians, but truth by those who are left-of-centre. This applies to both their political leanings and their aligned choice of media channels.

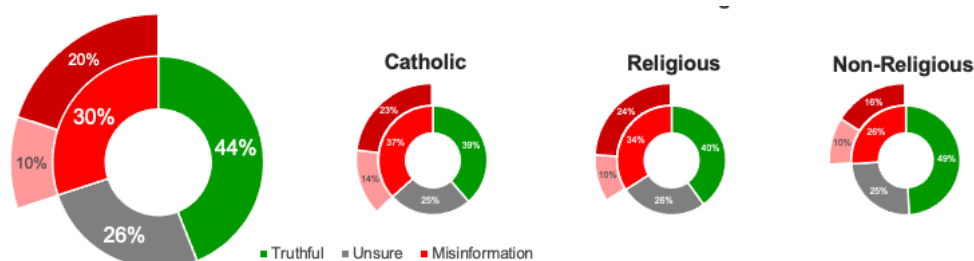


Q27 case study: The Guardian has reported that the world will suffer catastrophic climate change of 1.5 degrees heating within the decade without fast action.

#### Case 7: Social Media on Cardinal George Pell

The topic being presented in the case study can be more important than the channel or source in perceptions of misinformation, with no difference by media leanings or channels used when we presented the case of Cardinal Pell being accused of covering up child sexual assault (something of which he was found innocent). Instead, here the difference was more pronounced when we broke down the data by religious belief, with those of faith generally and Catholics specifically (including non-practicing) more likely to consider it misinformation than those of no religion.

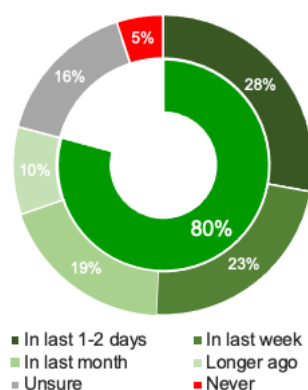




*Q27 case study: Social media sources reported that Cardinal Pell had covered up child sexual assault.*

### Experiencing misinformation

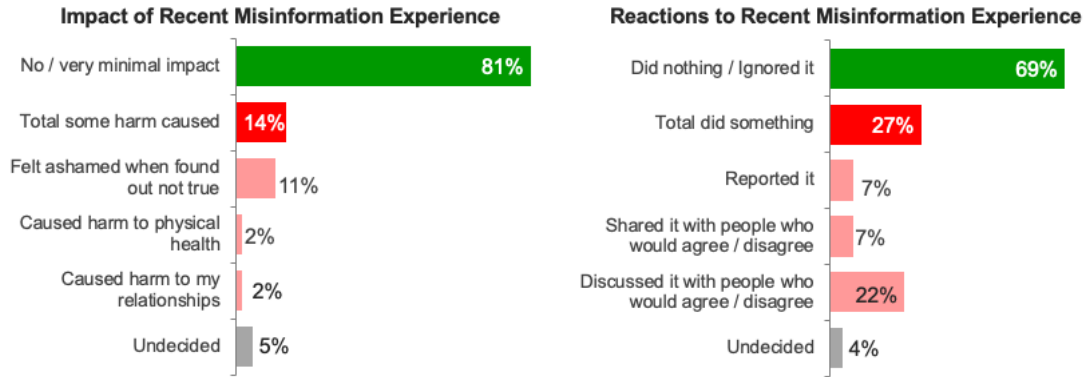
Regardless of their accuracy in identifying misinformation, most Australians believe they have experienced it, with around half reporting this has occurred recently (in the last week). While the previous analysis shows that political leanings of all types can influence perceptions of misinformation, left-leaning people and 'alternative' source users are more likely to say they have been exposed recently.



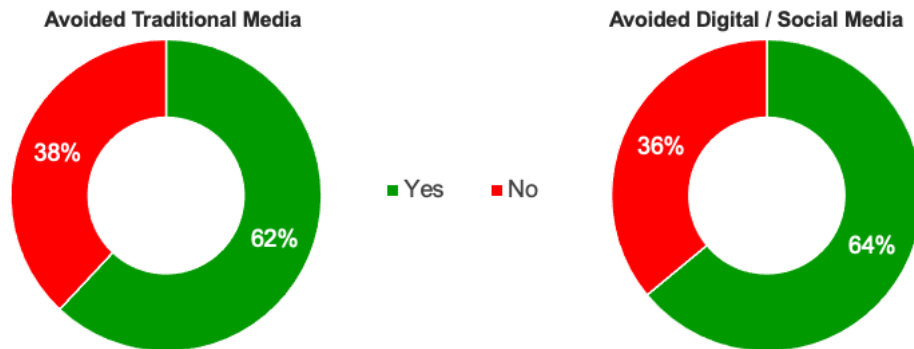
	Recently	Ever
<b>Total</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>80%</b>
Coalition Voters	43%	73%
Labor Voters	52%	81%
Right-of-Centre Voters	48%	75%
Left-of-Centre Voters	53%	83%
Conservatives	48%	78%
Progressives	56%	84%
Right-Leaning Media	49%	78%
Left-Leaning Media	58%	85%
Traditional Media	51%	80%
Digital Media	53%	84%
Alternative Sources	72%	93%

*Q22) Knowing that definition, do you think you've been exposed to misinformation in the media or online...?*  
Base: n=2,303 (All).

The vast majority of those seeing misinformation reported that it had no impact on them, and when it did it was primarily in feeling ashamed at being hoodwinked. Further, only around a quarter felt they needed to act at all, and much of that was sharing or discussing it, i.e. either adding to dissemination or warning against the particular case.

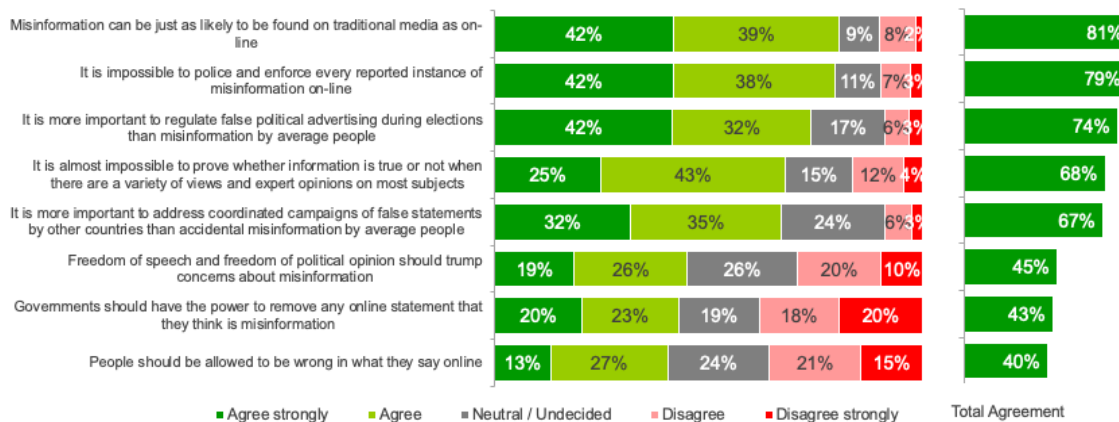


It actually seems much more common that people take preventative action against what they regard as misinformation, including almost two-thirds avoiding traditional and/or digital media channels, programs and sources. This result also helps to explain media preferences given the perception of misinformation being connected to political views.



Q25) Have you ever avoided using a TV channel, radio station or newspaper, including particular shows, because you felt it contained misinformation? Base: n=2,303 (All). Q26) Have you ever avoided using an on-line media platform or source because you felt it contained misinformation? Base: n=2,303 (All). Q28) Do you think news and current affairs shared or forwarded to you by relative or friends is more or less likely to be trustworthy? Base: n=2,303 (All).

Opinions are fairly split on policy actions that should be taken on misinformation, neither wanting open slather on content nor overreach on government powers. However, there is strong agreement that misinformation is just as likely to occur in traditional media, that it is impossible to identify and police, and that we should concentrate on coordinated and/or political disinformation.



## Appendix B | Best Practice Reporting Guidelines



**By: Hal Crawford**

Crawford Media Consulting

*These guidelines were written in March 2022*



### Executive summary

The transparency reports mandated under *The Australian Code on Disinformation and Misinformation* serve at least two purposes: communicating with the general public, and providing evidence of compliance with commitments.

These guidelines recommend an iteration of the original DIGI report template that reduces emphasis on signatory mis/disinformation process and policy and asks for more trended Australian data. The guidelines also recommend:

- A common reporting period
- Use of common definitions
- Explicit and upfront objective/outcome commitments
- Commitment to and explanation of reporting metrics
- Providing context through multi-year metrics reporting
- Greater public accessibility
  - Word limit (<8000 words)
  - Breakout case studies
  - Tables, graphs and other visual elements
- Reduced promotional tone

The issue of collective KPIs is considered in light of the EU Disinformation Code: it is recommended that DIGI and the Signatories begin work on establishing a reporting regime that would provide for comparison

and broad overview of the dis/misinformation environment in Australia. Establishing a standard KPI regime for the next reporting round is not feasible.

A report structure that modifies the existing template is recommended. Under the modified template, standard policy and process information is shifted to the appendix, and signatories are encouraged to focus on changes in market conditions, their responses and initiatives, case studies and contextualising data.

## Introduction

The purpose of this document is to set out guidelines for the annual reporting required of signatories under the Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation ('the Code'). The annual reports are required under Objective 7 of the Code: 'Signatories publicise the measures they take to combat Disinformation and Misinformation.'<sup>24</sup>

Signatories filed initial annual transparency reports in May 2021, adhering more or less to a template supplied as an appendix to the Code. It can be inferred from Objective 7 and the Code's administrative requirements that the purpose of the annual reports is twofold:

- To communicate to the general public measures taken by Signatories against mis/disinformation
- To provide a framework for the independent reviewer, DIGI and other stakeholders to audit compliance with the Code.

Although these aims are related, they could result in significantly different outputs if one were excluded. For example, if the purpose of the reporting regime was simply to communicate to the general public, signatories would best fulfil the requirement with short, engaging reports filled with graphics and ignoring the rigid structure of the Code itself. If on the other hand the reports were fundamentally bureaucratic documents, signatories could safely abandon brevity and assume a detailed knowledge of the Code. The dual purpose of the reports will influence the reporting template recommended in this document.

## Precedents

### EU Code of Practice on Disinformation

The 2018 EU Code of Practice on Disinformation is a voluntary, self-regulatory code that contains a requirement for regular reporting. The first (and so far only) annual reports under this code were filed in late 2019. After the onset of the endemic, signatories moved to a monthly reporting cadence focussing on disinformation relating to it. There was significant criticism of the initial reports from the European Commission, national regulators, and independent analysts.<sup>25</sup> This criticism and other observations about the EU code have led to the formulation of a strengthened code, which is due in March 2022. There is an expectation that biannual/annual reports will be re-commenced after this time.

Some criticisms of the initial EU signatory reports:

- Lacking KPIs at both an industry and signatory level
- No consistency in definitions of key terms
- Insufficient data in general
- Insufficient national-level data (as opposed to EU-wide data)

<sup>24</sup> '... each Signatory will provide an annual report to DIGI setting out its progress towards achieving the outcomes contained in the Code which will be published on the DIGI website.' 7.3, ACPDM, p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> For a considered and informative review of the EU code, see European Commission (2020), Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, Plasilova, I., Hill, J., Carlberg, M., et al., *Study for the assessment of the implementation of the code of practice on disinformation: Final report*, Publications Office, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2759/188091>

- Not 'user-friendly' for a general audience

As we will see, these issues echo concerns with the initial reporting under the Australian Code. While the EU issues are significant – particularly the absence of a KPI reporting regime – most commentators and stakeholders have taken the view that the EU Code of Practice is a positive and important first step.

### Original DIGI Code template

Signatories were provided with a reporting template in the second Appendix of the Code. The template is clear and provides a good base from which to iterate for ongoing reporting. Note the wording of Outcomes 1a-1d below has been paraphrased.

- Executive summary
- Background
- Business and Content Context
- Approach to Disinformation and Misinformation
- Approach to monitoring performance
- Data about trends
- Future Initiatives
- Objective 1: Safeguards against Disinformation and Misinformation
- Outcome 1a: Reducing harm by adopting scalable measures
- Outcome 1b: Inform users about what content is targeted
- Outcome 1c: Users can easily report offending content
- Outcome 1d: Information about reported content available
- Objective 2: Disrupt advertising and monetisation incentives for disinformation.
- Objective 3: Work to ensure the integrity and security of services and products delivered by digital platforms.
- Objective 4: Empower consumers to make better informed choices of digital content.
- Objective 5: Improve public awareness of the source of political advertising carried on digital platforms.
- Objective 6: Strengthen public understanding of Disinformation and Misinformation through support of strategic research.
- Objective 7: Signatories will publicise the measures they take to combat Disinformation.
- Concluding remarks

Eight reports were filed using this template. The table below indicates the considerable differences in report length (by approximate word count) and, for reference, the Objectives and Outcomes which each Signatory has agreed to.

	Wordcount	1	1A	1B	1C	1D	2	3	4	5	6	7
Adobe	2000	✓						✓	✓		✓	✓
Apple	3,000	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	✓
Google	10,700	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Meta	11,400	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Microsoft	7,200	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Redbubble	2,300	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓

TikTok	3,200	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Twitter	8,000	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

In general, the quality of the first reports was good: they provide a valuable overview of the scope of work the signatories are undertaking against mis/disinformation. In most cases they also provided examples and qualitative information and in some cases quantitative data. In laying down an organisation's standard operating procedures to counter mis/disinformation, they provide a valuable base for subsequent reporting. Because much of this will not change year-to-year, there should be less need in future to outline standard processes in the body of the report. Instead, signatories can focus on data, changes in the mis/disinformation landscape and their responses to these changes.

## Report refinement

There are important steps to take in improving the initial reports and refining their structure for ongoing reporting.

### Defined reporting period

It is essential the signatories and DIGI agree to a standard reporting period, and that where possible all data supplied relates to that period and corresponding previous periods. Two options for reporting periods would be the calendar year and the Australian financial year. Because these divisions fall cleanly on the quarterly and half-yearly business cycles used by most companies, extra work in sourcing data can be kept to a minimum.

All reported numerical data should correspond to the relevant reporting period and its predecessors. So, for example, if a signatory is reporting the number of accounts removed for inauthentic behaviour (and DIGI and signatories have agreed to report on calendar year), the numbers given should be for the whole of 2021, 2020, and 2019.

There will be a lag of several months between the end of the reporting period and the filing of reports. This is common to reporting regimes. In order to maintain maximum relevance, signatories should be free to mention (in text) significant developments in the interim.

### Common definition of key terms

There was some variation in the use of the terms 'disinformation' and 'misinformation' in the initial reports. The Code defines 'misinformation' as:

- A. Digital Content (often legal) that is verifiably false or misleading or deceptive;*
- B. is propagated by users of digital platforms; and*
- C. the dissemination of which is reasonably likely (but may not be clearly intended to) cause Harm.*

On the Code definition, 'disinformation' remains a type of content, one propagated by 'inauthentic behaviours':

- A. Digital Content that is verifiably false or misleading or deceptive;*
- B. is propagated amongst users of digital platforms via Inauthentic Behaviours; and*
- C. the dissemination of which is reasonably likely to cause Harm.*

Note there is no consensus on the terms 'misinformation' and 'disinformation' in academic or media discourse, and the Code expressly anticipates variation in definitions<sup>26</sup>. The problem arises here in the public communications role of the reports: it would be preferable for signatories to use common definitions to avoid public confusion.

Where using the Code definitions makes no practical difference to reporting, we advise Signatories to adhere to the terminology defined in the Code. Where there is a problem adopting the Code definitions above, we advise signatories to clearly define terms.<sup>27</sup>

## Statement of commitments and relevant services/products/platforms

Each signatory made it clear in their initial reports which Code Objectives/Outcomes they had committed to, but in most cases the information was spread through the report. There is an opportunity to state this up front, along with an indication of the signatories' relevant services and products. This is particularly important for signatories with big and differentiated portfolios. The omission of a relevant service/product should be noted.

## Data in context

In general, there was not enough numerical data supplied with the first transparency reports, and it was not trended. A minimum of three years of reporting should be supplied with any data, in order to give context. This is a key requirement for understanding.

Where the metric referenced is new, it may not be possible to supply three years; for example, reporting related to COVID will not currently have three years of data owing to the timing of the pandemic. In that case, contextualisation through trended monthly numbers may be appropriate.

Accompanying commentary is vital to explain changes. For example, the incidence of detected mis/disinformation may have increased in a given year because the quantum of mis/disinformation increased, or because a signatory improved detection. Regardless of the potential misinterpretation of trended data, a transparency reporting regime demands it, and furthermore demands that the same data be reported in subsequent years. Any addition or omission of data should also be the subject of an explanatory note.

The expectation of the report review process is that data used as internal Key Performance Indicators in the area of mis/disinformation be included in the report unless there is a clear commercial imperative to omit (see more on KPIs below).

## Australian data

Reporting under the Code should provide data for the Australian market. Global metrics may also be relevant, but given the Code's national nature the primary concern should be Australian numbers, examples, and context. It is recognised that Australian data may not always be available: if this is the case, the signatory should explicitly note that this is the case.

---

<sup>26</sup> See section 5.4 of the Code: 'In implementing measures under the Code, Signatories recognise that actions taken aimed at achieving any outcome including the implementation of policies and processes may use terminology other than 'Disinformation' and 'Misinformation' ...'

<sup>27</sup> These definitions can sometimes have real impacts. The EU's relevant code, for example, covers 'disinformation' only, and as such is restricted to false/misleading information which either is created for economic gain or to intentionally deceive. This formulation, made in 2018, failed to anticipate the great harm arising from false information disseminated without malice or financial gain during the Covid epidemic.

## Public accessibility

There are other aspects of the initial reports that can be built on to improve communication with a general audience:

- The existing reports are PDFs that have to be actively sought out on the DIGI website and downloaded. We encourage signatories to make summaries of their reports available on their own sites and platforms.
- The reports vary in length from 2000 to 11,400 words. While some signatories have a great deal of ground to cover in the report, limiting the word length to under 8000 words is reasonable. Brevity has many benefits.
- Increasing the use of graphical elements such as bar and line charts will help in communicating numerical information
- Breakout (separated from main text body) case studies illustrate key points and developments

## Reduced promotional tone

One noticeable aspect of some of the 2021 reports is what could be termed a 'promotional' tone. It is natural that signatories seek to portray their efforts and accomplishments in the best possible light. Unfortunately, promotional language undermines the informational content of the reporting, and encourages cynicism towards what are in fact major and important efforts to curb mis/disinformation. We encourage signatories to avoid promotional writing and to maintain a neutral stance, highlighting problems and successes with equanimity, and thereby increasing the credibility of the reporting. We appreciate this can be difficult with a public document: a good rule of thumb is to avoid statements and words that would not be found in internal company reporting.

## The issue of KPIs

The various reviews of the EU Disinformation Code and its initial reports highlighted the lack of structured KPI reporting as a serious flaw. This is an issue that the signatories to the Australian Code will also have to deal with, and it is not a simple matter.

The European Commission, in considering how to strengthen the EU Disinformation Code, makes a distinction between what it calls Service-level Indicators (SLIs) and Structural Indicators (SIs).<sup>28</sup> SLIs are metrics relating to each of the EU code's five pillars (equivalent but different to the 'Objectives' of the Australian Code). It has called on the EU signatories to identify, commit to, and report on a minimum set of these SLIs. Examples of metrics that could qualify:

- Numbers of user interactions with disinformation reporting tools
- Number of user interactions with disinformation awareness content
- Number of fact checks made
- Funding for fact checking
- Number of user interactions with content flagged by fact checkers as false
- Number of pages, accounts, profiles, and groups subject to actions to reduce visibility (including expulsion)

Given the heterogeneity of signatories' business models, there may be little commonality between SLIs. Structural Indicators, on the other hand, indicate the overall effectiveness of the code and the collective efforts of the signatories to combat disinformation. As such, the reviews of the EU code have recommended setting up a sample user group in each member state and surveying these groups regularly on matters such as:

- Where news is sourced (authoritative versus disinformation sources)
- Where content/news is sourced (directly or via platforms such as social networks)
- Engagement with the 100 biggest disinformation sites

---

<sup>28</sup> European Commission Guidance on Strengthening the Code of Practice on Disinformation, May 2021, page 21.



These do not seem robust or easy metrics to implement, and we are not recommending DIGI pursue these particular Structural Indicators. It is notable they are clearly focussed on users, and removed from the actions of individual Signatories. The question of how best to measure the overall effectiveness of the Code is one we urge Signatories and DIGI to consider as soon as possible.

We note that between the two tiers of KPIs recommended by the European regulators is a third type of metric that could assist in monitoring and combatting disinformation. This is a kind of collective SLI that relates directly to the actions of a single signatory but is measured and reported by all signatories using a common methodology. For example, an SLI that measures the percentage of time users spend engaging with mis/disinformation is sufficiently generic to apply almost across the board (what particular measures are feasible is a matter for Signatories and DIGI to discuss). The development of collective SLIs would be valuable in providing comparative information, both between Signatories and between reporting periods, and would provide better understanding to all stakeholders.

We acknowledge that the development of an agreed KPI reporting regime is a significant undertaking beyond the scope of these guidelines. Signatories are encouraged to identify and commit to appropriate internal KPIs (what the Europeans would term SLIs) in the next round of annual reporting. From these may emerge the outlines of a more formal mis/disinformation KPI reporting regime that includes Signatory as well as market-wide data.

We encourage DIGI to investigate setting up a statistically representative user survey of the type envisioned by the European Commission (this does not imply using their Structural Indicators), and to agree with Signatories on the data such a survey would gather in order to best gauge the society-wide impact of their work against mis/disinformation.

### Approach to generic information

As mentioned, the initial reports under the Code form a solid base for understanding the Signatories' work against mis/disinformation in general terms. This means that a great deal of the contextual information given in the Business and Content Context, and Approach to Disinformation and Misinformation sections of the 2021 reports can either be condensed, omitted or relegated to an appendix.

We examined the 2021 reports under the Code to understand how much of the original reporting would be replicated were the Signatories' approach to reporting remain unchanged in 2022. We found that on average, 84% of the content was generic information relating to mis/disinformation process and policy. This will evolve over time, but is unlikely to change substantially year-to-year.

Bearing in mind the dual purpose of the reports – to communicate to the public and demonstrate compliance with the Code – it will be necessary to include some of this information repeatedly. For example, it is a mandatory requirement of reporting that Signatories provide links to reporting mechanisms for mis/disinformation (see below for mandatory links). Signatories may also want to include important information about their approach to tackling mis/disinformation in every report, and there should be an opportunity to do this.

### Mandatory links reporting

Signatories' commitments under the Code include simple links to information in order that the independent reviewer may assess compliance. To be explicit regarding these mandatory requirements, they are:

- 1b: Links to user guidelines, policies and procedures relating to mis/disinformation.
- 1c: Links to publicly available tools for reporting mis/disinformation.
- 5: Links to/evidence of published information that allows users to better distinguish factual information from mis/disinformation.

The link requirements are provided as a checklist to ensure simple elements are not omitted. As indicated in the rest of these guidelines, signatories are expected to elaborate significantly through the identification and provision of relevant data and commentary. Signatories who have not committed to an Outcome/Objective are exempted from the relevant mandatory elements. Note that in addition to providing these links to assist the independent reviewer, it may be helpful for the reviewer to directly query the signatory on elements of a submitted report.

## Challenges in reporting

The signatories are diverse businesses and there are big variations in the application of the Objectives/Outcomes. It is not possible to be prescriptive in dictating the data supplied in the transparency reports, although it is expected that signatories themselves identify relevant data and supply it in line with the suggestions of this document (i.e., within the Australian market, for the reporting period, and for a minimum of two years prior to that). A particular challenge may arise for the signatories whose mis/disinformation operations are extensive. We encourage them to focus on changes within the reporting period and their interpretations, responses and initiatives. There are also some Signatories whose activities relevant to the Code cannot be quantified. In this case, Signatories are encouraged to report case studies and such qualitative information as will increase the general understanding of their efforts.

## Note on formatting

We recommend signatories use their own formatting conventions in terms of font, layout and colour in the final PDF document. This will not hinder independent review and may enhance messaging to the general public. As implied in the template below, the reports should follow a common structure, with considerable leeway for different elements like graphs, tables and breakout case studies. This will ensure a degree of uniformity across Signatories and better enable comparison between reporting periods. Where numerical data can be supplied, the preference is to present this at the beginning of sections and to contextualise with commentary. It is important to clearly explain metrics and the rationale behind them.

## Proposed report structure

We recommended following the framework below in preparing reports. Content suggestions and constraints are given in brackets. Note the positions of graphs and breakout case studies are given as examples only.

<b>Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation</b>	
<b>[Name of signatory]</b>	
<b>Annual Transparency Report</b>	
<b>[Reporting period]</b>	
<b>Summary</b>	
[Discuss in brief the overall features of the reporting period]	
[Include analysis of the general environment relevant to dis/misinformation]	
[Reiterate the primary elements of your work against dis/misinformation]	
[<800 words]	
<b>Commitments under the Code</b>	
[Use a table to summarise commitments and the platforms they apply to, as below]	
1a [paraphrase Outcome 1a]	[platform] [service] [product]

1b [paraphrase Outcome 1b]	[platform] [service] [product]
1c [paraphrase Objective 2]	[platform] [service] [product]
Etc. ...	Etc. ...

[Include short commentary on omitted objectives/outcomes/platforms/services/products]

**Reporting against commitments**

**Outcome 1a: Reducing harm by adopting scalable measures**

Graph 1

Graph 2

\*Signatories are encouraged to include graphs as much as possible.  
 [Metrics reported and for what reason]  
 [Comments on trends observed]  
 [Any changes in type of content/behaviour targeted]  
 [Changes to acceptable use policy etc.]  
 [What measures were successful and how is that reflected in the data?]  
 [Tables and graphics as appropriate]  
 [Case studies as appropriate]

**CASE STUDY 1**

[Illustrates a particular aspect of data trend or impact of changes made]

[Note this is an example location for a case study. If appropriate and available, Signatories should provide several case studies. Such qualitative content is valuable in bringing policy to life.]

**Outcome 1b: Inform users about what content is targeted**  
 [What new initiatives in communicating to users what constitutes mis/disinformation?]  
 [Evidence of user engagement with this content]  
 [Links to user guidelines, policies and procedures relating to mis/disinformation]

**Outcome 1c: Users can easily report offending content**  
 [Any changes in the way users report content for the reporting period]  
 [Links to publicly available tools for reporting mis/disinformation]

**Outcome 1d: Information about reported content available**  
 [What data have you published to users about the amount and quality of mis/disinformation reporting under 1c?]  
 [Include such data if available]  
 [Also give links to where the data has been published]

**Objective 2: Disrupt advertising and monetisation incentives for disinformation.**  
 [Explain KPIs as above]  
 [Quantify progress made against the monetisation of disinformation, graphically if possible]  
 [Changes to policies and processes implemented to reduce monetisation for targeted content and behaviour]  
 [Any relevant changes in market conditions]

**Objective 3: Work to ensure the integrity and security of services and products delivered by digital platforms.**

[Detail of work in the period against inauthentic behaviours that impact product security]

[As above, detail trends and initiatives, and plans in this area]

[This section may contain reference to 1a, given potential overlap in these Objectives – it is acceptable to simply refer to that section if all actions against inauthentic user behaviour are covered there]

**Objective 4: Empower consumers to make better informed choices of digital content.**

[Detail the ways in which you have helped users distinguish mis/disinformation from quality information]

[What is the uptake or awareness of such 'empowerment tools'?]

[In what content categories are they active?]

**Objective 5: Improve public awareness of the source of political advertising carried on digital platforms.**

[Detail the ways in which you have flagged political advertising and improved the awareness of political sources of advertising]

[Any challenges on the horizon, e.g. Upcoming elections]

**CASE STUDY 2**

[Illustrates a particular aspect of data trend or impact of changes made]

**Objective 6: Strengthen public understanding of Disinformation and Misinformation through support of strategic research.**

[Suggest the use of the table here]

[Name of university/institute/company]	[Overview of research]
...	...
...	...

[Notable success/challenges/changes in the above work]

[Include links]

**Objective 7: Signatories will publicise the measures they take to combat Disinformation.**

[Aside from this report, what other information about your work against mis/disinformation has been communicated to the public?]

[Quantify engagement with this information if possible]

[Overlaps to some extent with 1d, and if there is complete overlap simply refer to that section]

**Concluding remarks**

[Unanswered questions and challenges]

[Summary of any new initiatives not already mentioned]

[Evolution of your business's understanding of the problem and how to tackle it]

[Observations on the Code and the process of reporting]

[May include developments between the end of the reporting period and now]

**Appendix**

**Business and Content Context**

**Approach to Disinformation and Misinformation**