



Select Committee on Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy

Submission by the Local & Independent News Association
September 2025

The Local & Independent News Association (LINA) is a not-for-profit national industry association **representing 170+ digital, local and independent newsrooms**. These grassroots organisations can be described as the 'green shoots' of the news industry, expanding digital newsrooms in response to broader industry contractions and closures, and playing a vital role in combatting misinformation and disinformation, representing diverse and regional voices, and supporting social cohesion and community resilience.

Contact Details:

Claire Stuchbery

Executive Director

44-54 Botany Rd, Alexandria NSW 2015

Ph | 02 8063 7031

M | 0403 520 765

E | Claire.stuchbery@lina.org.au

W | lina.org.au

Table of Contents

About LINA	2
Introduction	3
The role of news media in combating misinformation and disinformation	4
1. The prevalence of, motivations behind and impacts of misinformation and disinformation related to climate change and energy.	5
2. The role of social media, including the coordinated use of bots and trolls, messaging apps and generative artificial intelligence in facilitating the spread of misinformation and disinformation.....	5
3. The efficacy of different parliamentary and regulatory approaches in combating misinformation and disinformation, what evidence exists and where further research is required, including through gathering global evidence	7
a) The role of the government in supporting public interest journalism	7
b) Suggested parliamentary and regulatory approaches to combat misinformation and disinformation.....	7
4. The role that could be played by media literacy education, including in the school curriculum, in combating misinformation and disinformation	8
Conclusion.....	9
References	9

About LINA

LINA's members are locally owned and operated news publishers creating high quality public interest journalism that meets professional editorial standards. While the average LINA newsroom operates with just 3.5 full-time equivalent staff, collectively members publish more than 10,000 stories each month and reach over 12 million unique website visitors. All members must be meeting a set of eligibility requirements, ensuring they are producing high-quality public interest journalism, produced independently by and for the community in which they operate.

LINA's role is to support the quality, accessibility, diversity and relevance of news available to Australian audiences by strengthening public interest journalism and building the capacity of local and independent newsrooms. This work focuses on providing practical support for business development and newsroom operations and generating economies of scale across a collective of independent businesses. LINA seeks to grow the financial sustainability of existing newsrooms, and encourage new, local media entrants by providing a deep level of hands-on support to member publishers.

Introduction

LINA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Senate Standing Committee's Inquiry into Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy.

Misinformation and disinformation are particularly prevalent in areas without strong local news services, and local media's role in mitigating these issues is crucial for promoting informed civic engagement and supporting the resilience of communities, governments, and broader Australian democracy (Senate Environment and Communication References Committee, 2021). Local and independent news outlets, strengthened by local knowledge, connections and trust, are uniquely well-placed to identify misinformation circulating in their area and investigate and report the truth quickly and effectively, and support media literacy.

However, the viability of news organisations is pressured by the diversion of advertising revenue to digital platforms. Platforms like Google and Facebook have captured a significant share of online advertising, impacting the traditional media's ability to fund journalism (Matasick, Alfonsi & Bellantoni, 2020). Simultaneously, social media platforms have become a pervasive environment for the circulation and spread of disinformation (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). These issues have been exacerbated by recent developments, such as the deprioritisation of news content within Meta's Facebook algorithms. International case studies, such as in Canada (see page 6) provide evidence warning of the impacts of further loss of news in online spaces.

The government has a responsibility to guarantee public access to healthy and diverse information and communications systems, which includes supporting the unique and valuable role of public interest journalism. LINA's submission outlines the role of news media in combating misinformation and disinformation, and parliamentary and regulatory responses that would support the capacity of local and independent newsrooms to perform this critical community function.

LINA responds to the following terms of reference of the Senate Select Committee on Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy:

- (a) the prevalence of, motivations behind and impacts of misinformation and disinformation related to climate change and energy;
- (e) The role of social media, including the coordinated use of bots and trolls, messaging apps and generative artificial intelligence in facilitating the spread of misinformation and disinformation;
- (f) the efficacy of different parliamentary and regulatory approaches in combating misinformation and disinformation, what evidence exists and where further research is required, including through gathering global evidence; and,
- (g) the role that could be played by media literacy education, including in the school curriculum, in combating misinformation and disinformation.

The role of news media in combating misinformation and disinformation

News media has a valuable role in addressing misinformation and disinformation. This is achieved by directly contradicting commonly misunderstood or misinterpreted information, reporting fact-based and verified information accurately (including inoculation or “prebunking” of information likely to be misconstrued), and providing a trusted source of information for audiences.

Local and independent news publishers attract high levels of trust due to their strong connections to the communities they serve. The 2025 Digital News Report found that trust in news sources is a factor which correlates with peoples’ choice to avoid news, and that despite general news interest falling, interest in local has risen over the past few years (Park et al., 2025). A 2023 study (Hess) found that audiences are “five times more likely to go directly to a local news website for their local news than to Google or Facebook and almost 10 times more likely to go to a local newspaper website over a local council website for news and information”.

“Community journalists are deeply embedded within their communities and are in constant contact with their many rhizomatic connections. This closeness and community membership ensures that community journalists are in tune with the issues of importance within their communities.”

— Anderson et al., 2022.

Further, trust in other institutions such as local government has also been found to be associated with the presence of local news (Megasic, Hess & Freeman, 2023), and increased engagement with news content increases civic engagement (ACMA, A New Framework for Measuring Media Diversity in Australia).

Case Study: The *Illawarra Flame* Debunks climate disinformation.

- **Background:** The *Illawarra Flame*, which began as a printed business directory, expanded into an online news service in 2022, focusing on sharing voices and issues relevant to the Illawarra region on the New South Wales coast.
- **The Disinformation Incident:** In October 2023, a heated community discussion was taking place regarding proposed offshore wind farms. A Facebook post started circulating, claiming that a University of Tasmania study had found wind turbines to be dangerous to whales. This claim was also circulated in national media and parliament.
- **The *Illawarra Flame*'s Role:** Concerned about the divisive impact the story was having on their community, the *Illawarra Flame* investigated these claims and discovered that the entire report was fabricated, with no scientific evidence globally to support the notion that wind farms harm whales.
- **Outcome:** The publication successfully combatted this misinformation being distributed through the community. Their commitment to fact-checking was recognised when the *Illawarra Flame* was featured on Media Watch for its role in uncovering the truth.

This example is one of many and highlights the critical role of local and independent news outlets in identifying and efficiently reporting the truth to counter misinformation circulating within their communities, especially when strengthened by local knowledge and connections.

1. The prevalence of, motivations behind and impacts of misinformation and disinformation related to climate change and energy.

LINA shares the Commonwealth's concerns about the threat posed by the circulation of misinformation and disinformation across communities, observing its impact on responses to climate change and energy related issues.

Not only are misinformation and disinformation rife on digital platforms, particularly social media, but the rise of social media and associated decline in advertising for news services has impacted the viability of many independent newsrooms and thus media diversity (Matasick, Alfonsi & Bellantoni, 2020). This trend "aggravates the vulnerability of the information ecosystem and undermines an essential avenue for trustworthy news and government accountability" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022).

As demonstrated by the *Illawarra Flame* case study (page 4), local news services do not merely identify potential misinformation and disinformation, verify and fact-check, but also amplify this reliable information within their community and to larger state, national or international news media and their audiences. Olsen and Mathisen (2023), describe this role and how therefore the decline in local journalism "disrupt[s] the news ecosystem", "increasing the risk of misinformation spreading via social media".

"The loss of local journalism has been accompanied by the malignant spread of misinformation and disinformation, political polarization, eroding trust in media, and a yawning digital and economic divide among citizens. In communities without a credible source of local news, voter participation declines, corruption in both government and business increases."

– Abernathy, 2022.

LINA does not seek to comment further on the motivations behind or broader impacts of misinformation and disinformation related to climate change and energy.

2. The role of social media, including the coordinated use of bots and trolls, messaging apps and generative artificial intelligence in facilitating the spread of misinformation and disinformation

Social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Instagram, are important tools used by newsrooms to reach audiences, particularly within younger demographics. Ninety per cent of LINA member publishers distribute content via social media. On Facebook alone, LINA publishers have a collective audience of over 2.3 million followers, and an additional 1.3 million on Instagram. The average Facebook following of each small media organisation is 30,000.

These social media platforms are particularly valuable for emerging newsrooms to establish a following and build brand awareness. For the first time, social media platforms have this year

overtaken online news as the second most popular main source of news (after television), used as the main source by 26% of Australians (Park et al., 2025).

However, these platforms are also significant channels for the wide and rapid spread of misinformation (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018), and social media “continue to misrepresent scientific knowledge about climate change” (Lewandowsky, 2021). Unscientific viewpoints are represented, for example, in the majority of YouTube videos about climate change (Algaier, 2019). The algorithmic capabilities of social media platforms influence what Australians see, encourage confirmation bias and exacerbate polarisation on issues. Recent algorithmic de-prioritisation of news content by Meta lead to significant drops in reach and referral traffic for news publishers (LINA 2024 Member Survey). This reduction in visibility for credible news sources on social media can inadvertently fuel the saturation of unverified information. SBS Director of News and Current Affairs Mandi Wicks describes how the role is increasingly falling to news publishers to not just report on the news of the day, but to “combat ‘fake news’ and moderate hate speech on their social media profiles, comments which are often AI-generated via bots” (Park et al, 2024).

The threat of not having a strong and diverse news media to counter mis and disinformation in emergency situations has been demonstrated through research into the effects of Meta’s news ban in Canada. The loss of local news on Facebook had “profound consequences for Canadians” during wildfires that spread through Northern Canada shortly after the ban was enacted in 2023 (Parker et al., 2024). Unlike previous years, local news organisations were unable to use Facebook to share essential information about the spread of fires and safety orders. This study states that “although government accounts were still visible to Canadian users, they proved to be insufficient in countering misinformation and confusion and effectively delivering information to residents of small, rural communities”. News reports in the aftermath detail how “confusion and misinformation have abounded about which evacuation centres are still accepting people, how evacuees might be able to get financial compensation, the progression of the fires and what happens next as residents watch the fires through their screens, far from home” (Lindeman, 2023). The importance of public interest news for combating misinformation and disinformation in Australia was similarly emphasised in the report of the COVID-19 Response Inquiry (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2024), a role that remains critical as society now confront the demonstrable human health impacts of climate change (Lewandowsky, 2021).

It is therefore increasingly important that independent newsrooms producing public interest journalism are provided capacity-building support to:

- a) Produce quality news content that counters this growing misinformation and disinformation and provides communities with verified information;
- b) Share this content in online spaces to reach diverse audiences and reduce the saturation of false information circulating; and
- c) Innovate and develop alternate distribution methods to strengthen direct connections with audiences and reduce reliance on third-party platforms, like Facebook, to share and receive news.

Parliamentary and regulatory responses to support these outcomes are outlined on page 7.

3. The efficacy of different parliamentary and regulatory approaches in combating misinformation and disinformation, what evidence exists and where further research is required, including through gathering global evidence

Parliamentary and regulatory approaches to combating misinformation and disinformation are most effective when they are understood as part of a wider information ecosystem, in which trusted news media play a central role (outlined below). Research has found that disinformation about climate change is more likely to be spread by politicians, organisations and anonymous agencies, and thus calls on joint efforts of media practitioners and governments to mitigate these risks (Hassan et al., 2023). Recent studies and inquiries, including the Joint Select Committee's report on the impacts of social media in Australian society (2024), outline evidence-based government responses to support this role of news.

a) The role of the government in supporting public interest journalism

A healthy media sector, and public interest journalism in particular, has been well established in academic literature as a fundamental pillar of democracy. However, public interest journalism — including sharing local information, providing a platform to under-represented voices, and acting as a watchdog to corruption or misconduct — has “always been in tension with commercial imperatives” (Pickard, 2019). As such, it struggles to maintain financial viability, particularly in the wake of recent market disruptions, including the collapse of the traditional advertising model for media, the shift of audiences online, and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is therefore an obligation for the government to support the media not only for its value in identifying and combating misinformation and disinformation, but related democratic roles including providing scrutiny and accountability of government, institutions and businesses (such as those in the energy sector) and supporting community health and safety through emergency coverage, preparedness and resilience, particular critical in the context of increasing natural disasters caused by climate change. With suitable policies in place, maintaining editorial independence for newsrooms does not need to come at the expense of policy intervention that will support the news media system and broader information environment required to maintain a healthy democracy.

b) Suggested parliamentary and regulatory approaches to combat misinformation and disinformation

Suitable government responses and policy mechanisms that would either a) support news services to produce public interest journalism, or b). create a policy environment supportive of the sustainability of existing newsrooms and the development of emerging newsrooms, include:

- Acting on the following recommendations of the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society (2024):
 - Explore alternate revenue mechanisms to supplement the [News Media Bargaining] Code [or News Bargaining Incentive, now in development], acknowledging its

- limitations and the need to redesign the Code to remove barriers to registration for small, independent or digital only publishers;
 - Develop mechanisms to guide the transparent distribution of revenue arising from any new revenue models;
 - Establish a short-term transition fund to help news media businesses to diversify and strengthen alternate income streams and news product offerings;
 - Establish a Digital Media Competency Fund to assist both young Australians and other groups at risk of being taken in by mis and disinformation; and
 - Require digital platforms to provide notice of changes to algorithms and the rationale for those changes.
- Introduce a legislated minimum government advertising spend specifically directed to locally produced and distributed news publications. This would increase return-on-investment for campaigns by reaching highly targeted audiences, incentivise media buying agencies to engage with local, independent outlets, and increase newsroom sustainability and capacity.
- Modernise Local Government Acts so local governments are required to share notices of public information in local digital publications, alongside print, radio, tv and/or other suitable formats. This would ensure critical information reached modern audiences and support local accountability and transparency.
- Support the development of a not-for-profit news sector by enacting the recommendation of the Productivity Commission’s philanthropy inquiry (2024) that news organisations producing public interest journalism be eligible for DGR status.
- Provide capacity-building support for newsrooms to improve sustainability, including by transitioning to new platforms and distribution methods to strengthen direct connections with audiences, via the News Media Assistance Program.
- Grant newsroom eligibility for all relevant support and grant programs to improve effective communication within and to communities.

4. The role that could be played by media literacy education, including in the school curriculum, in combating misinformation and disinformation

There is a growing role for news services to educate readers in media literacy, providing explainers and examples to help identify mis and disinformation and understand journalism that is produced under professional editorial standards. The Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society in ‘Second interim report: digital platforms and the traditional news media’ (2024) recommended that:

“Australian Government establish a Digital Media Competency Fund (to be funded via alternative revenue mechanisms to be explored at Recommendation 2). While this fund should have a strong focus on the digital media literacy of young Australians, it should also fund initiatives aimed at improving the digital media literacy of other groups at risk of being taken in by mis- and disinformation, including older Australians and those in regional areas.”

LINA has proposed a number of actions to support the work of newsrooms in educating communities and improving media literacy, outlined in its [2025 Pre-Budget Submission](#). Supporting newsrooms to

continue this role will also increase engagement with trustworthy information sources, provided they are meeting professional editorial standards such as those required of LINA member publishers.

Conclusion

Governments have a responsibility to help guarantee public access to healthy and diverse information and communications systems, and combating misinformation and disinformation, both in preventing the dissemination of false information and of countering this information after its circulation, requires a coordinated, multifaceted government response.

Central to this effort is support for the news media, particularly independent and local news outlets, which have proven especially effective in serving communities with trusted, evidence-based reporting as “misinformation and disinformation pervade our social feeds and threaten to undermine our democratic way of life” (Mandi Wicks in Parks et al., 2024). The absence of local news increases community vulnerability to misinformation, yet commercial or market factors make sustaining these outlets increasingly difficult.

To address this, independent newsrooms producing public interest journalism must be equipped with both capacity-building and regulatory support, enabling them to continue this vital democratic function while developing sustainable business models for the future.

References

Abernathy, P. (2022). “The State of Local News”. *Local News Initiative*.

Australian Communications and Media Authority. (2025). Media Diversity Measurement Framework. Accessed via: <https://www.acma.gov.au/media-diversity-measurement-framework>

Allgaier J. (2019). “Science and environmental communication on YouTube: strategically distorted communications in online videos on climate change and climate engineering”. *Front. Commun.* 4:36 doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2019.00036

Anderson, H., Backhaus, B., Bedford, C, & De Souza, P. (2022). “Go Join that radio station up there: The role of Australian community radio in journalism and education training”. *Australian Journalism Review*, Vol 44, Issue 2.

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2024). ‘COVID-10 Response Inquiry Report’. <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/covid-19-response-inquiry-report>

Hess, K. (2023) “Media Innovation and the Civic Future of Australia's Country Press”, Deakin University

Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society. (2024). *Second interim report: digital platforms and the traditional news media*.

Lewandowsky, S. (2019). "Climate Change Disinformation and How to Combat It". *Annual Reviews*.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-090419-102409>

Lindeman, T. (2023). "Meta's news block causes chaos as Canada burns". *Wired*. Accessed via:
<https://www.wired.com/story/meta-facebook-instagram-news-block-canada-wildfire/>

Magasic, M., Hess, K. & Freeman, J. (2023). "Examining the social, civic, and political impact of local newspaper closure in Outback Australia." *Media and Communication*, 11(3), 404-413.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2022). "Good Practice Principles for Public Communication Responses to Mis- and Disinformation", *OECD Public Governance Policy Papers N30*. Accessed via: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2023/04/good-practice-principles-for-public-communication-responses-to-mis-and-disinformation_e047ea9c/6d141b44-en.pdf

Parker, S., Park, S., Pehlivan, Z., Abrahams, A., Desblancs, M., Owen, T., Phillips, J., & Bridgman, A. (2024). "When journalism is turned off: Preliminary findings on the effects of Meta's news ban in Canada". *Media Ecosystem Observatory*, McGill University <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/eqn45>

Park, S., Fisher, C., McGuinness, K., Young Lee, J., McCallum, K., Fujita, M., Haw, A., & Nardi, G. (2025). "Digital news report: Australia 2025". Canberra: News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra.

Park, S., Fisher, C., McGuinness, K., Lee, J., McCallum, K., Cai, X., Chatskin, M., Mardjianto, L. & Yao, P. (2024). "Digital News Report: Australia 2024". Canberra: News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra.

Pickard, V. (2019). *Democracy without journalism? Confronting the misinformation society*. Oxford University Press.

Productivity Commission. (2024). *Future foundations for giving*, Inquiry report no. 104, Canberra. Available at: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/philanthropy/report>

Senate Environment and Communications References Committee. (2021). "Media Diversity in Australia". Commonwealth of Australia. Available at: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Environment_and_Communications/Mediadiversity

Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). "The spread of true and false news online". *Science*. Vol. 359, No. 6380, pp. 1146–1151. <https://www.science.org/doi/full/10.1126/science.aap9559>.