

Facebook and the News Media:

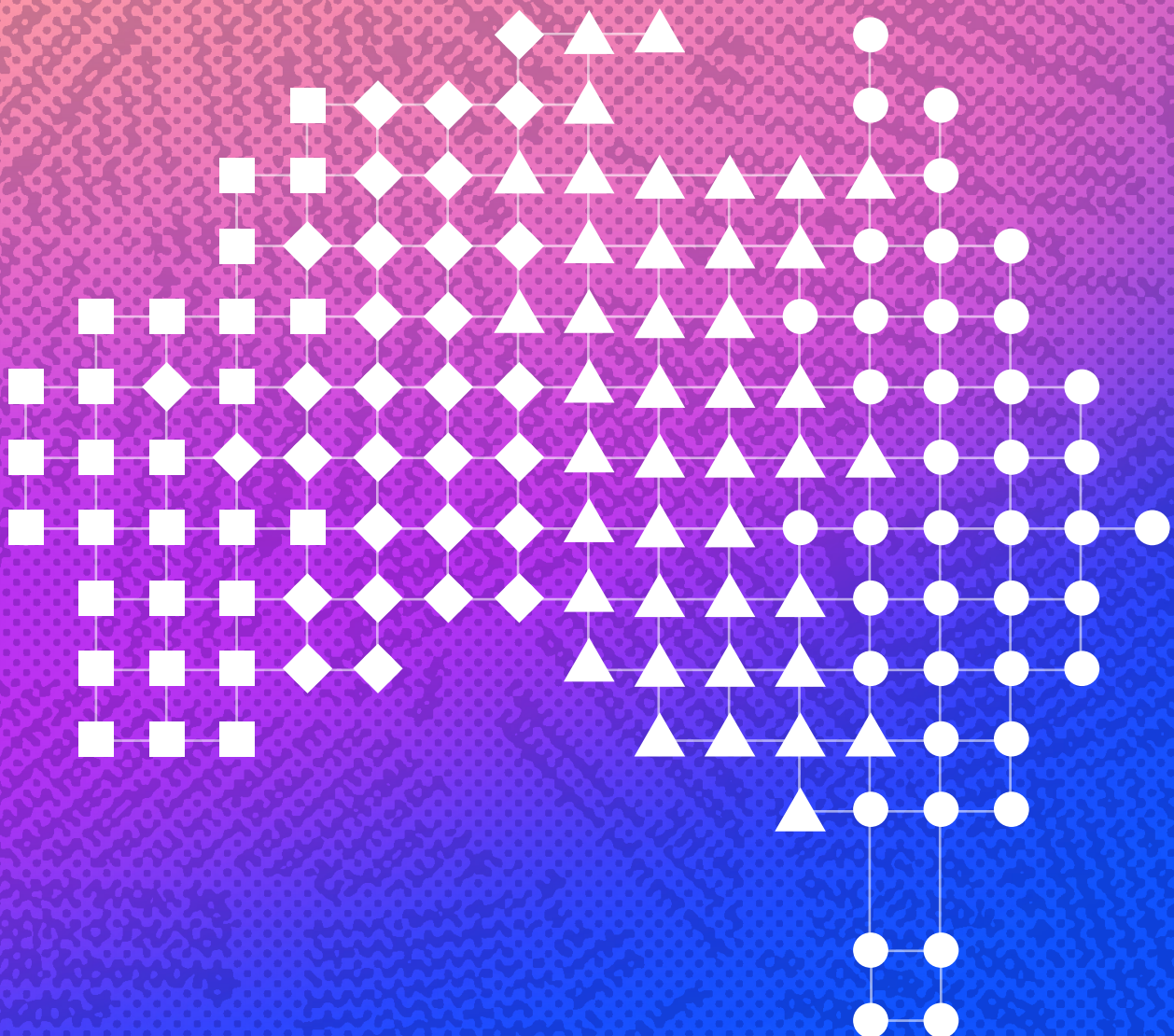
How Australians Engage with News and Misinformation Online

RESEARCHED AND WRITTEN BY

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with **Ms Phoebe Hayman**

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The report reflects the findings of the authors. The authors are responsible for any omissions or errors.

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As Pākēhā scholars in Aotearoa New Zealand, we also acknowledge a steadfast commitment to honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi and its principles.

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Executive Summary



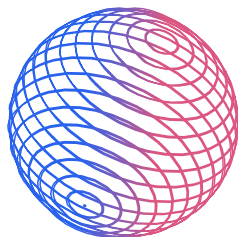
Facebook and the News Media: How Australians Engage with News and Misinformation Online is a timely research report exploring the evolving relationship between Australian news organisations, social media (Facebook) and online audiences. Almost 20 years after Facebook was launched internationally in 2006, following its inception at Harvard University in 2004, this study analyses more than three million posts from 25 Australian news publishers to gain insights into how news content is distributed, how audiences engage with news topics, and the nature of misinformation and disinformation spread—focusing on case studies related to health, election integrity, and extreme weather events.

This Australia-first study draws on 15 years of news data, leveraging the newly established Meta Content Library (MCL) to provide unprecedented insights into how public content is shared across Facebook. We acknowledge the support of Meta and the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan for facilitating access to this valuable new resource.

Facebook and the News Media uncovers key insights and emerging trends shaping Australia's media landscape, including:

The Global Information Ecosystem

This report highlights the deeply interconnected nature of the global information landscape, where misinformation topics originating in one country—such as election denialism from the United States—can spread and influence public discourse elsewhere. Further, the fluid exchange of information across professional journalism and social media platforms can also enable misinformation to transcend traditional and digital public spheres, both playing a role in shaping public debate around political and social events.



Social Media's Role in News Distribution

News organisations are increasingly dependent on social media platforms, particularly Meta's Facebook, to expand their reach. This report tracks a 15-year rise in news content shared on Facebook, highlighting a fundamental shift in how Australians consume news. As social media becomes a primary channel for information dissemination, this trend aligns with broader research on the evolving media landscape.



The Role of Elites in Spreading Misinformation (and Countering It)

Public figures, particularly politicians, play a key role in spreading misinformation. The data shows that misleading statements from elites are readily picked up and amplified by the public. While mitigation measures such as fact-checking and Meta's efforts to limit the spread of false content can curb misinformation, political figures are largely exempt from these policies. This highlights the critical responsibility of political elites to communicate truthfully and avoid fuelling misinformation.



The Need for Responsible News Reporting

The findings underscore the vital role of professional journalists and media organisations in reporting daily events and informing the public online. As audiences increasingly rely on social media for news, the media's responsibility to signal credible information and counter misinformation is critical to limiting its spread.



The Role of Social Media in Limiting Misinformation Spread

In the years canvassed during this study, Meta, Facebook's parent company, has employed a multi-faceted approach of 'remove, reduce, and inform' to counter misinformation, particularly during Australian elections. At the time of writing, it collaborates with third-party fact-checking organisations operating in Australia like AFP and AAP to review content, applying warning labels to limit the reach of debunked posts. Meta removes content that violates its Community Standards, which outline what is and isn't allowed on platforms like Instagram, Threads, Facebook, and Messenger. It also provides policy education programs to curb misinformation spread.



Among the most harmful misinformation is content that could incite violence or interfere with voting. It works with the Australian Electoral Commission to promote verified election information. To counter AI-generated misinformation, Meta labels AI-created content and down-ranks misleading material. Additionally, it enforces transparency rules for political ads, monitors for foreign interference, and removes coordinated inauthentic behaviour to safeguard electoral integrity.

Real-World Consequences of Misinformation

Misinformation, particularly health-related misinformation has significant real-world consequences, affecting public health responses and individuals' behaviours. The data in the report points to the effects of COVID-19 misinformation on public health outcomes but also shows other less tangible harms that can occur such as reduced public trust.



Cyclical Nature of Misinformation

The data demonstrates how misinformation can be somewhat predictable with some themes appearing around electoral misinformation in cyclical patterns during election campaigns. The recurring nature of certain misinformation highlights the importance of continuous monitoring to identify and address emerging misinformation and disinformation.



The 'Stickiness' of Misinformation

Although misinformation constitutes a small fraction of the overall content shared online, it is often more 'sticky'—meaning it is more likely to be shared and amplified than other types of content. This characteristic makes misinformation more persistent and harder to mitigate, even after fact checking, as some people will continue to share falsehoods even knowing that they are untrue.



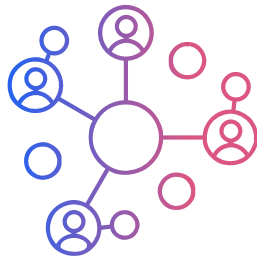
Executive Summary

The report emphasises the global nature of the information environment and the significant role played by political elites, mainstream media, and social media in shaping public discourse. It also underscores the need for collaborative efforts to manage and mitigate the spread of misinformation with governments, civil society leaders, journalists and academics. Addressing misinformation and disinformation is a multifaceted challenge that requires ongoing vigilance and collaborative action from all sectors of society. In addressing these challenges and to better understand the dynamics of the information ecosystem, access to social media and news data is essential for researchers. For these reasons we make two key recommendations:

RECOMMENDATION:

A Collective Approach to Reducing Misinformation

Tackling misinformation requires a collective effort involving multiple stakeholders: media organisations, political elites, civil society actors, academia, and technology companies. This whole-of-society approach is essential for reducing the prevalence and impact of misinformation and disinformation.



RECOMMENDATION:

Strengthening the Meta Content Library

The use of the Meta Content Library to trace news stories and misinformation provides early evidence of its benefits to researchers as a valuable tool to gain a broader and deeper understanding of the information landscape. By providing comprehensive social media data that incorporates news stories and user engagement, it allows for better analysis, testing of assumptions, and greater insights into how misinformation spreads online. Indeed, as our second case study demonstrates, academics without access to data and knowledge of social media platforms' processes run the risk of themselves amplifying or exaggerating the risk of specific examples of misinformation.



Introduction

As we move deeper into the 21st century, the relationship between news media, digital platforms, and how Australians consume information is changing. This report examines these relationships, focusing specifically on how major Australian news organisations use Meta's platform, Facebook, and analyses audience consumption patterns, offering a timely insight into how Australians engage with both news content and misinformation online.

In producing this Australian-first study, we acknowledge the ongoing debate over definitions of *misinformation*, *disinformation* and *malinformation* (see Wardle, 2020), which present a challenge in developing effective policies to address these issues. For the purposes of this report, we adopt the following definitions (for details, see Gibbons and Carson, 2022; Wardle, 2020):

- **'Misinformation'** refers to inaccurate or misleading content shared without the intent to cause harm, though it may still have negative or harmful consequences.
- **'Disinformation'** refers to deliberately misleading or deceptive content spread with the intent to cause harm, manipulate public perception, or achieve personal or political gain.
- **'Malinformation'** refers to true information that is shared with an intent to cause harm such as damage to reputation.

Where the intent behind the spread of falsehoods is unclear, or a broad term for falsehoods will suffice, we use the term misinformation. This report takes an exploratory approach, leveraging the new Meta Content Library. Access to the MLC enabled us to provide deeper insights into how Australia's major news outlets utilise the country's most popular social media platform (Facebook) to distribute news and expand mainstream media's online reach. Facebook is an obvious choice for a study of this nature given it is the most used social media site by Australians. According to Correll (2025) from January 2025 approximately 19 million Australians actively use Facebook, representing about 70 per cent of the nation's population making it the most used platform in Australia, just ahead of YouTube (18.5 million users).

The research is guided by three research questions:

- How has the quantity and variety of professional news stories on Facebook evolved over time?
- In what ways do Australians engage with news and misinformation on Facebook?
- What insights can be gained from tracking the spread of misinformation online?

In addressing these research questions, we firstly acknowledge that identifying and tracking misinformation online is highly challenging, especially given the contested definitions of the terms, as discussed. Further, some misinformation that may have appeared on Facebook may have been removed, or its reach limited if, for example, it was identified as violating Meta's Community Standards, before our analysis was undertaken. These standards govern content on Facebook and other Meta platforms, addressing issues such as misinformation, hate speech, violence, and harmful content. According to Meta:

Community Standards are in place for the most serious kinds of violations, including misinformation on Facebook, Instagram, and Threads. This includes content that could contribute to imminent violence or physical harm, or that attempts to interfere with voting. If we find content that violates these policies, it will be removed. (Seeto, 2025)

In other words, it is impossible to measure what we cannot find. As a result, systematically tracking misinformation and disinformation spread is not feasible for this project, so we instead provide a detailed study of four misinformation case studies covering topics of election integrity, health information and politics, to inform this part of our report.

Background

As quality information is integral to a well-functioning democracy to inform public debate and shape opinion – and surveys consistently show most Australians get their information about news events online (Newman et al., 2024) – this is a timely study to understand how news organisations use digital platforms to reach broad online audiences in the digital age. To provide broader context, shifts in Australian media policy, such as the introduction of the News Media Bargaining Code (see below) in the past four years have influenced the relationship between digital platforms and Australian news media.

This study was undertaken in late 2024 and early 2025 against the backdrop of key media policy debates and changes. These included: speculation about the future of Australia's News Media Bargaining Code (NMBC); commentary on Meta's commitment to hosting news content, and the Australian Government's proposal for a Media Bargaining Incentive (MBI) levy on large digital platforms that opt out of the NMBC. The MBI's policy development was subsequently paused amid trade negotiations with the United States of America over proposed tariffs on Australian goods.

Our task was two-fold. First, we sought to investigate Australian news production on Facebook. Second, we explored the presence of misinformation in the public comments section of Australian Facebook users to gauge prevalence and public engagement with misinformation and disinformation. Both tasks provide the foundation for informed discussion over the potential consequences of any further changes to media policy regarding Australian news content on Facebook.

The report contributes unprecedented insights into Australian news content on Facebook and the presence—and absence—of misinformation among Facebook user comments. From an academic perspective, the results offer important theoretical and empirical developments in the study of media and communications such as concepts of platform dependency, echo chamber theory and the public sphere. From Meta's perspective, the results are instructive given the platform's expressed commitments on misinformation mitigation ahead of Australia's 2025 federal election (Meta, 2025).

Definitions

The News Media Bargaining Code

The NMBC is an Australian law enacted in 2021 that mandates large digital platforms, namely Google and Facebook, negotiate payment agreements with news publishers for displaying or linking to their news content on their platforms. The law followed the 2019 recommendations of an Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) inquiry into digital platforms. The idea of a NMBC was one of several recommendations from the inquiry to the federal government. The federal government's expressed policy intent was to strengthen public interest journalism by addressing the power imbalance between digital platforms and traditional media identified by the ACCC report, to ensure that news organisations received adequate compensation for their news content appearing on platforms. Before the law was enacted, Facebook temporarily removed news from its platform during intense negotiations with the Australian government over the Code's design. Unlike Canada's Online News Act (C18), which was modelled on Australia's NMBC but resulted in a permanent news blackout on Facebook in Canada, news access in Australia was restored within days after amendments were made to the law. The NMBC enactment led to a series of voluntary deals between platforms and media organisations in 2021 with an estimated \$200 million flowing from the platforms to media outlets. As of the time of writing, the federal Treasurer's designation powers, which compel companies to negotiate, have not been enacted. Instead, the agreements reached were driven by the threat of designation rather than its actual implementation. However, after the first tranche of deals expired in 2024, Meta has not renewed the media agreements and, without any designation, is not legally compelled to do so.

Media Bargaining Incentive levy

In late 2024, the Australian government took a different approach to designation and proposed the **News Bargaining Incentive**. It was to be a levy on large digital platforms designed to contribute to the sustainability of news and journalism in Australia. Major technology companies, such as Meta, Alphabet (Google), and ByteDance (TikTok) were to be charged an annual levy that could be offset by participating in the NMBC, thereby encouraging these platforms to negotiate or renew commercial deals with Australian news organisations (McGuirk, 2024).

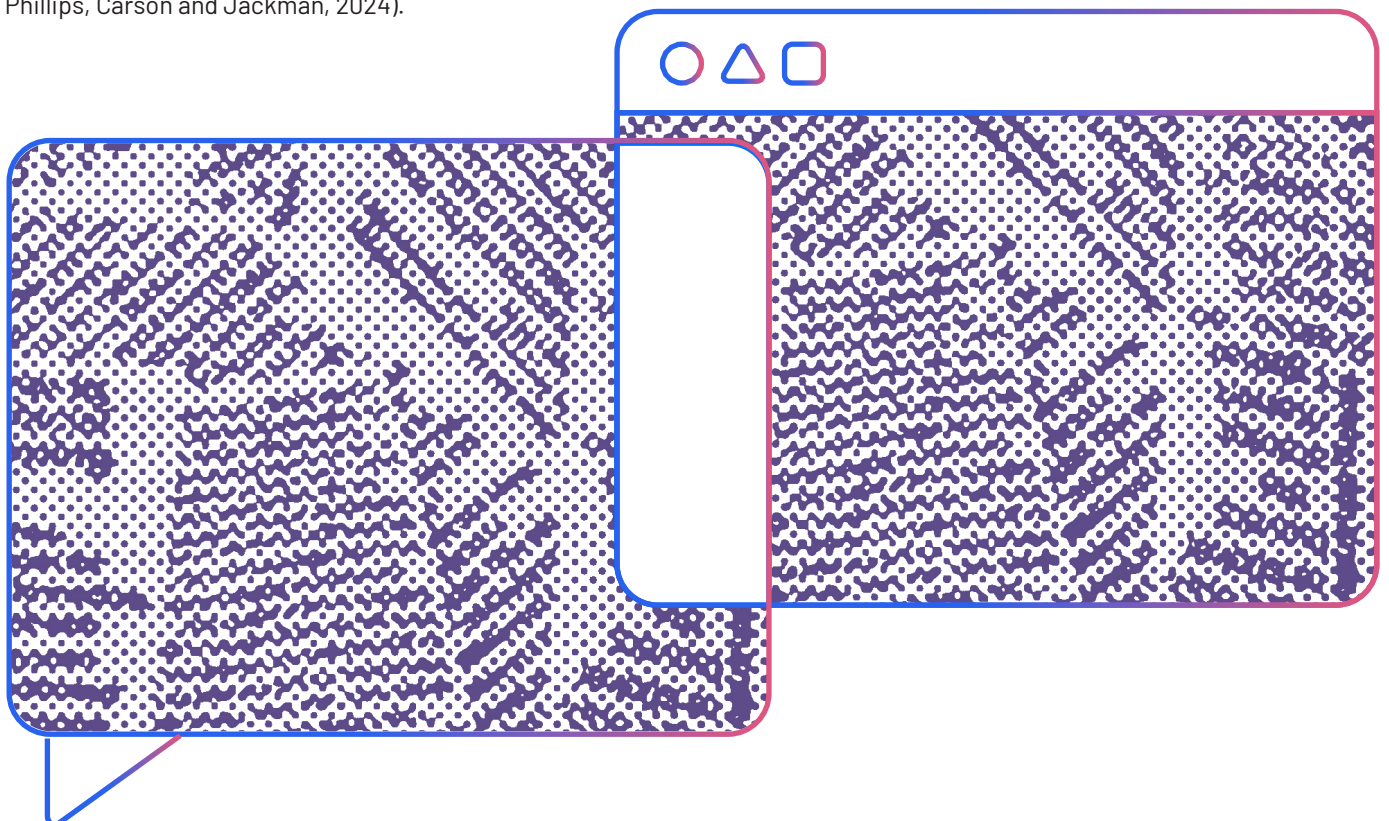
However, the implementation of the levy is paused at the time of writing due in part to the 2025 federal election and concerns that its introduction will hamper sensitive tariff negotiations with the United States, where most of the major tech companies are domiciled.

Method

For this project we draw data from Meta’s new Content Library and its API. The MCL represents Meta’s newest researcher access tool to examine publicly posted content on its platforms (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, and Threads). Researchers looking to use the MCL and the API must apply to the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan—a process we discuss more extensively later. In our case, the MCL allows researchers to investigate public content coming from Facebook posts and comments.

To examine this content, we deploy state-of-the-art topic modelling. For those less technically interested, essentially the model leverages large language models and machine learning algorithms to categorise sentences into distinct topics. For those more interested in the technical details, the process (i.e. a refined version of BERTopic: Grootendorst, 2022) involves embedding unique sentences (from posts and comments) using a large language model (LLM), which is then passed to several machine learning algorithms for dimensional reduction (via UMAP and TSNE) and clustering (via HDBSCAN). A more extensive discussion of this process is offered in our work elsewhere (e.g. Phillips, Carson and Jackman, 2024).

Meta offers two levels of access for us to implement this method. The MCL, for example, allows us to extract all public posts from pages with more than 15 thousand followers—a smaller limit of 1 thousand followers is on offer just for investigatory purposes. The API, however, offers much more impressive granular capabilities (e.g. examining individual public Facebook comments), but this requires not only access to a cleanroom environment housed by the Social Media Archive at ICPSR (SOMAR), but also explicit approval from ICPSR for any material removed from the cleanroom—again something discussed below. For the analysis to come we deploy the exact same topic modelling procedure, using essentially the same code, done in and outside of the cleanroom where necessary. Details of how we investigate misinformation presence on Facebook and social media user engagement are offered further in the case studies section of the findings below.



Findings

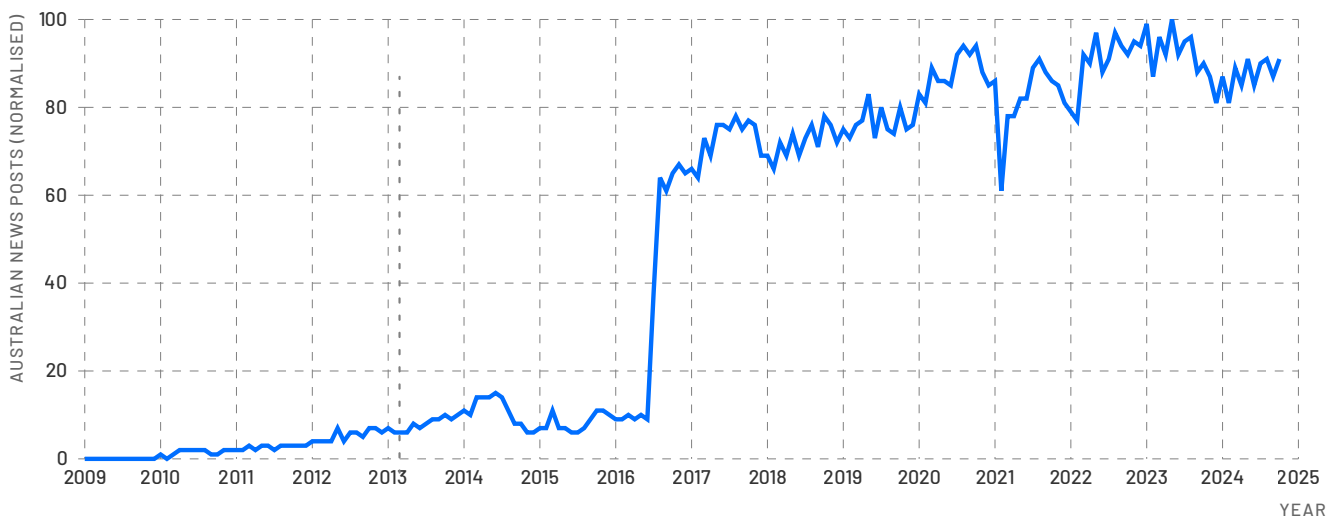
Our first goal was to ascertain a clear picture over time of how much and what Australian news outlets publish on Facebook. To do so, we relied on a list of 25 major Australian news media outlets, found in our previous work (Carson and Jackman, 2023; full list in Appendix A), and examined via the Meta Content Library.

Australian news content and the 2016 bump

Figure 1 shows the frequency of total content published from these Australian news organisations across the last fifteen years. The figure suggests that Australian news outlets are producing more content to share on Facebook over recent years than (essentially) at any point prior. While Facebook's news feed algorithm introduces certain caveats, the data suggests that Australians following major news pages are likely consuming more news than ever before off the Facebook platform. More notably, the figure indicates a decisive shift in Australian news production around mid-2016, which we refer to as the '2016 bump.'

Such a jump has perhaps two explanations: Either a great deal of missing data exists from our MCL search, or the figure points to a considerable change in the frequency of Australian news outlets' content production. Our examination of the data and conversations with industry figures suggests the latter: namely that the publishing behaviour of Australian news publishers in mid-2016 appears to change across the board and may be attributed to Facebook policies that incentivised news outlets to publish on their sites.

Figure 1: Australian news outlet posts on Facebook (2009-2025)



Source: Authors via MCL; n ~ 3 million posts from 25 Australian news publishers on Facebook

Findings > Australian news content and the 2016 bump

The data used in this report is based on Meta's Content Library, we acknowledge this may be incomplete when compared to the platform directly. For this reason the data shown here might not reflect the full picture nor all news stories that were posted on the platform.

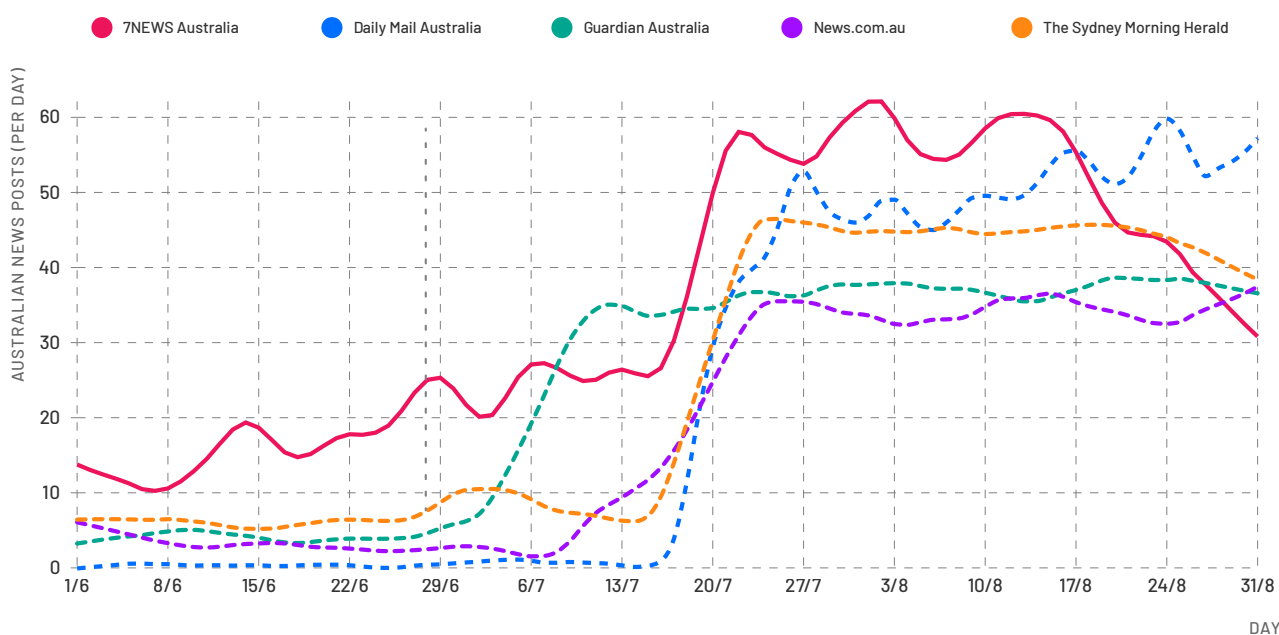
Nonetheless, we see a decisive change in 2016 and thus tested to understand if it was systemic. To do this, we extracted a sample of nearly 50 thousand posts from our top Australian news publishers lists between May and September 2016 for further examination. Figure 2 shows this 'mid-2016 slice', highlighting the posting frequency of the top five news content publishers. As the figure indicates, news posts from all five media outlets increase substantially (150 per cent in some cases) between late June and early to middle July 2016. Among Australia's major national news outlets, *Guardian Australia* (green) leads this spike with News Corp's (Rupert Murdoch-owned) *News.com.au* (purple) and 7NEWS Australia (red) following, along with the Australian version of the global news outfit, *Daily Mail Australia* (blue) and the Nine Entertainment-owned *Sydney Morning Herald* (orange).

With major global news events such as Brexit, the 2016 US Presidential campaign, and the Rio Summer Olympics occurring during this time, it seemed reasonable to assume

that such a jump might come from persistent coverage of big news stories. To investigate this potential explanation more fully, we produced a topic model of this 2016 news slice.

For those interested in the technical details of our topic modelling, please see our work elsewhere (e.g. Phillips, Carson, and Jackman, 2024). We found 73 topics best explain the spread of (sentence-level) discussion among these Australian news posts in 2016. These were then grouped into broader news genres (see Figure 3) following the categories of similar studies such as the *An Unfinished Story: Understanding Gender Bias in Australian Newsrooms* (Carson et al., 2024). While the Brexit referendum, the Clinton vs. Trump election campaign, and the Rio Olympics were unsurprisingly present in the model, they represented blips in overall news coverage during 2016. Instead, more generic Australian sports coverage (e.g. NRL, football, tennis, etc.) food, and crime reporting represented the biggest topics. More importantly, three-quarters of the topics identified by the 2016 model experienced a moderate increase in frequency during this period, with many maintaining or further increasing their prevalence over time. In other words, no single story prompted the 2016 bump, suggesting a more systemic shift in news outlets posting news to Facebook.

Figure 2: the mid-2016 Australian news bump



Source: Authors via MCL; n = 11,603 posts from the top 5 news publishers in 2016 represented as a locally estimated scatter smoothing curve (LOESS).

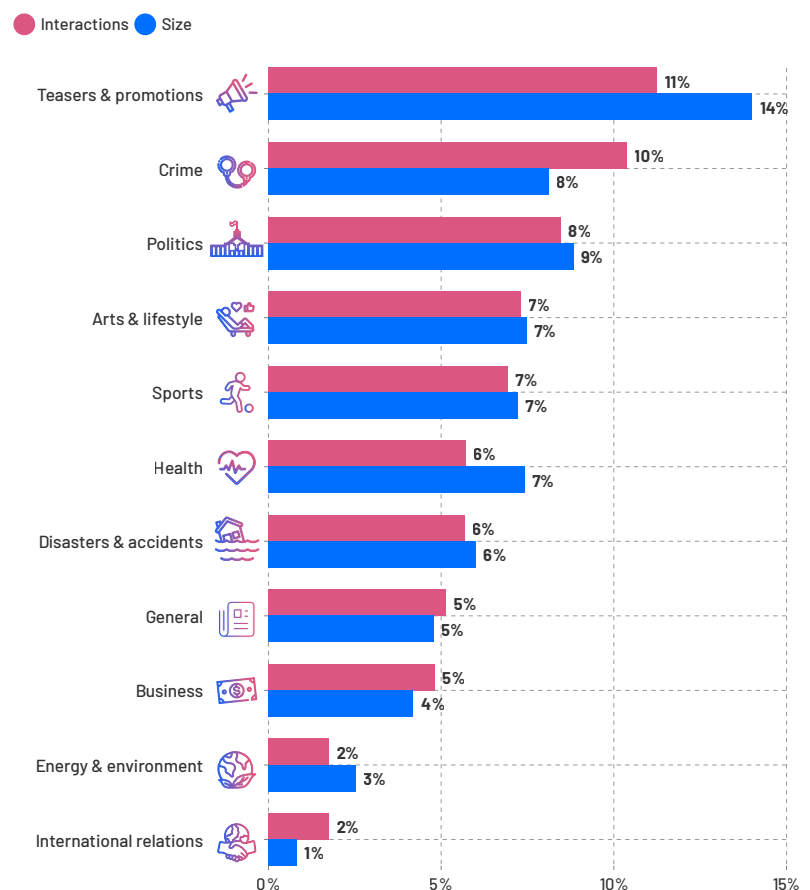
The 2016 bump is most likely not a result of mass missing data from MCL, neither from a single news media outlets' intense production of content, nor from a single-story dominating coverage.

In our estimation, the results suggest that the overall behaviour of Australian news publishers changed substantially over a small period in mid-2016. After further investigation including talks with industry figures and review of the literature, we believe this can be attributed to changes to Facebook's relationship with news publishers and the introduction of its 'Instant Articles' product for all news publishers in April 2016 designed to help publishers monetise their content. Also in 2016, Facebook Live was introduced, providing an affordable tool for broadcasting live video and reaching large audiences on the platform. While the Facebook algorithm was altered in June 2016 to deprioritise news and boost posts from friends and family, it did not deter news outlets from trying harder to be shared in users' friends and family feeds (Patel, 2016) or through sponsored (paid) content. From 2016 through to the pandemic, Facebook provided direct financial support and programs to many Australian news outlets providing further incentive for news outlets to publish on the platform. The year 2016 was also a time of global audience growth for Facebook with 80 per cent of Americans online using the platform, up seven per cent on 2015 (Newman et al., 2016). News organisations recognised Facebook as the most popular social media site not just in American but also Australia, with mobile access to the platform also on the rise. With more than 11 million Facebook users, over half of Australians (52%) reported using online and social media as a news source during this time (Watkins et al., 2016). Digital only news outlets such as *BuzzFeed* focused heavily on distributing news through social media channels and gained significant ground over competitors in 2016, including its first reporter in the Canberra press Gallery (Watkins et al., 2016). But, as history has shown, it was not to last with subsequent algorithm changes working

against *BuzzFeed's* narrowly focused distribution model and the digital-only news site closing its Australian news division in 2020 (Carson and Muller, 2024).

As political communication scholars such a structural change in news distribution is important to document for a variety of theoretical reasons such as the theory of platform dependence (see Carson and Muller, 2024; Meese and Hurcombe, 2021). Empirically, the results provide evidence of the online news bump, as identified by scholars from our field, (Newman et al., 2016) but not systematically recorded in Australia, until now.

Figure 3:
Thematic grouping of 2016 (slice) topic model results



Source: Authors via MCL; n = 28,930 posts from 25 Australian news publishers.

Notes: Interactions represents the percentage of total likes, reactions, shares, and comments each topic received as reported by MCL; Size is represented as a percentage of all topics. Percentages include noise topic, meaning they will not sum to 100%.

Australia's news content over four months in 2024

To better understand the contemporary news diet of Australians, and the use of Facebook by news outlets to reach audiences, we put together a topic model of four months of content from Australian news publishers in 2024 (i.e. ~ 98k posts). The model indicates 75 topics best explain the spread of sentences across all news producer posts during this period. Using a thematic model derived from our previous work (i.e. Carson and Jackman, 2023), we organised the topics into 11 broad 'news' categories—as described above. Figure 4 visualises the size of those categories during this four month stretch, and the percentage of total interactions for each news genre or category.

As our analysis indicates, *Arts & lifestyle* coverage predominates. Spread over 13 topics ranging from celebrity gossip, entertainment, and art (among others), the theme fixates on both the domestic and international contexts—as the following representative posts demonstrate:

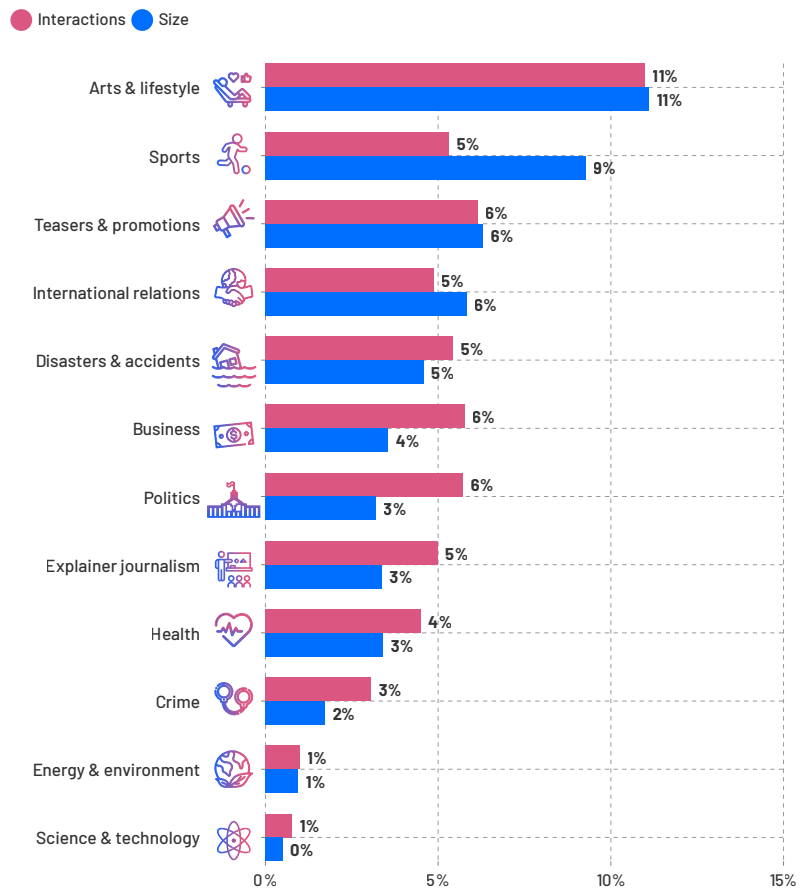
“Perth-bred pop icon Troye Sivan cleaned up big awards like Album of the Year, Best Solo Artist, and Best Pop Release, but the full list of winners gives a more accurate appraisal of the depth of artistic greatness in the Australian music scene...”
 — ABC Australia, 2024-11-20

“They're about to celebrate 70 years of marriage and this Adelaide couple have one beautiful tradition they still make sure they do every day Read their secrets to success...”
 — *The Advertiser*, 2024-09-14

“A cult Aussie beauty line loved by cosmetic junkies because it offers cheap duplicates of well-known make-up and skincare offerings has a new rival ... and it has come from close to home...”
 — *Courier Mail*, 2024-07-28



Figure 4: Thematic grouping of 2024 (slice) topic model results



Source: Authors via MCL; n = 97,285 posts from 25 Australian news publishers.

Notes: Interactions represents the percentage of total likes, reactions, shares, and comments each topic received as reported by MCL; Size is represented as a percentage of all topics. Percentages include noise topic, meaning they will not sum to 100%. Please note that the data used in this report is based on Meta's Content Library, we acknowledge this may vary slightly when compared to the platform directly.

Sports also features prominently in Australian news coverage—as our work elsewhere shows (e.g. see *Unfinished Story: Understanding Gender Bias in Australian Newsrooms* – Carson 2024, et al.).

“Our Aussie girls have absolutely dominated the pool at the Paris Olympics - winning six out of the seven gold medals that Australia won in the swimming events...”
– *News.com.au*, 2024-11-18

“A former AFL player has joined a new outfit ahead of season 2025 after leading his club to an epic 2024 premiership win in one of the biggest local footy player moves so far”
– *The Advertiser*, 2024-11-19

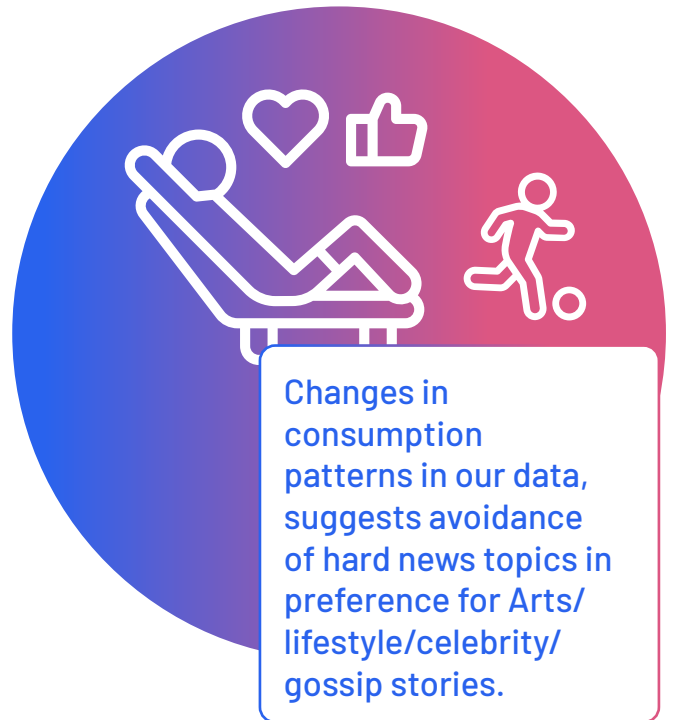
“Not even 12 months on from retiring from the Test cricket arena, David Warner has left the door open for the call to return if Australian selectors need him for the upcoming series”
– *Sky News Australia*, 2024-11-21

According to our data, Politics is not a prominent genre of news reporting, nor does it attract audience engagement, something similarly echoed by our recent past research (see Carson and Jackman 2022).

“Thousands of pro-Palestine protesters have flooded the streets of Sydney and Melbourne to call for a ceasefire in the Middle East while marking the first anniversary of the war in Gaza.”
– *9 News*, 2024-10-06

“The PM will impose minimum age access to social media platforms before the election under sweeping laws...”
– *The Australian*, 2024-09-10

However, we observe that Politics along with Crime were the top categories in 2016. These are considered hard news categories and are now replaced at the top of the leader board of posted news topics and audience engagement in 2024 with softer news categories such as Arts and Lifestyle and Sport. This shift in online audiences' news diets may have occurred for several reasons: It might be due to algorithmic bias. Another possibility is news avoidance of hard news subject matter. This would be consistent with other studies that have been tracking the phenomenon of 'news avoidance' over time. The *2024 Digital News Report* highlights that news avoidance—where the public deliberately avoids news content—has been a persistent trend over the past decade, briefly easing during the COVID-19 pandemic (Newman, 2024: 26). Survey data shows that three in five Australians are avoiding the news, with women being more likely to do so (Park et al., 2024: 19, 55).



Changes in consumption patterns in our data, suggests avoidance of hard news topics in preference for Arts/ lifestyle/celebrity/gossip stories. A further dimension to this, is news editors' recognition that these top 2024 categories can be conducive to 'clickbait' and online sharing and thus are producing more of these types of stories for online dissemination. In any case, shifts such as these highlight the black box nature of platforms that makes it difficult for researchers to fully assess underlying processes and mechanisms that explain data trends.

In sum, and in answer to our first research question about *How has the quantity and variety of professional news stories on Facebook evolved over time?* What this section of the report finds is that the quantity and variety of professional news stories on Facebook have increased over time and have remained high. This trend reflects the growing reliance of news organisations on the platform to distribute their content and engage with audiences. While crime, politics, arts and lifestyle, sports, and health have consistently been the most popular topics, data from 2024 indicates a shift away from harder news toward sports and lifestyle coverage. These softer news genres tend to generate higher audience interaction than traditional hard news topics, suggesting a potential link to the growing phenomenon of news avoidance documented by other scholars or algorithmic bias. This trend may indicate that audiences are actively seeking less distressing or politically charged content when engaging with news on social media platforms.

Misinformation and Disinformation case studies

The second section of our report investigates the spread of misinformation among Australians on Facebook. We accomplished this task by examining Facebook comments, effectively an unexplored medium since most social media platforms have discontinued or limited access to their API that previously enabled researchers to analyse user data. Through the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan, we obtained authorisation to access the MCL API within a secure cleanroom environment. This rare opportunity allowed our project to analyse and topic model public Facebook comments while maintaining strict data privacy controls. A more detailed discussion of this access is provided in the conclusion.

Given the difficulty as outlined earlier of tracking misinformation systematically, our project examined four case studies of misinformation identified within public Facebook comments. The cases span subject areas prone to misinformation: election integrity, environment (natural disasters), and public health. We now turn to each case study.



Case 1: Election Integrity: Australian pencil voting conspiracy

The provision of pencils, rather than pens, in polling places across many democracies including Australia, has given rise to interrelated voter fraud conspiracies. In Australia, the most common form is the false assertion that electoral management body (EMB) staff at the state or federal level will exploit the use of pencils to erase votes that they disagree with and forge ballot papers to change the outcome of elections.

This conspiracy has become more prominent across successive elections in the last decade, furthered by political elites such as One Nation leader Pauline Hanson in 2022 and fuelled by online discussion forums (Graham, 2022). This myth is not unique to Australia; it also emerges in comparable countries like the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, where votes are typically marked in pencil.

Australian state and federal EMBs supply pencils as a default option at polling places because pencils are a practical option – they are cheaper than alternatives such as pens and are less likely to run out or otherwise malfunction (AEC, 2025). Electoral commissions are generally mandated by law to provide a writing implement. For instance, Section 206 of the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* stipulates that 'each voting compartment must have an implement or method for voters to mark their ballot papers'.¹ However, there is no requirement that pencils *must* be used to vote in Australia, and voters are allowed to bring their own pen to vote if preferred. Further, a large proportion of voters opt for a postal ballot in recent elections, and this necessitates the use of their own writing implement as the ballot is filled out from home or outside the polling station.

Although the myth likely predates social media (Flanagan, 2023) the earliest found record of a prominent public figure espousing a voting pencil conspiracy in Australia was in 2013. This election was a low point for the AEC in several ways marred by mislabelled ballots in the northern federal Victorian electorate of Indi, as well as missing Senate ballots in Western Australia (Ghazarian, 2013; Keetly, 2013). Within this context, newly elected Senator, billionaire miner, Clive Palmer suggested publicly on television that votes cast using a pencil had been erased (see SMH, 2013).

¹ Until 2020, this clause specifically referred to a pencil.

The myth was again aired in the 2022 federal election and the 2023 referendum on a Voice to Parliament. In response to its growing prominence, the AEC and state electoral commissions routinely include the voting pencil conspiracy in their online misinformation registers on their websites and their spokespeople actively tackle the issue on mainstream and social media. In addition to the efforts of electoral commissions, in 2022, the misinformation was covered by several fact-checking bodies such as RMIT FactLab and AFP Fact Check in their work with Meta fact-checking during the federal election (Davidson, 2023; Meta, 2022).

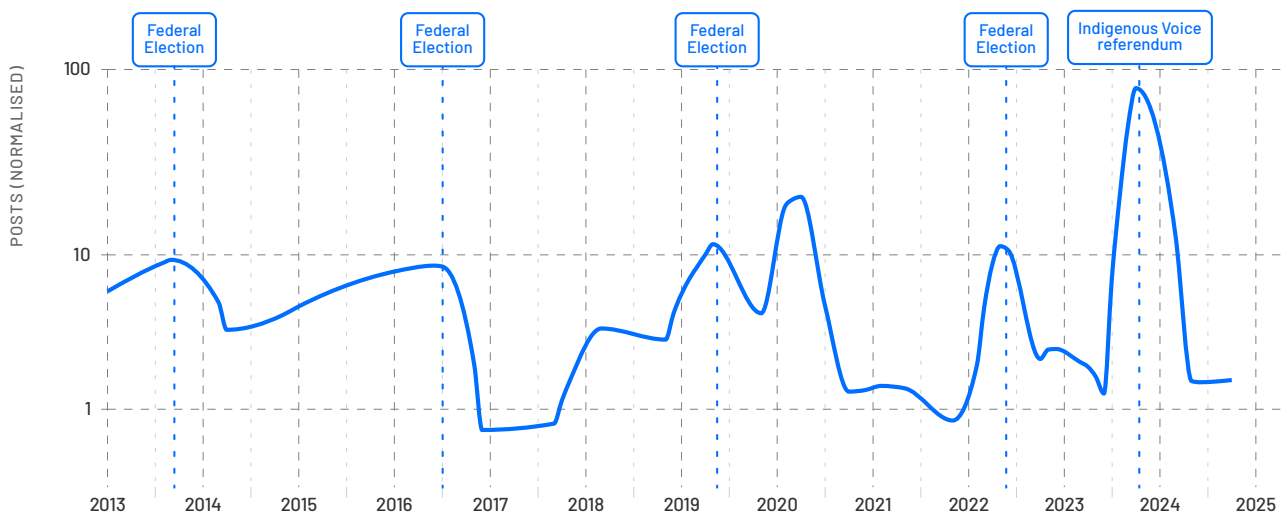
Despite fact-checking efforts, this conspiracy persists. Reflecting the increasingly online, global and adaptable nature of conspiracies, voting pencil misinformation is not unique to Australia, with local variations of the narrative emerging in comparable democracies. This conspiracy has had prominence in the United Kingdom, with notable surges during the 2014 Scottish Referendum and the 2016 Brexit vote, when campaigners urged Leave supporters on social media to #usepens. UK variations of the false narrative often falsely claim electoral fraud orchestrated by shadowy government agencies such as MI5 (PTI, 2016).

As in Australia, contextual factors can amplify misinformation spread, making the pencil conspiracy more prevalent during elections that are marked by uncertainty about voting processes or distrust in institutional integrity.

To explore its presence (or absence) on Facebook we first extracted seven thousand posts from Australia's eight federal and state Election Commissions' Facebook pages (e.g. the AEC, NSWEC, etc.). Next, we collected 60 thousand unique sentences in comments responding to these points and ran these sentences through the topic modelling procedure outlined earlier. In other words, given the context described, we expected many public responses to Australia's Election Commissions' posts that reference pencils.

Figure 5 shows the pencils conspiracy topic in response to all Facebook posts from federal and state Election Commissions in Australia. The pencils topic is 1 of 67 topics in the model. Critically, the pencils topic only consists of 385 unique sentences (out of the 60 thousand total). The pencils topic also only received 0.8% of all likes. The first observation to be made, therefore, is that while the misinformation persists over time, it engages a very small proportion of Facebook users and is not as prominent as media commentary might suggest. This persistence is what we call 'stickiness' - misinformation that lingers even when user engagement is low.

Figure 5: A sticky problem: Pencils conspiracy in comments responding to Australia's Election Commissions' posts



Source: Authors via MCL cleanroom; Y-axis normalised; n = 418 total sentences represented as a LOESS curve; comments received about 0.8% of all likes.

The pencil misinformation topic shows public comments spike ahead or at the time of each election, as expected, with perhaps a notable dip in 2022, but a rise in 2023 during the polarising Voice to Parliament referendum. In other words, the topic is comparatively small, but persistent despite exhaustive public fact checking and debunking. For this reason, we identify that it is 'sticky' in that it persists over time notwithstanding mitigation responses to it such as disinformation registers, fact-checking, and debunking.

This case study highlights several key learnings about misinformation and its spread on social media. First, it shows the persistence and adaptability of conspiracies, with misinformation like the voting pencil fraud conspiracy resurfacing during elections despite repeated fact-checking efforts over time. Even when misinformation is publicly debunked, it persists, particularly when tied to broader societal uncertainties or distrust in institutions. Second, it shows that misinformation often spreads through partisan channels, amplified by political figures and online communities. Lastly, the case underscores that while fact-checking plays a role in misinformation mitigation, it is not always sufficient on its own to fully negate its impact, especially when the myths are 'sticky' and return to engage a small, vocal audience.

Figure 6: Tweet from @THE_Russell



Case 2: Environmental misinformation: Queensland Flood victims

Our second case study turns to the Eastern Australian floods of February and March 2022 that had devastating impacts across communities on the north coast of New South Wales and south-eastern Queensland. Twenty-two people lost their lives. In Queensland alone 18,000 homes were damaged (Moore, 2022). The Queensland Reconstruction Authority estimated the cost to the state was approximately \$7.7 billion in total (Deloitte Access Economics, 2022).

The federal government received criticism from local communities and the Queensland premier for its slow response to the disaster which had left some feeling abandoned by their government (Trajkovich, 2022). Although the federal government reported in early March that thousands of Australian Defence Force personnel had been deployed to flood-affected areas, locals said they had not witnessed this support (Raper, 2022). Scott Morrison, the Prime Minister of Australia at the time, declared a national emergency on 9 March. He made this declaration under powers introduced after devastating bushfires the previous year, during which the Prime Minister faced similar backlash for his absence – holidaying in Hawaii – and public criticisms for a late response to the crises.

Misinformation was prevalent during this period and frequently covered by the media, reflecting a highly charged and contentious atmosphere. Fact-checked stories included Labor frontbencher Stephen Jones' false claim that Morrison met with British polemist and US commentator Piers Morgan while Brisbane was flooding. Another was Morrison's inaccurate assertion that he was being criticised on social media for spending too much on flood relief (RMIT ABC Fact Check, 2022; Summers, 2022).

Among the falsehoods, multiple fact-checking organisations responded to a story that originated on 21 March when Twitter user @THE_Russell posted 'BREAKING: Morrison complains that flood victims are 'weaponising their trauma' against the government. #auspol #floods2022'. Accompanying this text was an edited still from an ABC broadcast, showing Morrison and colleagues with a text banner reading 'PM: Flood victims should be grateful for government assistance' (Figure 6).

Fact-checkers from Reuters, RMIT FactLab and Agence France-Presse Fact Check all debunked this claim between March 21 and March 24, 2022, consistently finding that this image was manipulated by adding a false caption (Janif, 2022; Jeffery, 2022; Reuters Fact Check, 2022). The

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misinformation was presented as a still picture of a news broadcast, and so verifying the recorded broadcast and its false caption was a straightforward task.

In this case study we examined roughly 30 thousand comments in response to 600 posts from our Australia news publishers that contained the keyword 'flood' in March 2022. Given the background above, we expected a topic

model of that data to isolate flood-specific misinformation comments (e.g. accusations that Morrison complained victims 'weaponised their trauma'). The model, however, did not isolate this misinformation-specific language into an identifiable topic as we had expected. Table 1 outlines the full results of our topic model of comments responding to this 'flood' news coverage.

Table 1: Comments on 'flood' posts from Australia news publishers in March 2022

Topic	Likes	Size	Topic	Likes	Size
A: Idiots & Morons (33)	8.47%	8.56%	GG: Donation issues (56)	0.97%	0.66%
B: Demand Action (44)	4.26%	4.09%	HH: (Unfairly) blame PM (25)	0.96%	0.95%
C: Councils & Developers (60)	3.9%	2.49%	II: Flood history (62)	0.95%	1.25%
D: Donations (5)	3.88%	3.26%	JJ: Elections (49)	0.93%	1.04%
E: Noise (34)	3.56%	3.55%	KK 'Anna' (24)	0.92%	0.83%
F: Funding (52)	2.87%	2.16%	LL: Climate change debate (58)	0.89%	0.61%
G: Mentions (1)	2.82%	9.41%	MM: Support & assistance (54)	0.89%	1.03%
H: Regions (29)	2.8%	2.75%	NN: Donation 'thieves' (4)	0.87%	0.87%
I: Climate Change (36)	2.64%	2.23%	OO: Insurance (7)	0.81%	0.62%
J: Dumping (45)	2.25%	2.11%	PP: Sympathy (47)	0.79%	0.57%
K: Charities (57)	2.21%	1.63%	QQ: Disasters (37)	0.77%	0.63%
L: Victims & Donations (6)	2.1%	1.61%	RR: 'Blame game' (48)	0.76%	0.66%
M: Red Cross (9)	2.09%	0.79%	SS: PM responsibility 51	0.75%	0.64%
N: Stolen donations (18)	2.02%	1.22%	TT: Criminals & Justice (55)	0.7%	0.67%
O: Gratitude (40)	1.93%	2.37%	UU: Aircraft (23)	0.68%	0.63%
P: Aussie spirit (30)	1.84%	1.65%	VV: Volunteers (35)	0.67%	0.69%
Q: Blame & Scott Morrison (3)	1.75%	1.61%	WW: 'Too late' (42)	0.62%	0.66%
R: Weather (41)	1.59%	1.77%	XX: Ukraine & Russia (16)	0.62%	0.67%
S: Cities (11)	1.57%	1.18%	YY: China & Pollution (15)	0.61%	0.5%
T: Federal, state, local gov (50)	1.45%	1.59%	ZZ: Disaster fund (12)	0.6%	0.63%
U: Units (20)	1.32%	1.04%	AAA: Prayers (39)	0.59%	1.17%
V: Red cross concerns (8)	1.31%	1.05%	BBB: Noise (22)	0.58%	0.8%
W: Media 'propaganda' (32)	1.27%	1.4%	CCC: Dams (59)	0.56%	0.76%
X: Trust in charities (17)	1.2%	0.79%	DDD: Disgraceful behaviour (31)	0.55%	0.82%
Y: 'Scomor' attacks (0)	1.17%	1.22%	EEE: History (43)	0.46%	0.49%
Z: Vaccine safety (2)	1.14%	1.26%	FFF: Mother nature (26)	0.44%	0.61%
AA: Red Cross debate (10)	1.14%	0.57%	GGG: Admin fees (19)	0.42%	0.51%
BB: Protestors (13)	1.13%	0.85%	HHH: Shameful (21)	0.41%	0.63%
CC: First naming politicians (27)	1.12%	1.33%	III: Taxpayers (28)	0.35%	0.53%
DD: 'Let's hope' (46)	1.08%	0.79%	JJJ: 'Please help' (61)	0.34%	0.52%
EE: Civil emergencies (38)	0.99%	1.08%	KKK: Mayors & towns (53)	0.34%	0.45%
FF: Party politics (14)	0.98%	0.85%			
Note: Number of comments (N = 29845)					
Note: Number of unique sentences (N = 41195)					
Note: Total noise sentences (N = 4638)					
Note: Total sentences (N = 48243)					

Source: Authors via MCL cleanroom; comments on ~ 600 'flood' posts from Australia news publishers in March 2022.

In our estimation none of these topics reflect the misinformation we expected to find regarding ‘weaponisation.’ We certainly found comments attacking and defending Scott Morrison (e.g. sometimes debating who was to blame), but none of that involved the fact-checked story identified above. It may have been that the fact-checking was successful and the story removed as part of Meta’s Remove, Reduce, and Inform policy to treat misinformation spread, however, our model begins 1 March and the story was not serially fact checked until late March. Thus, we would expect to see evidence of ‘weaponisation’ in our data, similar to how misinformation about the AEC and pencils spread before being fact-checked. Instead, we found numerous comments that discussed donations, charities, and the Red Cross in particular, which demanded further examination and is explored in Case Study 3. The lesson here is that while journalists and academics may identify a high-profile figure—such as the Prime Minister—as a major target of misinformation, this perception may not always align with reality. This highlights the importance of social media data access for researchers to objectively assess the virality of misinformation online, free from the constraints of black-box systems.



Case 3: Red Cross donation misinformation

Despite media and fact-checkers’ focus on fake news about political elites and government disaster responses, the data shows Facebook comments on news of the Eastern Australian floods focused heavily on narratives about the Red Cross’s flood relief efforts, in our assessment.

The Red Cross charity coordinates donations and support in the wake of crises, including natural disasters, globally. There are a number of misinformation narratives that have arisen around the Red Cross’ efforts in the wake of disasters. This misinformation typically focuses on the organisation’s conduct, often portraying it as inadequate or corrupt. They are not unique to Australia and have recurred in response to disasters across the globe where the agency has a presence, and in Australia are most evident in 2020, 2022 and 2023.

Locally, these narratives gained traction after the 2020 bushfires. The Red Cross, in partnership with supermarket giant Coles, led the largest relief fundraising effort, raising \$242 million and distributing grants to over 6,000 people (Australian Red Cross, 2023; Daily Telegraph, 2019). Social media content alleged that the Red Cross had ‘fleeced Australians to the tune of hundreds of millions’ and was withholding funds from disaster victims (AAP FactCheck, 2020). This misinformation was amplified by political commentary, including criticism from rural NSW Liberal MP Andrew Constance, who argued that the Red Cross was too slow in distributing funds and should not allocate 10 per cent for administrative costs (Henriques-Gomez, 2020).

As the Red Cross have stated in response to such claims:

Misinformation can spread quickly after a disaster, causing confusion and distrust within communities struggling to recover. Many of those affected are already unsure where to turn for help, and inaccurate claims only add to that uncertainty. (American Red Cross, 2024).

Scam fundraisers and fraudulent charities often emerge after disasters, such as the 2011 floods in south-eastern Queensland and the 2023 WA floods, likely harming public trust (Ellery, 2023; Scamwatch, 2011).

According to our topic model results, Facebook comments fixated on concerns involving the Red Cross (V), and trust in charities generally (X) with regards to whether donations (GG) reached intended recipients. In fact, strategies to

circumvent so-called 'stolen donations' (N) and donation 'thieves' (NN) sometimes involved buying gift cards for flood victims, instead of donating directly to the charities themselves. While these topics collectively represented a small proportion of overall comments (anywhere between 5-15%), they were notable particularly given the apparent absence of the Scott Morrison-specific misinformation that we expected to encounter more prominently in the model.

This case study highlights the significant harm misinformation can inflict on public trust and disaster response efforts. False narratives about the Red Cross—despite fact-checking and official clarifications—contributed to scepticism about the organisation's relief efforts, potentially discouraging donations and delaying aid to those in need. Misinformation not only eroded confidence in charitable institutions but also fuelled alternative, less transparent donation methods, such as gift card purchases, which may have reduced the efficiency and coordination of relief efforts. More broadly, this case underscores how misinformation, amplified by political figures and social media, can disrupt crisis recovery by sowing confusion, fostering distrust, and diverting critical resources away from established response mechanisms.

This case study also illustrates that fact-checking, while important, by itself is not sufficient to fully counter misinformation. Despite the power of fact-checkers to identify false claims and then to refute them, these Red Cross falsehoods persisted and spread widely (demonstrating its stickiness), often due to their amplification by political figures and social media. Fact-checking plays a vital role in identifying misinformation and providing accurate information, but its effectiveness is limited when misinformation is deeply embedded in partisan or emotionally charged discourses that involve motivated reasoning (Carson et al., 2023). To effectively combat misinformation, a multi-pronged approach is necessary, involving not only fact-checking but also public education, media literacy, and collaborative efforts by a range of stakeholders - government, civil society, media, digital platforms and academia, to address the underlying causes of mistrust that fuel misinformation (see Carson and Fallon, 2021).

Case 4: Health Misinformation: Hydroxychloroquine

Early responses to COVID-19 were marked by uncertainty, unfolding in the absence of clear information as scientists worked rapidly to understand the virus, its transmission, and effective treatments. In this environment, contradictory and unproven medical advice spread widely and fast, promoted by various influential actors on social media, including billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk (Gallagher, 2020; Mayo Clinic Staff, 2024). Another prominent example was US President Donald Trump's promotion of the anti-malarial drug, hydroxychloroquine.

Trump first suggested the drug's use as a COVID-19 treatment at a press conference in March 2020 based on a small French study and the false statement that the FDA supported its use as a treatment for Coronavirus infection (Facher, 2020; Milman, 2020). Trump reiterated his claims throughout March and early April of that year, with his tweets promoting hydroxychloroquine reaching approximately 300 per cent more users than his average tweet reach, amplifying these claims on a global scale (Niburski and Niburski, 2020).

Trump's claims led to stockpiling, overdoses, and real-world harm (Beaumont and Ratcliffe, 2020). Public health officials initially responded cautiously rather than directly refuting him, with Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) and key member of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, Dr Anthony Fauci, stating it was not 'productive or helpful for me to be making judges [sic] on right or wrong' (BBC News, 2020). The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that Australian media outlets, including *The Project* and *news.com.au*, further amplified hydroxychloroquine as a potential 'cure,' for COVID-19 by relying on overstated and optimistic press statements from researchers (McCarthy, 2022).

In Australia, as in the US, the spread of this health misinformation and exaggerated claim was largely partisan, with particular political figures and media playing leading roles. Mining billionaire and leader of the United Australia Party, Clive Palmer, actively promoted hydroxychloroquine as a COVID treatment, announcing in March 2020 that he would fund trials, manufacture, and stockpile the drug (McCarthy, 2022). To advance this agenda, he placed a two-page advertisement in *The Australian*. Federal Coalition MPs Craig Kelly and George Christensen at the time, also championed hydroxychloroquine, co-authoring an open letter advocating for its use (RMIT ABC Fact Check, 2020).

Misinformation about hydroxychloroquine spread rapidly following Trump's endorsement, evolving as prominent conservative and reactionary political and media figures repeated false claims; what followed was a growing anti-vaccine movement across nations. Fact-checking services helped to counter these shifting narratives. BBC Reality Check debunked claims that thousands of doctors supported hydroxychloroquine and that 'Big Pharma' was blocking its rollout as a COVID-19 treatment (Goodman, 2020). Reuters Fact Check refuted social media claims that the drug could be made at home using grapefruit peel (Reuters Fact Check, 2021). ABC Fact Check disproved Clive Palmer's assertion that hydroxychloroquine was responsible for Australia's low COVID-19 death rate (Campbell & Cassidy, 2020). However, refuting these claims had limited impact. Estimates indicate that hydroxychloroquine use was linked to at least 17,000 deaths worldwide, though the true toll is estimated to be likely higher (Silva, 2024).

To explore the prevalence (or absence) of hydroxychloroquine-specific misinformation within the scope of our study we collected and examined nearly seven thousand comments responding to 100 posts from our Australian news publishers containing this keyword (between March 2020 and January 2024). Table 2 presents our topic model results from that data, identifying 71 individual categories that show the spread of sentences from these comments.

The data shows that there is a clear debate about the effectiveness of the drug in combating COVID-19, with for

example some citing/discussing studies (H), and clinical trials (PP). To others, the hydroxychloroquine-specific responses devolved into name calling (I, FF, XX) and sarcasm (A). Consistent with other pandemic-related discussions, there is concern about a vast conspiracy from actors (e.g. Evil people, SS) and institutions like 'big pharma' (NN), government (corruption: TT), mainstream media (20), and direct social media censorship from Meta and Twitter (EE). There were also many who rejected such conspiracies (e.g. NNN, XX, etc.). As with other studies, it shows that robust discourse occurs on social media that belies echo chamber theory (Phillips et al. 2024).

Moreover, comments highlighted personal struggles with accessing hydroxychloroquine for established medical uses, such as treating rheumatoid arthritis and lupus. These individuals, among others, were frustrated over shortages caused by the drug's instant popularity as a potential COVID-19 treatment (see Table 2).

This case study highlights the real-life harms caused by the spread of health misinformation. These include both the direct risks of using hydroxychloroquine inappropriately due to false beliefs and the secondary harm of its unavailability for legitimate non-COVID health conditions, leading to distress, frustration, and worsening symptoms. It also shows that fact-checking alone, while part of the mitigation strategy, is not enough to abate misinformation spread. Facts alone are not enough to curb people sharing falsehoods, meaning that other measures also need to be considered such as counter messaging from respected civic society leaders.

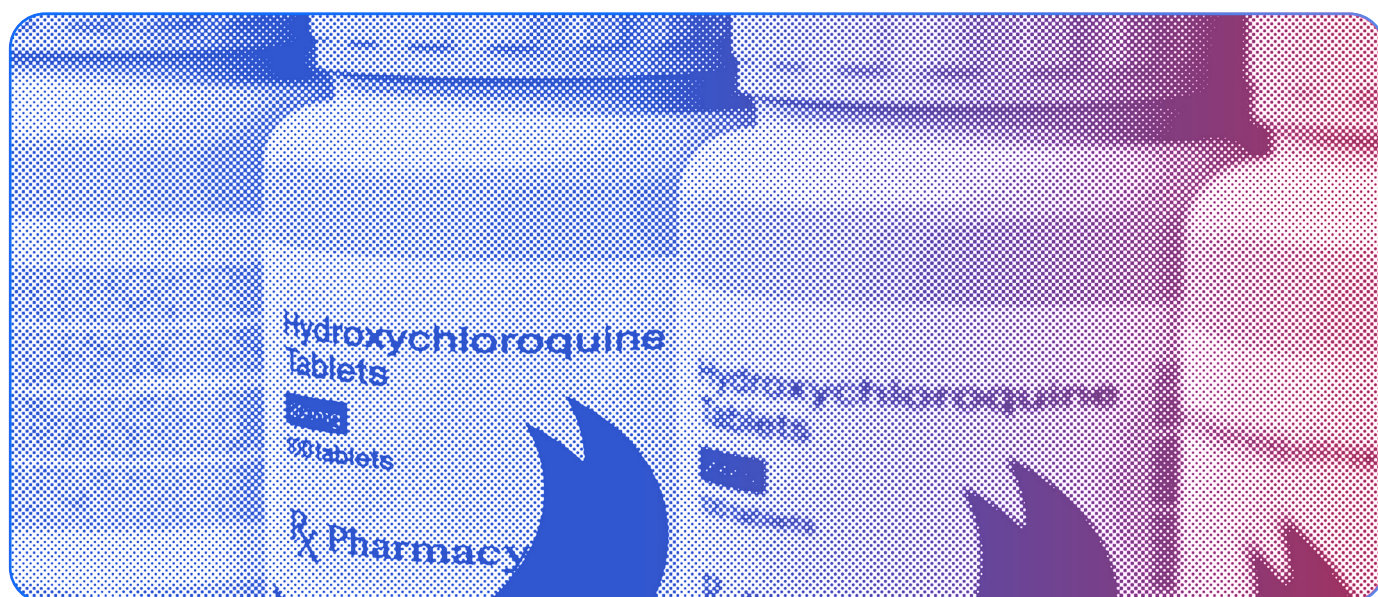


Table 2: Comments responding to Hydroxychloroquine posts from Australian news publishers

Topics	Likes	Size	Topics	Likes	Size
A: Sarcastic response (43)	4.05%	3.93%	LL: Unfair trump criticism (51)	0.94%	1.13%
B: Mentions (0)	3.36%	4.35%	MM: Rheumatoid arthritis and lupus 14	0.9%	0.79%
C: Name-calling & praising (30)	3.3%	3.26%	NN: Big pharma (69)	0.88%	1.27%
D: COVID19 remedies (38)	3.09%	3.01%	OO: Studies (e.g. Lancet)(37)	0.88%	0.91%
E: Trump labels (58)	2.72%	2.9%	PP: Clinical trials (44)	0.88%	0.95%
F: Medical 'marriage' assistance (29)	2.39%	2.51%	QQ: 'haha' (39)	0.83%	0.61%
G: Trump criticisms (49)	2.26%	2.09%	RR: France & Europe (27)	0.8%	0.9%
H: Hydroxychloroquine studies (13)	2.21%	2.01%	SS: Evil people (60)	0.79%	0.98%
I: Name-calling noise (59)	2.06%	1.21%	TT: Gov corruption (48)	0.76%	1.05%
J: Craig Kelly (1)	2.05%	1.9%	UU: Media channels (15)	0.76%	0.93%
K: Hydroxychloroquine support (67)	1.93%	0.87%	VV: 'Controversial' (24)	0.76%	0.75%
L: Investing (54)	1.7%	1.49%	WW: Cure (17)	0.74%	0.71%
M: Prescriptions (70)	1.69%	1.78%	XX: Morons & idiots (28)	0.73%	1%
N: Pithy sarcasm (47)	1.62%	1.86%	YY: Andrew Bolt (10)	0.73%	0.68%
O: Parliamentary debate (53)	1.62%	1.38%	ZZ: Jobs, debt, wages (55)	0.73%	1.17%
Q: Mainstream media (20)	1.53%	1.89%	AAA: Vaccines & profits (36)	0.7%	0.68%
R: Teenage girl promiscuity (50)	1.52%	1.6%	BBB: UV, bleach & disinfectant (4)	0.69%	0.82%
S: 'Science' (9)	1.46%	0.86%	CCC: 'indefensible' (18)	0.68%	0.47%
T: Murdoch & Sky (8)	1.44%	1.79%	DDD: 'goodness sake' (46)	0.66%	0.59%
U: 'Wake up' & criminal justice (56)	1.43%	1.37%	EEE: Can't trust these words (61)	0.65%	0.51%
V: 'works' vs. scam 23	1.37%	0.93%	FFF: Nancy Pelosi 32	0.65%	0.81%
W: Evaluate reporting (42)	1.36%	1.36%	GGG: The virus (34)	0.65%	0.76%
X: Cliver Palmer (6)	1.25%	1.48%	HHH: Demons (31)	0.63%	0.76%
Y: Conspiracies (12)	1.23%	1.27%	III: Pandemic 'deaths' (40)	0.63%	0.52%
Z: Negative effects (64)	1.22%	1.07%	JJJ: 'Liar' (63)	0.6%	0.8%
AA: fact checking and misinfo (25)	1.21%	0.89%	III: Sky (16)	0.59%	0.89%
BB: Ivermectin (3)	1.19%	0.81%	KKK: Safety & risk (45)	0.58%	0.51%
CC: Clive, Kelly, and Trump (7)	1.13%	0.91%	LLL: Morrison & Murdoch (21)	0.52%	0.49%
DD: Overdose encouragement (33)	1.13%	1.26%	MMM: 'HCQ' (2)	0.5%	0.61%
EE: Facebook & twitter censorship (26)	1.13%	1.02%	NNN: Deriding conspiracies (62)	0.48%	0.79%
FF: Name-calling (22)	1.13%	0.88%	OOO: Malaria (11)	0.46%	0.79%
GG: Vaccine scepticism (35)	1.1%	1.41%	PPP: Conspiracy actors (52)	0.45%	0.57%
HH: Death (65)	1.1%	1.09%	QQQ: Various medicines (5)	0.4%	0.67%
II: Leadership (57)	1.03%	0.57%	RRR: NWO 66	0.39%	0.95%
JJ: Treatments (68)	1.02%	1.07%	SSS: Elderly (41)	0.31%	0.47%
KK: 'Fake news' (19)	0.97%	0.97%			
Note: Number of comments (N = 6707)					
Note: Number of unique sentences (N = 10451)					
Note: Total noise sentences (N = 1563)					
Note: Total sentences (N = 11445)					

Source: Authors via MCL cleanroom; comments on ~ 100 Hydroxychloroquine posts from Australia news publishers between March 2020 and January 2024.

DISCUSSION

This report provides key insights into Australian news production and the presence—or absence—of common misinformation narratives on Facebook through an analysis of news use and case studies of misinformation spread and audience engagement. We now briefly discuss the significance of its findings.

In answer to our second research question, *in what ways do Australians engage with news and misinformation on Facebook?* the results clearly show that Australian news media is producing more content on Facebook in 2025 than other years over the last 15 years. Australian Facebook users, depending on their algorithm, might therefore be getting more ‘news’ on the platform than previously. We find that audiences are moving away from harder news topics. While crime, politics, arts and lifestyle, sports, and health have long been the dominant topics, 2024 data reveal a shift toward greater focus on sports and lifestyle content, moving away from harder news story genres like politics. These softer news categories often drive more audience interaction than traditional hard news, which may be linked to the increasing trend of news avoidance noted by other researchers (see Newman et al., 2024). This shift could suggest that audiences are increasingly drawn to less upsetting or politically intense content on social media platforms, either purposefully or because of algorithmic bias promoting soft news stories.

Australian news media also saw a remarkable boost in production in mid-2016, effectively over the span of two or three weeks. We suspect Facebook policy changes prompted this boost in news content which incentivised news publishers to use the platform to distribute its stories to a wider audience, which continues at the time of this report’s finalisation.

In terms of misinformation, we investigated three subject areas related to Australian elections, health, and environmental issues, namely natural disasters. The aim of our study was to explore the nature of misinformation and disinformation online across key subject areas where such communication has consequences and can cause real-world harms. In answer to our final research question, *what insights can be gained from tracking the spread of misinformation online?*—we identify virality patterns, key amplifiers, correction challenges, public perceptions, and

Audiences are moving away from harder news topics. While crime, politics, arts and lifestyle, sports, and health have long been the dominant topics, 2024 data reveal a shift toward greater focus on sports and lifestyle content, moving away from harder news story genres like politics.

the role of platforms and other stakeholders in mitigating its real-world harms.

On election integrity, we explored the persistence of the conspiracy that Australian Election Management Bodies were requiring voters to use pencils so that ‘they’ could erase and change votes that they disagreed with. We show the ebb and flow of pencil conspiracies in comments on Election Commission posts over the last decade. While persistent (sticky), the comments make up a miniscule part of the data (i.e. only a few hundred comments). This is in part a good news story, given the quantum is low. However, the cyclical nature of the misinformation suggests more could be done by key stakeholders such as electoral commissions, digital platforms, media, community leaders and government to pre-empt the misinformation spread with algorithm reduction and pre-bunking measures such as media literacy and civics education.

On health, we examined all comments in response to public posts from our Australian news publishers that mentioned the drug hydroxychloroquine. In our initial assessment, Australian news posts on the matter saw similar growth and decline over a brief period compared to posts across the entire platform mentioning the drug (according to MCL data). The comments largely were as expected: various

conspiracy theories, justifications of the false claim of the drug's effectiveness in combatting COVID-19, but also counter-arguments and ridicule from those believing the drug to be ineffective. Some social media users expressed concern over the reduced availability of the drug crucial for managing their own health conditions, such as lupus, due to the increased demand.

On natural disasters, we explored all comments in response to March 2022 posts from our news publishers mentioning 'flood' and 'Scott Morrison' or 'Prime Minister'. We expected to find a great deal of comments relaying the erroneous claim that the PM 'blamed' flood victims for 'weaponising their trauma.' Given the misinformation story's prominence in Australia, we even previously conducted (and published) a survey experiment on this same fact-checked story that proliferated on Facebook. To our surprise, the model did not specifically identify this topic in the data. Instead, we saw a great deal of misinformation about whether donations from the Red Cross would reach the flood victims, with some comments urging others to buy gift cards for victims instead (as an example). We found this result highly significant, as it demonstrates that without access to data and better knowledge of the black-box system that drives the algorithms, fact-checking experts may draw incorrect conclusions about the spread of certain misinformation stories and fail to identify others that warrant further investigation.

Study Limitations

This surprising finding highlights the primary limitation of our study and leads to a key recommendation: without access to digital media data and knowledge of processes, pundits and academics can only speculate about the prevalence of specific misinformation stories in both domestic and potentially international contexts.

While the consequences of uninformed speculation require careful consideration, so too does the direction of studies—like ours—that aim to explore the effects of specific misinformation stories that academics deem to be prominent.

That said, we are grateful for access to the Meta Content Library and acknowledge the restrictive data access policies of other digital platforms, which pose a significant challenge to political science and communication research worldwide and principles of open science. We also note some limitations with the existing granted access that require some final discussion. Academics and expert research groups across the world have expressed criticism in an open letter about the new MCL's capabilities, in contrast to the previous CrowdTangle tool. To be clear, we have met marginal technical obstacles during our transition, though we wish to note our experience may differ.

Another key issue for researchers is oversight requirements. While we understand Meta's commitment to protecting user privacy is paramount, there remain legitimate concerns for academic freedom in relation to the oversight process, which requires any material removed from the cleanroom to be reviewed for approval by SOMAR before it can be used in publications such as this. As this publication goes to press, we note these processes are changing with Meta proposing to bring them in-house.

To clarify, we have had no issues with ICPSR's Social Media Archive approval process, and the SOMAR staff have been responsive and supportive. Given the platform's commitment to freedom of expression, we hope this remains the case for academic research in the future.

RECOMMENDATION:

A Collective Approach to Reducing Misinformation

Tackling misinformation requires a collective effort involving multiple stakeholders: media organisations, political elites, civil society actors, academia, and technology companies. This whole-of-society approach is essential for reducing the prevalence and impact of misinformation and disinformation.

RECOMMENDATION:

Strengthening the Meta Content Library

The use of the Meta Content Library to trace news stories and misinformation provides early evidence of its benefits to researchers as a valuable tool to gain a broader and deeper understanding of the information landscape. By providing comprehensive social media data that incorporates news stories and user engagement, it allows for better analysis, testing of assumptions, and greater insights into how misinformation spreads online. Indeed, as our second case study demonstrates, academics without access to data and knowledge of social media platforms' processes run the risk of themselves amplifying or exaggerating the risk of specific examples of misinformation.

CONCLUSION

This report contributes to public understandings of the relationships between social media and Australian news publishers, while also offering valuable insights into the engagement with and spread of misinformation online. It shows that social media, namely Meta's Facebook, remains a central platform for news distribution, playing a vital role in how Australians engage with daily information.

Likewise, elite figures, particularly politicians, play a crucial role in shaping public discourse and can have an untoward influence in amplifying misinformation. However, the counter is also true, political figures offer valuable information cues to their partisan supporters and can wield this power to play a leading positive role in curbing misinformation spread.

Similarly, the report highlights the influential role that journalists and media outlets play in producing news and holding public figures to account when they spread misinformation. Misinformation can also spread through mainstream media and its public comments sections, and thus the media have both direct and indirect roles to play in enabling free but responsible speech. This could take many forms and could include direct negation of falsehoods through journalistic adjudication, fact checking, and sanctioning its commentators who knowingly spread disinformation.

The report underscores the real-world consequences of misinformation and the harms it may cause especially in health and public trust in institutions and organisations such as charities. Containing this spread is critical for healthy democracies, societies and individuals. We have used the available data to demonstrate misinformation's cyclical nature, particularly around elections and the proactive actions that could be taken to anticipate and limit this. Additionally, we show that misinformation is not confined to borders, as misinformation easily crosses from one country to the next due to the interconnected global information ecosystem. Finally, the persistence of misinformation, or its 'stickiness,' endures despite ongoing fact-checking efforts, underscoring the need for a whole-of-society collective approach involving key stakeholders as named in this report to work together to effectively address misinformation's pernicious spread.

The persistence of misinformation, or its 'stickiness,' endures despite ongoing fact-checking efforts, underscoring the need for a whole-of-society collective approach involving key stakeholders as named in this report to work together to effectively address misinformation's pernicious spread.

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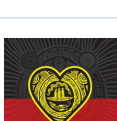


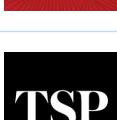



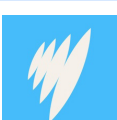









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APPENDIX

Australian news producers:

	Daily Mail Australia 5,537,298 followers		The Australian 1,112,335 followers		The Mercury Newspaper 105,341 followers
	9 News 3,267,696 followers		Guardian Australia 811,192 followers		Crikey 88,629 followers
	News.com.au 3,064,858 followers		Courier Mail 712,809 followers		Koori Mail 77,692 followers
	7NEWS Australia 2,588,433 followers		10 News First 648,287 followers		The Saturday Paper 47,179 followers
	Sky News Australia 1,732,597 followers		The Age 515,465 followers		The New Daily 46,754 followers
	SBS Australia 1,502,188 followers		The Advertiser 470,990 followers		IndigenousX 23,622 followers
	Daily Telegraph 1,397,729		Herald Sun 469,739 followers		Australian Associated Press 7,054 followers
	The Sydney Morning Herald 1,315,202 followers		Brisbane Times 215,375 followers		
	ABC Australia 1,172,080 followers		The Canberra Times 118,821 followers		

