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SYNTHESIS AND PRIORITIES

NEWS FUTURES: MEDIA POLICY ROUNDTABLE 2026



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SYNTHESIS AND PRIORITIES

NEWS FUTURES: MEDIA POLICY ROUNDTABLE 2026

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Executive Summary

Public interest journalism is the bedrock of democracy, accountability, and social cohesion. However, Australia's news ecosystem is currently weak, fragmented, and struggling due to a decade of newsroom closures and the shift of advertising revenue to global digital platforms. To address these challenges, the News and Media Research Centre (N&MRC) hosted a Media Policy Roundtable in February 2026, bringing together 45 representatives from industry, government, not for profit organisations, and academia to develop a multi-pronged strategy for the news industry's long-term viability.

The rapid adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) has introduced a new threat to the viability of journalism. AI platforms are eroding business models through zero-click searches, where audiences consume information without visiting the original publisher's website, leading to a loss of referral traffic. Furthermore, AI companies often scrape and train models on copyrighted news content without permission or compensation. The spread of "AI slop" and hallucinations has further muddied the information environment, contributing to deep audience distrust. At the same time, opaque algorithms on social and search platforms prioritise engagement over accuracy, often amplifying misinformation or low-quality content. Younger audiences are pivoting toward personality-led news driven by influencers, and all of this is exacerbated by low media and AI literacy across all age groups, leaving citizens vulnerable to misinformation.

The roundtable identified several critical areas for government and industry intervention:

- **Platform Regulation:** There is an urgent need for transparency in algorithmic curation and mandatory labelling of AI-generated content. On digital platforms, public interest journalism needs to remain prominent and discoverable.
- **News Bargaining Incentive (NBI):** This proposed framework aims to encourage digital platforms to enter commercial agreements with publishers. However, to make it future-proof and equitable, it must be platform-agnostic, ensuring it is broadened to include emerging actors such as AI platforms.
- **Sustainable Funding Models:** Moving beyond one-off grants, the roundtable proposed longer term solutions including a tax offset for journalists' salaries to support the industry's workforce, and the long-term sustainability of public interest journalism.
- **Professional Standards and Emerging Actors:** To foster a pluralistic news ecosystem, the sector must embrace influencers and digital-first outlets by providing them with adequate training, as well as devising a common industry code to ensure the quality of the news ecosystem.

Addressing the market failure of public interest journalism is essential for a healthy democracy. Success requires a paradigm shift in policy that prioritises transparency, sustainable funding, and national media and AI literacy education to empower citizens in an AI-driven world. The participants agreed that while no single solution exists, evidence-based research must guide future policy.

Background

Public interest journalism underpins democracy, accountability and social cohesion. Where there is a healthy news ecosystem, diverse voices are amplified, power is held to account, and social cohesion increases. Despite this important function of news and journalism in society, our civic infrastructure for trustworthy news and public information is currently weak, fragmented, underfunded and struggling to adapt.

The decline in traditional news audiences presents an ongoing challenge where journalism competes for finite audience attention in a high-choice information environment. Advertising has shifted away from local professionally produced media content to global digital platforms, offering user-generated content, social media and search.¹ Australia has experienced a long decade of newsroom closures, mergers and layoffs in an already small and heavily concentrated industry.² Local, in language, and regional news outlets have closed, leading to poorer access to quality news in many parts of the country.

The year 2025 marked a rapid adoption of generative AI and growing uncertainty around the loss of visibility of news on search engines, social media and AI platforms. We are encountering a new threat as AI is further eroding business models; in an era of zero-click searches, publishers are gradually losing control over how their content is discovered by audiences.³ The spread of AI produced content and growing AI slop, with no guardrails, is muddying the information environment resulting in deeper distrust and audience disengagement.⁴

Lower quality and gaps in news provision have accelerated the audience pivot to social media and alternative sources of news. The rise of AI use in content production has caused widespread concern, with only 26% of Australians saying they trust artificial intelligence innovations and 53% saying they reject them.⁵ Another big shift is the surge of influencers driving personality-led news, particularly appealing to younger audiences. This is, in part, driven by the social media platforms that shape people's news diet. For example, half of consumers who access news on TikTok say they pay most attention to influencers.⁶

¹International News Media Association. (2025). Advertising projections: Traditional media declines but stabilises. <https://www.inma.org/blogs/advertising-initiative/post.cfm/advertising-projections-traditional-media-declines-but-stabilises>

²Australian Communications and Media Authority (2025). *News media in Australia: 2025 report*. Commonwealth of Australia (Australian Communications and Media Authority), Canberra.

³Ballen, R. (2025). *Google's AI search features are killing traffic to publishers*. Tech Crunch. <https://techcrunch.com/2025/06/10/google-ai-overviews-are-killing-traffic-for-publishers/>

⁴Adami, M. (2024). *AI-generated slop is quietly conquering the internet*. Is it a threat to journalism or a problem that will fix itself? Reuters Institute. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/ai-generated-slop-quietly-conquering-internet-it-threat-journalism-or-problem-will-fix-itself>

⁵Edelman Trust Institute. (2024). *Edelman trust barometer: Trust and the crisis of grievance Australia report*. Edelman Trust Institute, New York: New York, p. 13.

⁶Park, S., Fisher, C., McGuinness, K., Lee, J., Fujita, M., Haw, A., McCallum, K. & Nardi, G. (2025). *Digital News Report: Australia 2025*. Canberra: News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra.

These trends are linked to the low trust Australians have in mainstream news. Since 2016, the proportion of Australians who say they distrust news has risen from 25% to 32%.⁷ Generative AI tools are accelerating the spread of misinformation at an alarming rate, and only half of what we see online is created by humans – all the rest is generated by bots.⁸ Globally, Australians have the highest concern about misinformation.⁹

Misinformation flourishes when there is a high information demand but not enough verified evidence. A sufficient supply of quality news and information can counterbalance misinformation. Research shows a strong link between news consumption and people's ability to verify misinformation,¹⁰ their political participation¹¹ and an overall reduction in polarisation.¹²

We need a multi-pronged, long-term strategy to support all types of existing and emerging publishers, respond to market failure, and ensure long-term viability of a news industry that can provide high quality news for Australians. To date, there have been multiple interventions and policy measures including several government direct funding schemes,¹³ the world's first News Media Bargaining Code,¹⁴ and the News Bargaining Incentive that is under development.¹⁵ However, market failure is accelerating, and it is time to review the existing policies and reset the future policy agenda.

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ Imperva. (2025). *Bad bot report 2025: The rapid rise of bots and the unseen risk for business*. Austin, TX: Imperva.

⁹ Park, S., Fisher, C., McGuinness, K., Lee, J., Fujita, M., Haw, A., McCallum, K. & Nardi, G. (2025). *Digital News Report: Australia 2025*. Canberra: News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2025-06/apo-nid330740_0.pdf

¹⁰ McGuinness, K., Park, S., Lee, J., Lukamto, W., Fisher, C., Fulton, J., Haw, A. & Holland, K. (2025). Unpacking election misinformation: Australians' experiences of news and information about the 2025 federal election. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre. <https://doi.org/10.60836/hc77-gn54>

¹¹ Shaker, L. (2014). Dead newspapers and citizens' civic engagement. *Political Communication*, 31(1), 131–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2012.762817>

¹² Moskowitz, D. J. (2021). Local news, information, and the nationalization of U.S. elections. *American Political Science Review*, 115(1), 114–129. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000829>

¹³ These include the three-part Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation Package for business innovation, journalism scholarships and cadetships, Public Interest Newsgathering Fund, Journalist Fund for training and cadetships, News Media Relief Funding for regional and diverse newsrooms and Journalism Assistance Fund.

¹⁴ https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bld=r6652

¹⁵ <https://consult.treasury.gov.au/c2025-718159>

N&MRC News Futures: Media Policy Roundtable 2026

To address some of these issues, N&MRC hosted the *News Futures: Media Policy Roundtable 2026* on 19 February 2026. The aim of the half-day event was to bring together government, industry, public interest groups and media researchers to discuss recent research findings and advance a policy agenda to tackle key questions in Australia's news media policy landscape.

The roundtable was attended by 32 representatives of the news media, government, regulatory agencies, digital platforms, think tanks, and academia, plus 13 representatives from the University of Canberra. The event was organised by N&MRC's Sora Park, Momoko Fujita, David Nolan, Kieran McGuinness and Will Hayward, and chaired by Virginia Haussegger AM. It was conducted under Chatham House Rules without journalists covering the proceedings to help facilitate candid discussion. The event was recorded for the purposes of note taking and the creation of this report. All comments in this report have been anonymised to respect the confidentiality that governed the event.

The discussions were led by the following four key questions:

- 1 **What can the government and society do to tackle the issue of distrusting and disengaged citizens?**
- 2 **In an age of AI, how can we identify risks and safeguard citizens from misinformation?**
- 3 **How can we ensure we have sufficient and locally relevant public interest journalism?**
- 4 **How can we best manage the power imbalance between digital platforms (social, search, AI) and news organisations?**

We listened to a diverse range of perspectives – from emerging publishers to the largest media organisations in Australia, and from government to philanthropy. Deliberations on the day underscored the need for co-ordinated efforts across industry, government and academia. There is no one-size-fits-all remedy to the problems, but there is certainly a role for evidence-based research to help inform policy decisions and industry action about the news industry.

Quality news underpins democracy. Without it, diverse voices are sidelined, citizens become more vulnerable to misinformation, and society becomes polarised. This highlights one of the key issues discussed on the day, that of public interest journalism, the supporting of which is not simply about sustaining the industry. It is about ensuring quality and diverse news.

It must be stressed that whilst there are many pressing issues facing the Australian media, this report focuses on the key priorities identified through the discussions.

We wish to thank each of the attendees for the respectful and open way in which they participated.

KEY DISCUSSIONS

The attendees were divided into four groups to cover the four questions. The first part of the discussion with each group was to identify and elaborate on the key policy issues. Interestingly, while each group was given a specific topic, there were many overlapping suggestions, and we were able to identify issues that were common across all groups.

In the first instance, though, it is pertinent to acknowledge transparency as an overarching concern across all four discussion areas.

- There is a lack of transparency in algorithms, including social media and AI platforms.
- Transparency should be part of any content on platforms in regard to endorsements and/or advertising.
- Transparency is needed to ensure audiences recognise when AI is used.
- Transparency is needed in the News Bargaining Initiative.
- Funding distribution via the tax system must be transparent and equitable.
- Publishers can increase trust with transparent news standards.
- Transparency can lead to accountability, public trust and audience engagement.

There was also an agreement that there is not one solution. A multi-pronged approach that includes regulation, direct funding, media and AI literacy education, proactive engagement with AI, social media and search platforms, and management of journalistic standards were deemed necessary.

Definitions of news and journalism are changing

The definition of news is crucial. When people report disengagement with news, it may simply be that they are getting news from non-traditional sources. This is the case particularly among younger generations. Several positions emerged around definitions:

- Better understanding of new forms of news actors, such as content creators and influencers who produce and distribute journalism to audiences.
- Clear scope of public interest journalism – what is included and why.
- The importance of local news and the need for clearer definitions of news and journalism, particularly in relation to eligibility for government or industry funding.
- The need to clearly define what is *locally* relevant.
- Clearer distinctions between journalists and public interest journalism.
- The need to distinguish professional journalism standards.
- The blurring lines between news and opinion.

It was also noted that there is a definition provided by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) that can be used as a baseline:

News: “Includes any factual reporting by journalists or other information on current events at either a local, regional, national, or international level (see also professional news).”¹⁶

Professional news: “News produced by a news outlet that adheres to professional standards, is editorially independent, operates predominantly in Australia and produces publicly available news content.”¹⁷

The eligibility of news businesses under the News Media Bargaining Code is based on the concept of core news.

Core news: “News content that reports, investigates or explains (1) issues or events that are relevant in engaging Australians in public debate and in informing democratic decision-making issues; or (2) current issues or events of public significance for Australians at a local, regional or national level.”¹⁸

¹⁶ <https://www.acma.gov.au/glossary-news-media-australia>

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=ld%3A%22legislation%2Fems%2F6652_ems_2fe103c0-0f60-480b-b878-1c8e96cf51d2%22

Algorithmic curation of news

Algorithmic curation of news content on online platforms was a major talking point, particularly around its impact on news quality, stability of news production and transparency. There was discussion about how algorithms can easily influence people's access to certain types of news content, and how misinformation can be favoured by algorithms that prioritise audience engagement over accuracy. Repeated exposure to or engagement with algorithmically curated news may reinforce seemingly comprehensive accounts that lack clear source attribution, potentially increasing the risk of factual distortion and clouded audience judgement.

Digital platforms are not journalistic institutions and are primarily designed to monetise audience attention through advertising. The attention economy has created an information environment in which news organisations heavily rely on these platforms to secure audience reach and engagement. They need to learn ways to optimise their content for algorithms, which may be impractical for news stories that require much longer-form content than bite-sized videos. Algorithms are not transparent, and this instability could disadvantage small, local or regional outlets more significantly than larger ones with established brand awareness.

The lack of transparency in how platforms develop and update content recommendation systems ignited a debate. As with commercial or government sectors, algorithm-driven journalism raises significant privacy and data-safety risks due to automated systems' reliance on opaque data pipelines, audience analytics and platform-controlled infrastructures. These systems limit publishers' control over how user information is used and processed, highlighting a need for policy intervention across sectors, not just in news.

Below are several of the other concerns raised by the attendees:

- The level of distraction and distortion caused by algorithms.
- Algorithmic influence on people's news feeds, and its volatility.
- Polarisation and division in society, that undermines social cohesion.
- Concern about the quality of content produced by influencers, disinformation actors, and non-news actors that algorithms push into feeds.
- The lack of transparency in algorithms, which can change without warning.
- Current algorithms are designed for profit and not public good.
- No guardrails to monitor and regulate the design of algorithms.

Generative AI use in news production and consumption

“ They’re [AI companies] slippery suckers that are moving faster and government can’t keep up. And that’s intentional. I think they’ve taken the original “move fast and break things” and moving so fast they’re breaking everything. ”

Alongside discussion about the news industry’s platform-dependency, attendees also raised concerns about AI platforms relying on news content to answer user queries, and the use of generative AI in news production, with each group recognising the issues as part of their topic. Generative AI platforms and search engines rely on content sourced from the web, including news, to train their AI models that provide answers to user queries. Attendees raised concerns around the declining referral traffic to news websites and the power imbalance and copyright issues created by such practice.

The AI models can produce false or misleading responses to user queries – hallucinations – which raises misinformation concerns. News organisations are also feeling financial and ethical pressures from AI platforms scraping their website content without permission or remuneration. If they block it, however, this raises the risks for audience exposure to biased or misleading information generated from non-news sources as AI platforms use what is available to produce responses.²⁰

There were also concerns around generative AI use in newsrooms and by non-traditional news actors. Attendees acknowledged the challenges of fast-evolving changes to technology and user behaviour and the lack of transparency and accountability in the disclosure of generative AI-use contributing to falling trust in journalism. Many Australians are not equipped to distinguish authentic from AI-generated content, while policymakers face the challenge of regulating large global digital platforms. There were several major points raised by the attendees:

- Generative AI contributing to falling trust in journalism.
- Increasing economic pressures on news organisations due to AI platforms scraping their content without compensation.
- Generative AI platforms using limited sources and producing skewed and biased results to users.
- Blurring of human vs AI-generated content.
- Difficulty in regulating global digital platforms in a domestic regulatory environment.
- AI used by foreign actors to spread propaganda for the purposes of undermining trust in media, institutions and democracy.

²⁰ Powell, R. & Jung, C. (2026). *AI’s got news for you: Can AI improve our information environment?* Institute for Public Policy Research. <https://www.ippr.org/articles/ais-got-news-for-you>

Emerging news actors

The discussion about this topic took two angles: emerging news outlets that are digital-first or social media only, and influencers and content creators providing news to audiences. As noted by one attendee, Australia has traditionally had a few organisations controlling the news. This model functioned in the world of scarceness, but the internet has transformed this in both the production and consumption of news. New news actors and formats continue to emerge. While the diversity of views can be reflected through these emerging players, traditional news organisations often see them as problematic.

“ It’s not just someone who works for a major publication, but if someone online follows whatever the legal definition is, ascribes to the ethics standards, the journalistic standards, and is subject to some kind of press council or something, they should also be classed as a journalist and have to help people differentiate it, rightfully so, from someone else who doesn’t do any of that. ”

- New digital-only entrants are not formally recognised or accepted as news outlets by traditional news organisations. How can we embrace these new entrants as professional journalists/outlets?
- The need to ensure the quality of news provided by influencers and content creators through an agreed upon professional industry standard.
- Concerns were raised about influencers and content creators acting as fact-checkers for news content produced by professional journalists, and the potential for certain bad actors to distort news.
- Professional journalism and media literacy training are needed for influencers and content creators.

Audiences' low media and AI literacy

Media literacy is directly related to civic resilience, which is much needed in an increasingly overwhelming and confusing information environment where traditional news is under threat. However, Australians have low media literacy levels,²¹ and few have had formal or informal media literacy training.²²

AI literacy was recognised as an increasingly pressing issue that the public struggles with. Audiences are increasingly accessing news via summaries on Google's AI Overview or through generative AI chatbots such as ChatGPT, Gemini or Copilot. However, people are not equipped with the ability to discern biased or false information found on these platforms. Several issues related to media and AI literacy emerged:

- Rapid pace of AI development, without guardrails.
- Australians' low media and AI literacy.
- Low public awareness and understanding of AI.
- Difficulty identifying AI-generated content.
- Generative AI platform algorithms not prioritising accuracy.
- Consumers struggling to assess the quality and credibility of news on digital platforms.

Funding and support for news

A resounding position across the board was the need for financial support for public interest journalism. It was recognised that the traditional business models are untenable and there is a crucial need to develop innovative ways to support public interest journalism. While there was consensus on the fact that funding is needed for news organisations, concerns were raised around justifying government funding for a sector that is experiencing a drop in public trust.

- The market failure of public interest journalism is inevitable and needs to be addressed by the government, in a similar way that the government supports other types of public good such as culture, national defence or public parks.
- Acknowledging that traditional models of funding – advertising, classified ads – are not working, and developing alternative funding models is critical.
- How can funding support, particularly from the government, be justified with an audience that does not trust news or its providers?

²¹ Park, S., Notley, T., Thomson, T.J., Hourigan, A., and Dezuanni, M. (2024). *Online Misinformation in Australia: Adults' experiences, abilities, and responses*. University of Canberra and Western Sydney University. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2024-12/apo-nid328959.pdf>

²² Park, S., Fisher, C., McGuinness, K., Lee, J., Fujita, M., Haw, A., McCallum, K., & Nardi, G. (2025). *Digital News Report: Australia 2025*. Canberra: News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. 10.60836/md4e-k570

POLICY PRIORITIES

“ *Systems and structures have changed but governance structure hasn't. We need a big paradigm shift in how journalism is discussed.* ”

Attendees recognised several policy priorities including platform regulation, the News Bargaining Incentive, implementing professional standards, devising sustainable methods of funding, and supporting local news.

Platform regulation

The digital platforms discussed during the day included social media, search engines and generative AI. AI introduces a new layer of complexity into the contemporary information environment by deeply integrating human-machine interactions into everyday information practices. These interactions increasingly blur the boundaries between human-generated and machine-mediated activities, even though existing policy frameworks continue to treat them as distinct domains. Current regulatory paradigms in Australia do not encompass global platforms and we need a new way of regulating these large global players.

Generative AI, search engines and social media platforms lack transparency about their content curation and recommendation algorithms. News publishers rely on the referral traffic from these digital intermediaries, particularly on social media, to reach and build their audiences. It is where news organisations can meet their younger audiences. The vast majority of under 25s access their news on social media and almost half say it's their main source of news.²⁵ However, algorithms can and have changed without warning and impacts the publishers' traffic.

²⁵ Park, S., Fisher, C., McGuinness, K., Lee, J., Fujita, M., Haw, A., McCallum, K., & Nardi, G. (2025). Digital News Report: Australia 2025. Canberra: News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. 10.60836/md4e-k570

Regulation that ensures a level-playing field involving all relevant departments within the government is necessary; the nature of the issues is across many different regulatory frameworks including copyright, privacy, consumer protection and anti-trust law. One suggestion was to introduce co-regulation rather than self-regulation, combining industry responsibility with statutory oversight.

The field is moving quickly, and it is difficult for consumers and regulators to keep up, but there were several suggestions generated on the day.

1

Transparency in algorithmic curation and generative AI use

Clear labelling and disclosures on platforms are essential to help users make informed decisions about sharing the personal data that powers algorithms, and consuming AI-generated and AI-assisted content. Specific proposals included:

- Empowering audiences to choose their news rather than relying on AI algorithms and including opt-out mechanisms.
- Labelling content on social media and AI to help users identify risky and harmful content.
- Regulatory framework to govern and facilitate these warning labels.
- Disclosure obligations for AI-generated or AI-assisted content.

2

Regulation regarding the use of news content by AI platforms

Attendees highlighted the issues with AI platforms and their business model of gathering data for scraping and training and its deleterious effect on the news industry.

Scraping: AI companies copy data from the internet, through scraping methods, including open access and information behind paywalls. Scraping itself is where copyright and ethics concerns first arise because it involves taking the data without permission.

Training: AI systems learn from patterns in the data, which uses copyrighted material that they scrape from the internet. Training is the process where an AI system analyses the collected data to learn the language structure, style and concepts. This is where the value to AI platforms is generated. When AI platforms enter a deal with news companies, this is what they are paying for.

The issue is at the scraping stage, where copyrighted works are taken to train datasets without consent. It is *not technically* necessary to scrape copyrighted content. Instead of scraping, AI companies can enter licensing agreements, use commissioned datasets, and acquire consent from users and owners of the data. This issue requires enforcing anti-trust law (competition law) as well as copyright reform.

There is currently limited compensation for the content AI platforms are using for both scraping and training. While almost 300 licensing agreements have been established internationally between AI companies and news outlets,²⁴ it is not expected that these types of deals will be significant money-makers.²⁵ Furthermore, current content agreements are lopsided in that smaller publishers are not included in discussions with AI companies and are not part of any financial negotiation. Interestingly, N&MRC analysis²⁶ shows that more than half of the top news organisations in Australia are blocking AI bots for training, retrieval and indexing.

Shortly after the roundtable, major media companies in the UK wrote an open letter urging publishers to join SPUR, the Standards for Publisher Usage Rights coalition. Their mission is to “establish shared technical standards and responsible licensing frameworks that ensure AI developers can access high quality, reliable journalism in legitimate, responsible and convenient ways, while guaranteeing that publishers retain practical control of their content and receive fair value when it is used.”²⁷

3 Must-carry type legislation

Another way of regulating undue market power is to require platforms to make news content prominent on their platforms and in their search results in a strategy called must-carry. The concept is that public interest journalism is discoverable and visible on digital platforms.²⁸

“ A question I get asked constantly is how do I find a good newspaper or who do you read? I don’t know who to trust ...
The first thing that comes up on the internet is now either social media or Google. ”

This type of must-carry rule has precedent in other industries such as television. For example, the Prominence Framework announced in January 2026 requires manufacturers of smart TVs, streaming sticks, and connected devices to ensure that Australian free-to-air broadcaster apps (e.g., ABC iView, SBS On Demand, 7plus, 9Now, 10Play) are pre-installed and prominently displayed on the home screen.

Internationally, there are some jurisdictions where specific types of content, including local content, news and culture, have a “must be discoverable” or “must not be discriminated against” as part of the strategy to protect local content.²⁹

²⁴ N&MRC’s unpublished analysis is available upon request.

²⁷ Open letter to global leaders across media. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/articles/2026/open-letter-spur>

²⁸ Eisenberg, J. (2024). *Finding a Way Forward for Australian News: An Examination of Local and International Regulatory Interventions*. Centre for Media Transition, University of Technology Sydney and International Institute of Communications Australian Chapter (IICA) <https://www.uts.edu.au/news/2024/11/finding-way-forward-australian-news-examination-local-and-international-regulatory-interventions>

²⁹ Eisenberg, J. (2024). *Finding a Way Forward for Australian News: An Examination of Local and International Regulatory Interventions*. Centre for Media Transition, University of Technology Sydney and International Institute of Communications Australian Chapter (IICA) <https://www.uts.edu.au/news/2024/11/finding-way-forward-australian-news-examination-local-and-international-regulatory-interventions>

While a slightly different method to include news, the Streaming Local Content Quotas legislation was passed in November 2025 requiring streaming services with over one million Australian subscribers to invest at least 10% of their total Australian program expenditure (or 7.5% of revenue) on new local content, including news-related documentaries and arts programming.

Researchers have concluded that must-carry legislation is not enough in itself but should be considered as part of a suite of strategies for digital platforms to support the sustainability of news.³⁰

News Bargaining Incentive

The News Bargaining Incentive (NBI), which is currently under consultation, was viewed as an opportunity for additional support for the news sector. As background, the NBI aims to encourage digital platforms to enter funding arrangements with news publishers as a way of counteracting a proposed levy on their profits: “Platforms that choose not to enter or renew commercial agreements with news publishers will pay the charge. Platforms with these agreements will, however, be able to offset their liability.”³¹

Nevertheless, concerns were raised about the NBI proposal such as who should be included as funders and who should be included as recipients. Suggestions for the NBI included:

- Including AI platforms in the NBI since generative AI is becoming an important source of news and information among the Australian public, and AI summaries are affecting the referral traffic to news websites.
- AI platforms are introducing advertising, which will increase competition.
- Ensuring a platform agnostic policy to include all types of digital platforms in the NBI.
- A need for a transparent system for the use of the charge if platforms elect to pay it instead of entering commercial deals with publishers.
- Ensuring that the funds are used for public interest journalism.
- Providing financial support to news organisations that have committed to a certain standards eligibility criterion would ensure the quality of news provided through the NBI.
- Establishment of an independent board to administer the management of the scheme, and receive and distribute the funds.
- Success measures to be clear and based on evidence to track the long-term impact of the legislation.

³⁰ Eisenberg, J. and Markus, T. (2026). Funding the Way Forward for Australian News: A Review of Local and International Funding Distribution Mechanisms. Centre for Media Transition, University of Technology Sydney, Australia. Doi. org/10.71741/4pyxmbn jaq.31260499

³¹ <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/stephen-jones-2022/media-releases/albanese-government-establish-news-bargaining-incentive>

Sustainable methods of funding

While not everyone agrees on who should be paying, there was consensus that funding to support the sector needs to be longer term, and one-off grants are not effective.

An alternative solution that was proposed is a tax offset scheme for journalists' salaries. A tax offset, sometimes called a 'tax rebate' or a 'tax credit', is a reduction in the amount of tax owed after taxable income has been calculated. Some tax offsets are 'refundable', meaning if the offset amount exceeds the tax owed, the difference is refunded by the Australian Tax Office. Refundable offsets are used when governments wish to provide broad support, say for an entire industry, as the refund on eligible expenditure occurs regardless of whether the applicant is profitable (and therefore has a tax bill to pay) or not. This scheme would assist the industry overall but would particularly benefit smaller and local news organisations that may not have large tax bills because they are not very or not at all profitable. This approach works in Australia's screen and gaming industries, and a similar scheme could be applied to the news industry. According to N&MRC's estimates³² based on journalists' workforce data from Census 2021, the approximate cost for different levels of offset would be:

Offset %	Estimated annual amount
10% offset	\$71,888,999
20% offset	\$143,777,998
30% offset	\$215,666,997

There are other types of consumer-side subsidy or tax levers that reduces the cost for individuals to purchase news subscriptions. This can take the form of a tax return for news subscription payments, reduced GST on news products or vouchers for eligible subscribers. To enable tax return schemes, allowing news organisations to have a deductible gift recipient status (DGR) is a necessary condition. This will assist audiences who are currently unable to pay for news behind paywalls. The percentage of Australians paying for online news has stagnated in the past few years³³ mainly due to the affordability.

In addition to tax levers, other longer term support mechanisms were suggested including:

- Funding for the following initiatives: helping news organisations learn from others, examples of new ways to monetise their content, reaching consumers where they are now, new distribution channels.
- Mandating a portion of government spending on their annual advertising expenditure to be spent on news outlets.
- Ensuring a clear and feasible definition of news and journalism, so access to funding support can be expanded to cover news providers that may not have been included in previous schemes.

For any of these government-driven support mechanisms to work, however, the success measures must be clear, must be evidence-based and must be administered with full transparency.

³² N&MRC's unpublished report can be accessed upon request.

³³ Park, S., Fisher, C., McGuinness, K., Lee, J., Fujita, M., Haw, A., McCallum, K., & Nardi, G. (2025). *Digital News Report: Australia 2025*. Canberra: News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. 10.60836/md4e-k570

Supporting local news

The discussion had about local news can be considered a microcosm of the general discussion. Considerations around supporting local news ranged from tax levers to education to diversity to innovation to employment issues.

Generally, attendees favoured indirect funding from the government rather than direct funding such as grants. However, there are special cases where direct funding is still useful. For example, supporting regional journalism and community-led news outlets is critical for a healthy news ecosystem in areas where the market cannot support sustainable local news outlets.

Suggestions such as the tax incentives/levers noted above would work for these outlets but there was recognition that independent news outlets that provide valuable community information and that also needs to be supported. Subsidised or discounted access to syndicated national/international news would be helpful, as would supporting journalists to be embedded in the community.

Suggestions to support local news included:

- Incentivise people to work in the regions in a similar way to teachers and doctors. This could be a top-up of salary, for example.
- Connect with and use community leaders and their networks and work with influencers to engage with audiences.
- Support innovative ways to reach audiences where they are.
- Cross-sector collaboration with, for example, community radio.
- Provide incentives to ensure all communities are served by news, including regional and cultural groups.

“ *How do you grow an audience in a sector that’s increasingly competitive and quite fragmented? It’s just a big question ... but it’s about innovating and finding new ways to reach them.* ”

Professional standards

A journalist publishes information, analysis, commentary, or opinion with professional standards of codes of practice. They were mostly hired by news organisations that have explicit standards as well as a transparent complaints process. However, emerging actors in an online environment, including creators, influencers and personalities, as well as digital-only news outlets, often fulfill the function of traditional journalists. More importantly, audiences increasingly rely on these emerging actors for trustworthy news. There is, though, a wide range of actors providing all sorts of information and opinion, with a varied degree in quality.

The attendees acknowledged the important contribution of these emerging actors, particularly for audiences who are light or non-users of mainstream news such as young women, culturally and linguistically diverse audiences and other segments of the population that are typically under-served by mainstream media. To encourage a pluralistic and diverse news ecosystem, the sector needs to embrace these new actors but ensure that a level of quality is assured.

Currently the Australian Press Council is the industry body responsible for investigating complaints about Australian newspapers and magazines along with their associated digital outlets. It is funded by news owners and membership is voluntary. While complaints can be made against any of these, if an outlet is not a Press Council “Constituent Body”,³⁴ that outlet does not need to comply with any ruling. The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA), the union that represents journalists, can investigate individuals for breaching the Journalist Code of Ethics but only its members and not all journalists are members. ACMA regulates broadcasting, radiocommunications, the internet and telecommunications and is responsible for content within the guidelines of both community expectations and codes of practice developed by industry groups.³⁵

Many attendees suggested that either a reform of the Press Council or a new industry-wide body that can set standards for a code of practice that any journalist, freelancer, content creator and independent news organisation can sign up for is needed.

³⁴ A “constituent body” of the Australian Press council provides funding for the Council

³⁵ <https://www.acma.gov.au/broadcasting-industry-codes-practice>

Media and AI literacy education

The need for effective media and AI literacy education in light of the rapid adoption of new technologies such as generative AI was raised throughout the day, in all of the discussions. However, it was also pointed out that the need for media literacy education must be clearly articulated to audiences. In contrast to all other interventions that are suggested in this report, media literacy education can be immediately implemented, and has a long-term impact, with relatively low costs.

Strengthening critical thinking education in schools as well as integrating AI and media literacy in school curricula are urgent priorities. It is also important to expand media literacy training initiatives nationally and offer adults the opportunity to learn and upskill. The needs go beyond skills-based training and research has shown that, rather than a once-off, this training must be regularly conducted.³⁶

“ *Need more effective media literacy education. So young people obviously they’re important. But also research suggests that our older people are equally needy. I think it’s required more for older people because they’re just so gullible on this stuff.* ”

Participants emphasised the need for:

- Motivating and empowering citizens to question the source and engage in fact-checking.
- Creator and influencer education and ethical training.
- Public-facing education on AI.
- National media and AI literacy programs that also include upskilling and ongoing training.

It was also pointed out that media and AI literacy is only one plank in an overarching strategy, and the onus for understanding the news, and the value of news, should not be on citizens alone. If the value of public interest journalism can be linked to the public good, that would also help. This strategy should be part of any media literacy training.

³⁶Park, S., Fulton, J., Howden, S. & Warburton, C. (2026). *Combating misinformation through media literacy*. Unpublished report.

RESEARCH GAPS

Evidence and data are needed to develop and implement policy measures and future initiatives. Identifying the research gaps was not a component of the roundtable. Nevertheless, many gaps were revealed through the discussions. The following is a short summary of the suggestions.

What is news and journalism?

Everyone agreed that supporting the news industry to ensure all Australians have access to high quality and trustworthy news is an urgent issue. However, in order to adequately support news producers who create quality news, we need to agree upon what news is and who is producing it.

Research has shown that news and journalism are difficult to define and audiences' definition of news is evolving. Longstanding journalistic professionalism assumes that a journalist's role is to provide what people need to know, even if they are not interested in it. This is often what is meant by quality news, where the quality is determined by professional judgement rather than audience input and there are many similar concepts – core news, civic journalism, watchdog journalism, public interest journalism. Public interest journalism, which was discussed extensively throughout the day, has been defined as: “news that informs the community. It is the accurate, reliable journalism that lies at the heart of public discussion, diversity of voice, open justice, accountability and informed decision-making.”³⁷ But audience views on news and journalism have radically changed in the digital environment. Audiences' preferences may be different to those of traditional journalism³⁸ and is a perspective that should also be included in future research.

³⁷ <https://piji.com.au/faq/>

³⁸ Fisher, C., Park, S., Fulton, J., Dulleck, U., & Flew, T. (2025). What is news in a high-choice media environment? An adapted boundary framework for audience definitions of news. *Media International Australia*, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X251322980>

Eligibility criteria have been questioned for various support schemes, and getting the definition right is important for many reasons including:

- To have consistent eligibility criteria for grant or subsidy schemes.
- Collecting baseline data to measure the impact of programs.
- Ensuring emerging actors – such as creators, influencers, and personalities that produce and deliver quality news – are recognised and differentiated from non-journalistic actors.

As noted by attendees, and mentioned above, ACMA has a published definition that can be used as a baseline for further research. One other suggestion for a definition is that journalism is information produced in line with a code of ethics, or accountable to a code of ethics or code of conduct. This definition can cover traditional news providers, emerging news actors and influencers/content creators.

Platform-specific audience behaviour and experience with AI news

This area of audience behaviour is largely unknown. Fragmentation of audiences due to an explosion of options in content and platforms is a common problem that publishers have experienced as digital news consumption continues to diversify. However, there is a lack of insight into platform-specific characteristics of audiences, including who they are, their interests, how they engage with content, their expectations and cultural norms. Research and a comprehensive mapping of audiences by platform is needed to allow news organisations the opportunity for more granular segmentation of the market and more effective reach.

Similarly, the discussions have highlighted that there is a limited understanding of audiences' experiences with AI-generated or assisted news. More research on the technological, psychological, social, and cultural drivers, and impact of engagement with AI news is needed to better inform future policy, e-safety interventions and media and, AI literacy initiatives.

The value of news to emerging digital platforms

The power imbalance between news organisations and major digital platforms is well established. In social media and search, this stems largely from the platforms' dominance in the advertising market, where they compete with news outlets and other websites for the same audiences. Their vast behavioural data advantage allows them to capture and hold user attention in ways competitors cannot match.³⁹

This asymmetry makes it difficult to determine the true value of news content to these platforms, underscoring the need for a regulatory framework that ensures fair valuation and compensation.

In the absence of such regulation, new players with different business models—particularly generative AI platforms—are rapidly emerging. Currently, the value of publishers to AI platforms has three components: (1) supplying archives used to train models, (2) having their content scraped for ongoing use, and (3) generating consumer demand for trusted information. According to the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, 292 deals have been made between 261 news outlets and 14 AI companies across six countries, yet only 18% of these are licensing agreements. Despite the surge in AI-related partnerships, revenue potential remains limited: only one in five global digital leaders expects AI deals to become a significant income source in the near future.⁴⁰

³⁹ Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. (2019). *Digital platforms inquiry: Final report*. <https://www.accc.gov.au/about-us/publications/digital-platforms-inquiry-final-report>

⁴⁰ Newman, N. (2026). *Journalism, media, and technology trends and predictions 2026*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

APPENDIX: ROUNDTABLE PROGRAM

Thursday 19 February 2026

Ann Harding Conference Centre, University of Canberra

Arrival	8:15	Registration and light breakfast
Opening	9:00	Event opening MC: Virginia Haussegger AM, Adjunct Professor, N&MRC, UC
	9:05	Opening remarks and welcome Professor Bill Shorten, Vice Chancellor, UC
	9:20	Introduction Professor Sora Park, Director, N&MRC, UC
Session 1	9:30	How can we ensure all Australians have access to high quality public interest journalism? Insights from N&MRC research Dr. Kieran McGuinness, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, N&MRC, UC Dr. Momoko Fujita, Senior Lecturer, N&MRC, UC
Break	10:30	
Session 2	11:00	Introduction to Session 2
		Group 1: Improving engagement and trust among Australians Facilitator: Michelle Ainsworth PSM, Adjunct Professor, N&MRC, UC
		Group 2: Challenges and responses to AI in journalism Facilitator: David Nolan, Associate Professor, N&MRC, UC
		Groups 3 & 4: Sustainability of public interest journalism Facilitator: Megan Brownlow, Principal, Hosten Consulting
		Group 4: Power imbalance between digital platforms and news organisations Facilitator: Saffron Howden, PhD Candidate, N&MRC, UC
	12:20	Synthesis and priorities - Implications for research and policy Facilitator: Virginia Haussegger AM
Close	12:50	Closing remarks Professor Julian Knowles, Executive Dean, Faculty of Arts & Design
Lunch	13:00	



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