

ACMA misinformation report

Fact sheet 1: key research findings

In late 2020 and early 2021, the ACMA undertook a mixed-method research project to better understand the state of misinformation in Australia and inform its June 2021 report to government. This included commissioning consumer research that examined Australian attitudes and experiences of misinformation on COVID-19, social media analysis that examined the scale and drivers of online misinformation narratives in Australia, and a case study on the financial impacts of misinformation within the telecommunications sector.

Exposure and susceptibility



4-in-5 Australian adults have seen misinformation about COVID-19, with 22% seeing 'a lot' or 'a great deal'

Reported exposure to COVID-19 misinformation was higher among younger Australians (18–25-year-olds), heavy users of digital platforms, and those who rely on social media as their main source of news.



Those who believe COVID misinformation have lower levels of trust in doctors, health officials and other authoritative sources

Survey respondents who disagreed with official advice on COVID-19 prevention strategies and treatments were less likely than the general population to trust scientists, doctors and health professionals, and much more likely to trust news and information from health and lifestyle blogs and news found on social media.



Exposure and susceptibility to misinformation varies significantly across the community, requiring targeted interventions

Older Australians, for example, were less confident in knowing whether they had come across COVID-19 misinformation, and non-English speakers were more likely to use social media platforms and private messaging apps to access the news.

Role of digital platforms



Most COVID-19 misinformation is experienced on larger platforms, like Facebook, YouTube and Instagram

However, when accounting for the relative popularity of each platform, Facebook, WeChat and Twitter recorded the highest levels of reported COVID-19 misinformation among their respective users.



Many Australians are aware that platforms take measures to address misinformation, but few have firsthand experience

Removal of content was the most recognised measure (48%), but the least seen or experienced (7%). Views were mixed on when it is appropriate for platforms to remove content, given its impact on free speech. There was lower awareness for less interventionist measures, like directing users to authoritative sources (34%).



Stricter content moderation on large platforms is driving some communities to seek refuge on smaller, alternative social media sites

Within our sample of 200 conspiracy-driven Facebook groups and pages in Australia, there were 4.5k mentions of moving to alternative social networks – such as Telegram, Gab, Parler and Rumble.

Sources and amplification



A small number of celebrities, politicians and prominent influencers exert an outsized influence over COVID-19 misinformation narratives in Australia

Most online misinformation narratives originate from within small, insular communities. This content can quickly propagate via local and international super-spreaders, who appeal to wider audiences and attract broader media attention.



Misinformation narratives often originate overseas but evolve or adapt to local audiences and domestic issues. The confluence of conspiracy theories around COVID-19 has created multiple paths to misinformation

QAnon was the most popular of the 4 COVID-related misinformation narratives examined, representing 31% of posts in our sample.

There was considerable overlap and increasing convergence between narratives, with many posts sharing a mix of anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine, anti-5G and QAnon sentiment.



Members of conspiracy-driven groups frequently share links to 'evidence' in support of misinformation narratives, including articles from mainstream news sources

Within our sample of Facebook groups, members frequently shared links to articles from mainstream Australian news sources, such as the ABC or Sky News, either to rebuke the reporting or to claim it provided 'proof' of a misinformation narrative. These groups also regularly shared links to alternative, less reliable online news sources, and YouTube videos, that supported their views.

Impacts and harms



Online misinformation narratives have resulted in a wide range of acute and chronic harms, including undermining public health efforts and eroding trust in democratic institutions over time

Examples include the #stopthesteal and Capitol riots in the US, and the propagation of anti-vaccine misinformation narratives within the Australian community. Between January and March 2021, following TGA approval of COVID-19 vaccines, there was significant growth in the number of anti-vaccine posts in our sample.



Australian mobile carriers incur millions in unforeseen costs directly due to online misinformation

Based on the industry data we collected, the Australian mobile industry spent an estimated \$3.1m in 2019 and \$7.9m in 2020 as a direct result of misinformation about 5G or the harms of electromagnetic energy. The largest cost category was the repair or replacement of damaged property as a result of arson or vandalism attacks at mobile sites.



76% of Australians believe that platforms should be doing more to reduce the amount of false or misleading information people see online

Australians see the issue of misinformation to be one of joint responsibility – split between individual users (78%), platforms (76%), and government (58%). 44% believe misinformation is unavoidable and is just something we have to live with.

Methodology

Consumer research study

This study was undertaken by the News and Media Research Centre (N&MRC) at the University of Canberra. The quantitative component consisted of a nationwide representative survey of 2,659 adult Australians, undertaken between 19 December 2020 and 18 January 2021. The qualitative component consisted of 12 focus groups with a total of 60 participants, undertaken across February and March 2021, with participants recruited based on a mix of demographic characteristics, geographic locations, and media habits.

Social media content and network analysis

This study was undertaken by creative consultancy We Are Social. This project sought to examine the scale and drivers of 4 distinct online misinformation narratives in Australia (anti-vaccine, anti-5G, anti-lockdown and QAnon) over a 12-month period (April 2020 to March 2021). It consisted of an examination of over 60,000 public conversations across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and Reddit, identification and analysis of 291 Australian conspiracy-driven pages and groups on Facebook and Instagram, and a manual review of misinformation narratives on TikTok and Telegram.

This research informed the ACMA's report to government, but will not be made public as it contains sensitive information pertaining to public figures and user accounts.

Cost impact survey

A cost survey was developed by the ACMA, in consultation with the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association (AMTA) and its members. The ACMA sought cost information for both 2019 and 2020 calendar years from carriers for costs directly related to addressing (or incurred as a direct result of) 5G or electromagnetic energy dis- or misinformation. In April 2021, AMTA distributed the final survey on behalf of the ACMA and co-ordinated responses from members. Telstra, Optus, TPG Telecom and AMTA all provided the ACMA with high-level cost inputs, allowing us to estimate the financial impact across the industry.