

## 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.

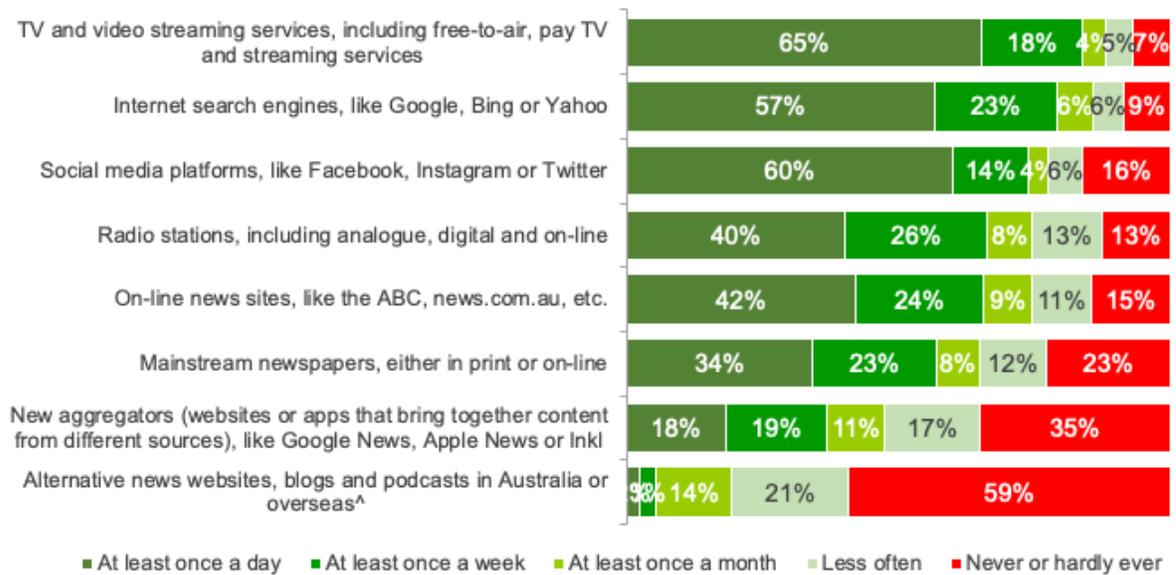
The breakdown of sources of exposure and perceived sources of misinformation by media use and political leanings to understand any biases and influences at play.

## 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.

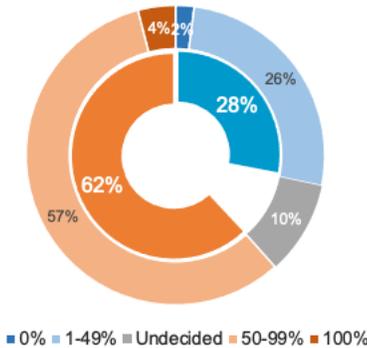


Q12) First, I'm going to read out a number of media channels. For each, please tell me how frequently, if at all, do you use them for accessing news and current affairs. Base: n=2,303 (All). N.B. Ordered by Frequent Use. <sup>^</sup> Includes coded responses from verbatim examples.

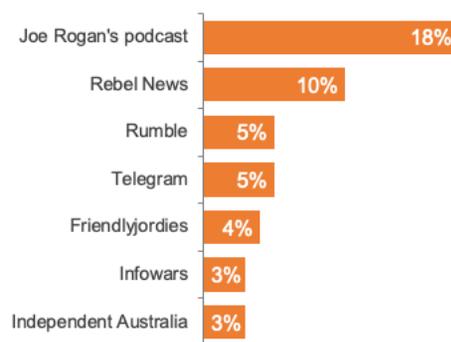
### Digital sources

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)**



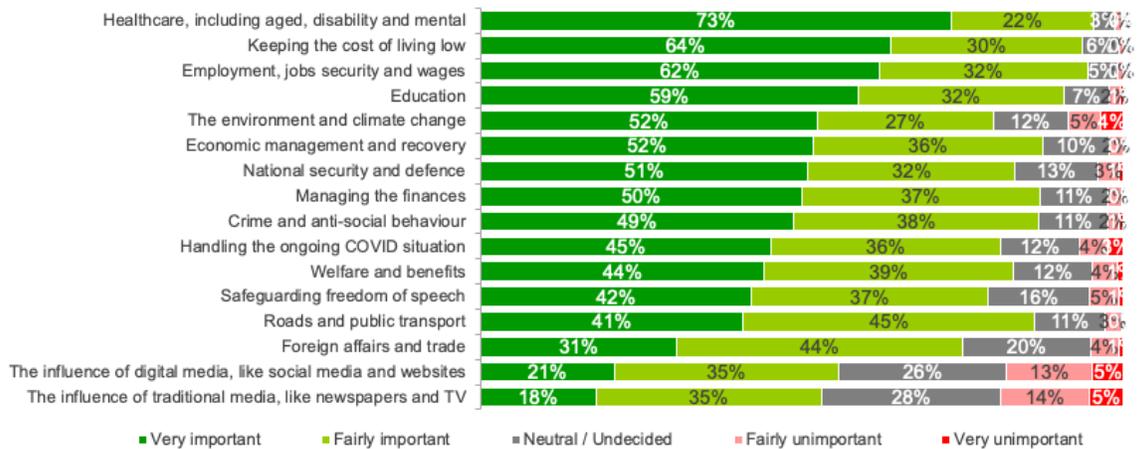
**Alternative Websites & Podcasts (Regular Alternatives Users)**



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

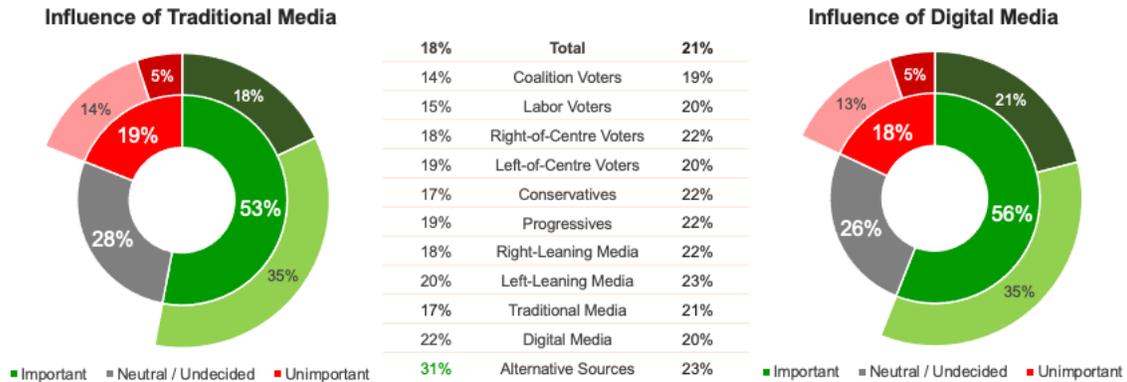
While it goes without saying the media plays an important role in society, Australians consider the influence of the media to be far less important than other issues; notably, freedom of speech is rated as 'very important' by double the number. This observation applies equally to both traditional and 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.

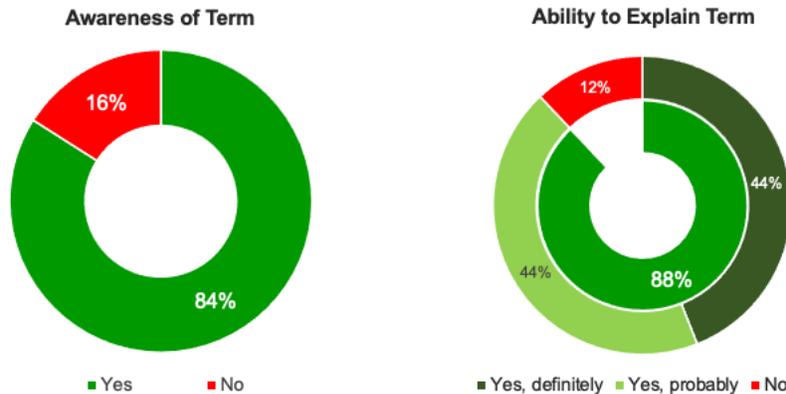


Q10) Below are some issues that other people have said are important to them and their vote. For each, please tell us how important it is to you. Base: n=1,902 (All On-line). N.B. Ordered by agreement.

## Understanding misinformation

### Awareness

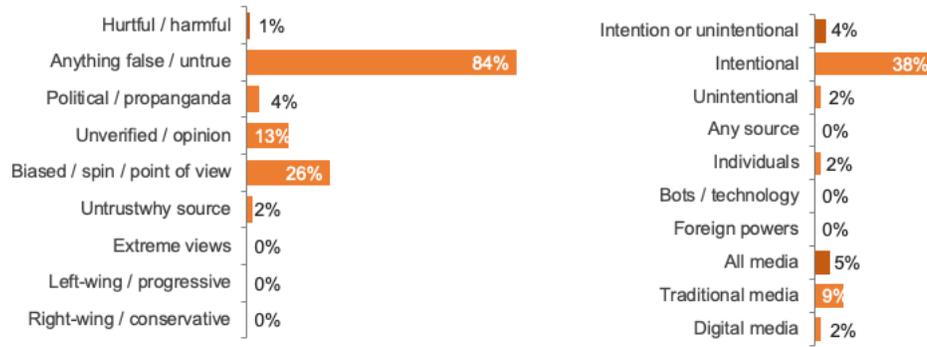
At first glance, it would appear that the Australian public are well-versed in all that is misinformation. The vast majority say they have at least heard of the term, and almost nine-in-ten believe they could explain it to someone else (though under half definitely could, i.e. are confident in their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

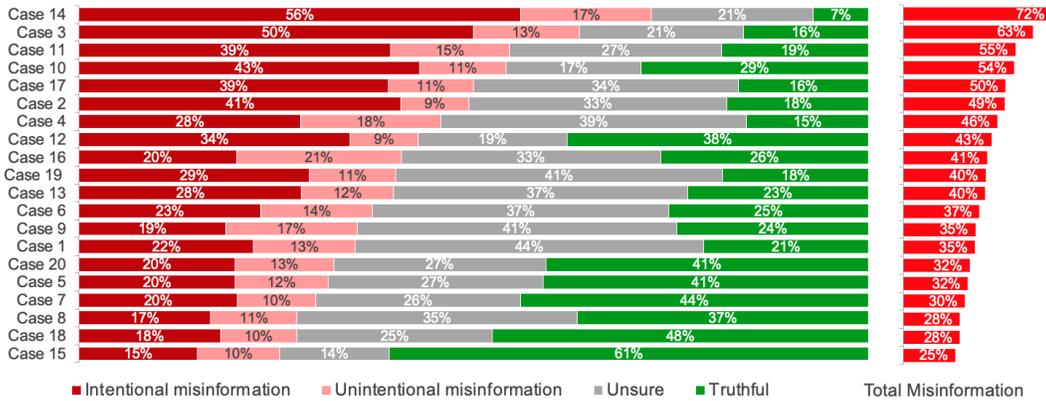
### Perceptions of channels and sources

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

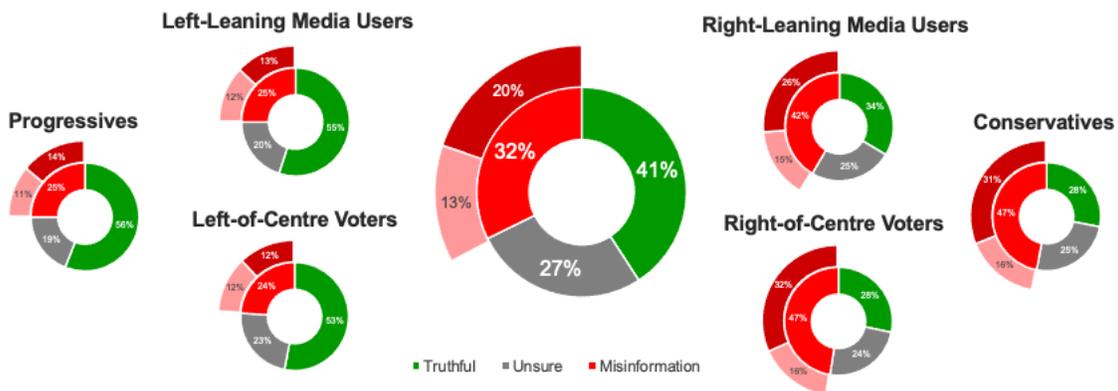
As a practical test on assessing misinformation, respondents were given 20 case studies – each containing a channel or source, a target and topic – some of these were considered to be misinformation, and some were not. There are majority views on what is misinformation and not in some cases, but in all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

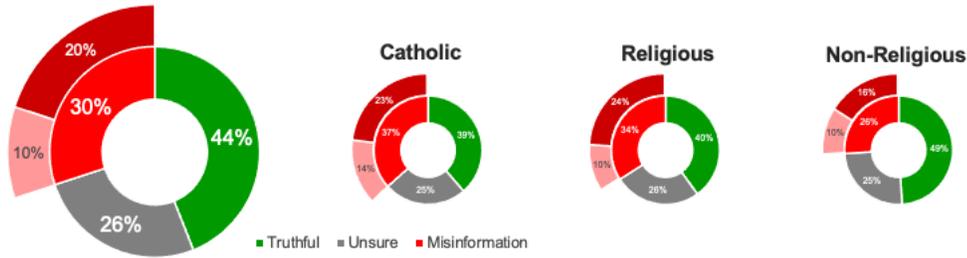
Taking a closer look at a range of case studies, we find a major source of this disagreement is audience prejudice. This example of The Guardian highlighting catastrophic climate change being regarded as misinformation (often intentional) by right-of-centre Australians, but truth by those who are left-of-centre.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

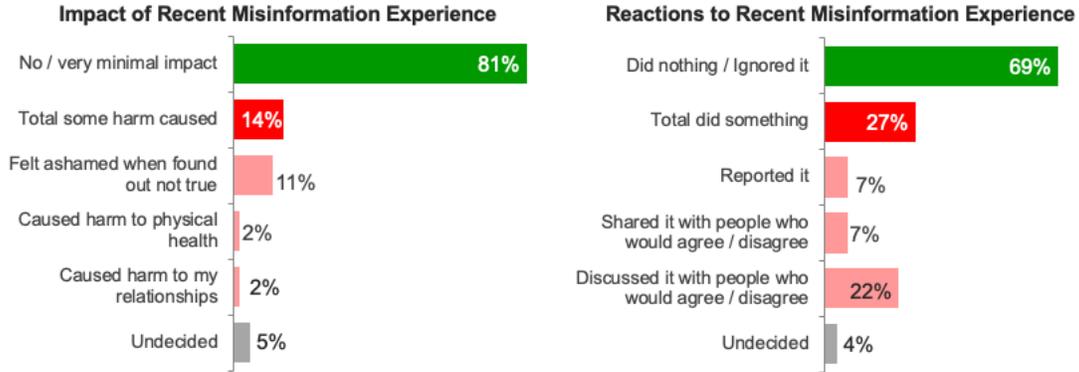
Regardless of their accuracy in identifying misinformation, most Australians believe they have experienced it, with around half reporting this has occurred recently (in the last week). While the previous analysis shows that political leanings of all types can influence perceptions of misinformation,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



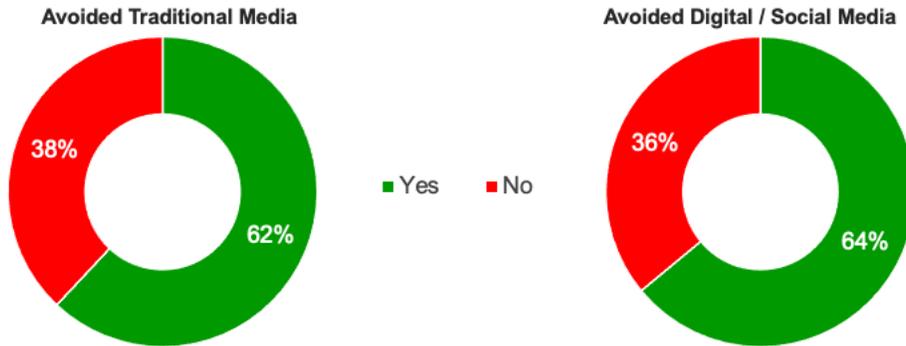
	Recently	Ever
<b>Total</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>80%</b>
Coalition Voters	43%	73%
Labor Voters	52%	81%
Right-of-Centre Voters	48%	75%
Left-of-Centre Voters	53%	83%
Conservatives	48%	78%
Progressives	56%	84%
Right-Leaning Media	49%	78%
Left-Leaning Media	58%	85%
Traditional Media	51%	80%
Digital Media	53%	84%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

