

Submission to the Review of the News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code

6 May 2022

News & Media Research Centre

Submission authors:

Associate Professor Caroline Fisher, News & Media Research Centre
Professor Kerry McCallum, Director, News & Media Research Centre
Professor Sora Park, Professor, News & Media Research Centre

For information regarding the submission or for further inquiries please contact:

kerry.mccallum@canberra.edu.au

canberra.edu.au

CONTENTS

Contents	2
The Scope of the Submission	3
Topic 1: Commercial agreements outside the Code	3
Topic 2: Designation of digital platforms	5
Topic 3: Registration of news businesses	6
Attachments	7

The Scope of the Submission

In this submission we are responding to the following questions from the Consultation Paper for the Review of the News and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code:

Topic 1: Commercial agreements outside the Code

Q3: The review seeks stakeholder views on cases where digital platforms and news businesses have not been able to reach commercial deals.

Q4: The review seeks stakeholders views on any other impacts of commercial deals on the Australian News sector (for example, on competition in Australian media markets).

Topic 2: Designation of digital platforms

Q6: Did the designation criteria operate to deliver outcomes consistent with the policy objectives of the Code?

Q7: If not, which designation criteria could be improved, and how, to ensure consistency with the policy objectives of the code?

Topic 3: Registration of news businesses

Q9: Did the registration tests operate to ensure news businesses were registered where, and only where, this was consistent with the policy objectives of the code?

Topic 1: Commercial agreements outside the Code

Q3: The review seeks stakeholder views on cases where digital platforms and news businesses have not been able to reach commercial deals.

The News and Media Research Centre (N&MRC) has conducted research and consultation with news media organisations to discuss the efficacy of the News and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code (NMBC). This endeavour is complicated by the absence of a public facing, comprehensive list of the deals that have been struck between the digital platforms and news organisations. The negotiation process has raised important questions about the lack of transparency around the deals, equivalence of commercial agreements across organisations, the exclusion of some organisations, and how the money is being spent without a requirement for it to go towards public interest journalism.

It also raises questions about whether deals have been done with a good range of businesses to enhance the health of the Australian news environment and encourage public interest journalism. While there has been a reasonable spread of deals across a range of large and small news organisations there are some notable exceptions such as: Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), AAP, The Conversation, and smaller not-for-profit public interest journalism outlets. It seems extraordinary that one of two national broadcasters should be excluded, given the quality and public interest nature of its journalism contribution. Likewise, *The Conversation*, which provides an expert lens on contemporary issues being debated in the public sphere. It should be noted that Google has negotiated with more outlets.

Based on public announcements deals have been successfully negotiated between a range of regional newspaper companies with either Google or Facebook. For example, Google has struck deals with Country Press Australia (70 regional mastheads)¹ the Victorian-based Times News Group (Surf Coast Times, Bellarine Times, Armstrong Creek Times, Ballarat Times, Golden Plains Times, Geelong Times, and Bendigo

¹ <https://blog.google/around-the-globe/google-asia/australia/country-press-australia-titles-join-google-news-showcase/>

Times) 2; and News Corp³ (which will reportedly be used to fund 20 regional positions and the trial of three regional print editions for Sunshine Coast Daily and Mackay's Daily Mercury)⁴. Facebook has negotiated deals with Australian Community Media (40+ regional, rural, and suburban mastheads including the Newcastle Herald, Canberra Times, Bendigo Advertiser, The Advocate, Katherine Times, Illawarra Mercury)⁵. On the face of it, this appears to be a good thing, but these deals cover only a fraction of the hundreds of regional and rural newspapers across Australia; ACM has 140 newspapers in its stable and CPA represents 190 small independent papers.

Q4: The review seeks stakeholders views on any other impacts of commercial deals on the Australian News sector (for example, on competition in Australian media markets).

Our consultations with industry have revealed concern from smaller outlets about the imbalance in negotiations that have privileged larger, traditional media organisations. Anecdotally, smaller outfits have struggled to strike independent deals and have been forced to form coalitions to have bargaining power with the platforms. However, these coalitions, born of necessity, have not necessarily been successful. For those organisations who have successfully struck deals, such as News Corp and ACM, there have been announcements of reductions in print services⁶ and staff losses from regional mastheads⁷.

The inconsistencies in news companies that Google and Meta have engaged with reflects the lack of transparency and common criteria in the VCAs. This is an indication that the bargaining power imbalances between digital platforms and news media has not significantly shifted. It also raises concerns about the potential gap that may occur within the news industry between those who are able to benefit from the VCAs and those who miss out. Australia's media market has always been highly concentrated historically⁸ and these new deals may even widen the gap.

Urgent research is needed to monitor the longer-term impact of the voluntary content agreements with on the signatory companies, those that missed out, and the wider news environment. In particular, it remains unclear how long the deals will last and the impacts of the deals once they come to an end.

Long-term, empirical research needs to be conducted in the following areas:

- Monitor the power imbalance between news media and digital platforms by measuring (1) concentration in advertising revenues; (2) concentration in audiences' usage.
- Track the changes in (1) provision of local news; (2) provision of public interest journalism in Australia.
- Monitor the number of journalists and news outlets that are servicing public interest journalism.

The research needs to be approached from three perspectives: digital platforms, news businesses, and government. Any research agenda must have the impacts of media policy on the public at its heart. For

² <https://mumbrella.com.au/acm-signs-letter-of-intent-for-facebook-news-deal-681111>

³ <https://newscorp.com/2021/02/17/news-corp-and-google-agree-to-global-partnership-on-news/>

⁴ <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/news-corp-formalises-google-and-facebook-deals-announces-hiring-spree-20210509-p57q8d.html>

⁵ <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7236733/facebook-does-deal-with-acm-for-news-feed/>

⁶ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-10-01/acm-cuts-publication-regional-newspapers/100500826>

⁷ <https://www.adnews.com.au/news/news-corp-australia-cuts-more-jobs>

⁸ Brevini, B. & Ward, M. (2021). Who controls our Media. GetUp! https://d68ej2dhhub09.cloudfront.net/2810-GetUp_-_Who_Controls_Our_Media_.pdf. Accessed 3.2.22.

maximum impact, this research requires collaboration with government, digital platforms, news businesses, and academia.

The evidence given to this review will provide insights into immediate impacts, but long-term tracking of those impacts on individual businesses and the wider news environment is also required.

We also recommend that Treasury make available a full list of the agreements that have been successfully negotiated with the digital platforms. We understand commercial in confidence concerns will limit the amount of information that can be made public. At a minimum, it would be useful to include the start and end dates of those agreements. The provision of this basic information would provide independent researchers with key information to inform studies into the impact of the agreements.

Topic 2: Designation of digital platforms

Q6: Did the designation criteria operate to deliver outcomes consistent with the policy objectives of the Code?

Given no digital platform has been designated under the Code, the answer to this question is unknown. It should be acknowledged that the threat of designation has encouraged Google and Facebook to negotiate with news businesses in line with the policy objective of levelling the bargaining playing field. However, due to the confidential nature of these commercial agreements, it is extremely difficult to assess the outcomes of the agreements and whether Google and Facebook have made a 'significant contribution' to the sustainability of the Australian news media.

Q7: If not, which designation criteria could be improved, and how, to ensure consistency with the policy objectives of the code?

A clear set of criteria for designation is needed to ensure the policy objectives of the Code are met. The designation criteria are not well defined in the Treasury Laws Amendment (News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code) Act 2021. For instance, the Australian Code does not describe the criteria for assessing whether a 'significant bargaining power imbalance' exists between a news business and a digital platform. The recently introduced Canadian Bill C-18, Online News Act, provides a more prescriptive set of criteria, which might be useful. Those are:

- (a) the size of the intermediary or the operator;
- (b) whether the market for the intermediary gives the operator a strategic advantage over news businesses; and
- (c) whether the intermediary occupies a prominent market position.

Likewise, it is unclear in the Australian Code if a group has made a 'significant contribution' to the sustainability of the Australian news industry through commercial agreements with news businesses. Again, the Canadian Bill offers some guidance for assessing the value of a digital platform's contribution. Importantly, their criteria include a requirement that financial compensation be used to support the production of local, regional and national news content. This is absent from our Code. It also requires that:

‘... a significant portion of independent local news businesses benefit from them, they contribute to the sustainability of those businesses, and they encourage innovative business models in the Canadian news marketplace’, and that

‘They involve a range of news outlets that reflect the diversity of the Canadian news marketplace, including diversity with respect to language, racialized groups, Indigenous communities, local news and business models’.

These additions would strengthen the clarity of the Code and its capacity to meet its policy objective to correct the power imbalance. They would also ensure the inclusion of a breadth of diverse news offerings – culturally, linguistically, and structurally - to enhance the health of the Australian news environment and encourage locally produced public interest journalism.

Topic 3: Registration of news businesses

Q9: Did the registration tests operate to ensure news businesses were registered where, and only where, this was consistent with the policy objectives of the code?

Concern raised by smaller and regional media businesses about the exclusionary nature of the ‘revenue test’ threshold of \$150,000 points to a possible inconsistency between the Code’s policy objectives and its implementation. The recent House of Representatives Regional Newspaper inquiry recommended the Consumer and Competition Act be amended to require news media organisations have revenue of \$75,000 for the past three years to register for the NMBC. We note that this could still disadvantage some media start-ups, but it would broaden the field of eligible smaller but well-established news businesses.

A second inconsistency pertains to the content and professional standards criteria for registration. Under the guidelines, content does not necessarily have to be produced by a journalist or news organisation, but by a corporation that operates or controls a news business. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a growth in journalism and information content produced by a range of sources other than traditional news outlets. This raises questions about the impact of the Code on the nature of the Australian news media. This arrangement allows for opportunistic operators to develop a content publishing arm of their business without a track record of commitment to producing journalism in the public interest.

For example, the successful registration of *NewsCop.com.au*. On the face of it this outlet would appear to meet the content and professional standards tests. However, a closer examination reveals that the authors listed have no biographical details and do not hyperlink to real people, which is not reflective of transparent news industry practice. There is also little evidence of any original journalism being produced by this outfit. While the website says its staff adhere to the MEAA Journalists code of ethics and there is an online form for complaints, there is little transparency about organisation. NewsCop does not disclose who the parent company is. Therefore, it is not possible to determine if the website is editorially independent, or if there is a conflict of interest.

To ensure the NMBC is supporting quality, original Australian journalism, which was surely the policy intent, we recommend the Professional Standards and Content tests be tightened to require a minimum percentage test for original, locally produced public interest journalism for the Australian audience, and stricter disclosure of the ownership and governance of the registering organisation.

Attachments

News and Media Research Centre (2021) Research priority report: News futures research and policy roundtable. University of Canberra.

Fisher, C., McCallum, K, and Park, S. (2021) Is the News Media Bargaining Code fit for purpose? The Conversation, 29 November 2021. <https://theconversation.com/is-the-news-media-bargaining-code-fit-for-purpose-172224>

RESEARCH PRIORITY REPORT

NEWS FUTURES: RESEARCH & POLICY ROUNDTABLE

News and Media Research Centre
Faculty of Arts and Design
University of Canberra

NEWS & MEDIA
RESEARCH CENTRE

Report Design: Ava Wang

Cite as: News & Media Research Centre.
(2021). Research Priority Report - News Futures:
Research & Policy Roundtable. Canberra: News &
Media Research Centre, University of Canberra.

© 2021 by News & Media Research Centre

DOI: [10.25916/axha-aw24](https://doi.org/10.25916/axha-aw24)

CONTENTS

BACKGROUND	2
News Media Bargaining Code	2
Misinformation Code	3
N&MRC News Futures Roundtable	4
RESEARCH PRIORITIES	5
1. News Media Bargaining Code: Tracking & Evaluation	5
2. Sustainability of News Businesses, with a Focus on Local and Regional News	6
3. Misinformation	7
GLOSSARY	10
APPENDIX: ROUNDTABLE PROGRAM	11

BACKGROUND

In recent years radical changes in the news media industries, largely driven by the rise of digital platforms, have moved news media from the periphery to the centre of government policy agendas. Research conducted by the News & Media Research Centre (N&MRC) highlights that relentless disruption to the news industry and decline in news consumption are coupled with the challenges of combatting misinformation and low levels of media literacy. Research shows the heightened thirst for news during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic has not been sustained, with substantial levels of complacency and misunderstanding among news consumers about the current state of the news media industries.

Inquiries such as the Finkelstein Inquiry into Media and Media Regulation (2012), the Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism (2018), and the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission (ACCC) Digital Platforms Inquiry (2019) all called upon government and industry to investigate ways to provide support to Australian journalism broadly, and regional news outlets specifically, to address the impact of the loss of advertising on their viability.

The ACCC Inquiry emphasised how digital platforms have changed the nature of news production and distribution, and how this is impacting on the public's ability to access trustworthy news. As a result, an attempt has been made to reform the asymmetric relationship between digital platforms and news outlets via the News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code.

Further, due to concerns about the veracity of online information in the digital era, the ACCC

recommended a voluntary Australian Code of Practice on Dis- and Misinformation be developed to encourage digital platforms to take measures to reduce the circulation and harm of online misinformation.

In its final report to government¹, the ACCC made 23 recommendations. The federal government supported six in their entirety, ten 'in principle with plans for further reviews', five were 'noted' and two rejected.

NEWS MEDIA BARGAINING CODE

Most controversially, the government gave in principle support to ACCC's DPI Recommendation 7 requiring "the ACCC to work with digital platforms and news media businesses to facilitate the development of a voluntary code to address bargaining power imbalances between these parties".²

However, dissatisfaction with the progress of this process led to the introduction of a mandatory News Media Bargaining Code. Following several months of tense negotiation and muscle flexing, the Treasury Laws Amendment (News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code) Bill 2021, passed both houses of Parliament on 24 February 2021.

The News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code (NMBC) attracted criticism in public fora for perceived faults in its plan, that it simply entrenched the power of the platforms and traditional news organisations, while disadvantaging small to medium sized news media

¹ ACCC (2019). *Digital Platforms Inquiry: Final Report*.

² Regulating in the digital age: Government Response and Implementation Roadmap for the Digital Platforms Inquiry, page 15. <https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-12/Government-Response-p2019-41708.pdf>

operations and non-traditional publishers.³ It must be remembered that the NMBC was never intended or expected to be the cure-all to the financial problems of the news industry, and other support programmes would also continue to be needed.

Despite these criticisms, and the fact that Google and Facebook are yet to be ‘designated’ under the NMBC, the Government hailed the process a success. It brought the two platforms to the negotiating table to strike commercial content agreements outside of the Code — mainly for provision of content on *Google News Showcase* and *Facebook News Tab*. There is no public-facing list of all the deals that have been done, but announcements reveal agreements have been reached with a range of news organisations, including: The Guardian Australia, Junkee, News Corp Australia, Schwartz Media, The New Daily, ABC, Australian Community Media, The Conversation, Country Press Australia, Ten, Seven West Media, Nine Entertainment Co., Times News Group, Crikey, and Solstice media. This is not an inclusive list as negotiations continue.

The process has raised questions about transparency, equivalence of the deals across organisations, the exclusion of some organisations, including smaller, regional, and non-traditional news outlets⁴, and how the money would be spent by news outlets without a requirement for it to go towards public interest journalism. It also raises questions about whether this is a good range of businesses to enhance the health of the Australian news environment and encourage public interest journalism.

Announcements by news companies that they would be reducing print services and cutting staff, despite having signed a deal with one

of the platforms, highlights an urgent need to question and measure the impact of the News Media Bargaining Code and voluntary content agreements (VCA) on the sustainability of the news industry and a diverse Australian news ecology.

In early 2022, Treasury will commence a review of the efficacy of the NMBC. This process will necessarily include a review of the commercial agreements, and whether the digital platforms have made a “significant contribution to the sustainability of the Australian news industry” as required under the Code. However, there is no definition of what a ‘significant contribution’ looks like.

MISINFORMATION CODE

Following the ACCC’s recommendation, the ACMA was given responsibility for overseeing and developing a voluntary code. On 22 February 2021, the Digital Industry Group Inc (DIGI), representing the interests of digital platforms, launched the Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation (ACPDPM). Under the Code, signatories commit to adopting a range of measures to reduce the spread of online dis- and misinformation and release annual transparency reports about these efforts.

Recent revelations from whistle-blowers about the management of misinformation on Facebook⁵ have highlighted the urgent need to measure the efficacy of the ACPDPM and to assess what other interventions are required. The voluntary nature of the Code has been criticised for its lack of oversight and penalties⁶. To help address these concerns, DIGI added an oversight body

³ <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/not-newsy-enough-facebook-spurns-small-publishers-20210727-p58dav.html>

⁴ <https://www.aph.gov.au/e-petitions/petition/EN3485> ; <https://theconversation.com/sign-our-petition-and-hold-facebook-to-account-170372>

⁵ <https://theconversation.com/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-testified-that-the-companys-algorithms-are-dangerous-heres-how-they-can-manipulate-you-169420>

⁶ <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7464645/australias-election-is-under-threat-because-of-facebook/>

and public complaint facility⁷. However, key problems remain in relation to the transparency of algorithms and data, and the need for independent scrutiny and accountability. Political leaders have also called for tighter regulation of social media platforms⁸.

With a looming federal election and increasing debate about the spread of political online misinformation, this presents a ripe opportunity for researchers, industry, and government to help steer the direction of further interventions.

N&MRC NEWS FUTURES ROUNDTABLE

To that end, the News and Media Research Centre (N&MRC) at the University of Canberra hosted the *News Futures: Research and Policy Roundtable* on 3rd September 2021. The aim of the half-day virtual event was to bring together government, industry, public interest groups, and media researchers to discuss recent research findings alongside policy and industry developments to advance a research agenda to tackle key questions in Australia's news media policy landscape.

The roundtable was attended by 34 representatives of the news media, government, regulatory agencies, digital platforms, the community, and academia, plus nine representatives from the N&MRC and University of Canberra. The event was organised by Acting Director Caroline Fisher and chaired by Director Kerry McCallum. 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 during the *News Futures: Research and Policy Roundtable* pointed to a range of areas of inquiry to pursue to help address these burning issues. Discussion brought diverse perspectives, experiences, and solutions to the table. It must be stressed that whilst there are many pressing issues facing the Australian media, **this report focuses on just two areas of immediate need: the efficacy of the News Media Bargaining Code and misinformation.**

We emphasise while there is no one-size-fits-all remedy to these problems, there is a significant role for evidence-based research to help inform policy decisions and industry action about the issues facing the news industry.

Deliberations on the day underscored the need for co-ordinated efforts across industry, government, and academia to identify gaps in research to help tackle pressing issues of financial viability and misinformation facing the news media in Australia. Ultimately, interventions must enhance public participation and a healthy democracy.

This Research Priority Report aims to serve as a guide for further development and collaboration and align industry and policy need with academic research capability.

We wish to thank each of the attendees for the respectful and open way in which they participated. Feedback about the event was positive with several participants commenting it had been stimulating, engaging and thoughtful.

*News & Media Research Centre
November 2021.*

⁷ <https://digi.org.au/australian-disinformation-code-of-practice-strengthened-with-independent-oversight-and-public-complaints-facility/>

⁸ <https://www.smh.com.au/national/my-daughter-is-but-one-victim-of-malicious-online-lies-it-s-time-the-social-media-giants-were-held-liable-20211007-p58y4b.html>

RESEARCH PRIORITIES

The research priorities identified here have been identified by the News and Media Research Centre (N&MRC) based on our interpretation of the discussion during the roundtable and our research expertise. The N&MRC advances public understanding of the changing media environment and is home of the annual *Digital News Report: Australia*.

1. NEWS MEDIA BARGAINING CODE: TRACKING & EVALUATION

Research Priority: Monitoring the longer-term impact of the voluntary content agreements on signatories, those that missed out, and the wider news environment

A substantial research agenda is required around the efficacy of the News Media Bargaining Code and the nature and impact of voluntary agreements on the news businesses with whom deals were signed, those that missed out, and the wider news environment. The research needs to be approached from three perspectives: digital platforms, news businesses, and government. Any research agenda must have the impacts of media policy on the public at its heart. For maximum impact, this research requires collaboration with government, digital platforms, news businesses, and academia.

To effectively monitor the impact of the VCAs on the health of individual news businesses and the wider news environment, a range of indicators should be used in relation to the main actors involved: Digital Platforms, News Businesses, and Government. Some of the suggested indicators below are observable and can be measured externally, while others require collaboration with independent researchers to gather qualitative feedback from each of the three main actors.

Indicators for News Businesses:

Workforce numbers; Closures, contractions, and

expansions; Cadetship and training programs; Staff development; Enrolments in Journalism courses, staff, graduates, and employment outcomes; Volume of journalism content — with a focus on public interest journalism; Subscription and membership numbers; Transparency about the deal struck and how the money is being spent.

Indicators for Digital Platform Platforms:

Amount and type of contributions made to the Australian news industry; Fairness of the deals between platforms and news businesses; Providing news businesses with access to data and advance warning of algorithmic change; Transparency about the deals done and the criteria used.

Indicators for Government:

Provision of additional supports to other sections of the news media industry; The success of current and former support programs; Acting on recommendations from the 2022 review; whether the Australian model of the Code is adopted by other countries and how it compares with other international efforts.

Research Priority: Evaluating the impact of the eligibility criteria for the News Media Bargaining Code Register on conceptions of journalism

In the event that Google and Facebook are designated by the federal Treasurer to negotiate with news organisations under the NMBC, news

outlets first need to register.⁹ But this raises questions about definitions of news businesses. To register, a news business must meet five eligibility criteria: connection, revenue, content, audience, and professional standards.

The content test points to a range of issues about **what type of organisation is deemed a news source**. Under the guidelines content does not necessarily have to be produced by a journalist or traditional news organisation, but by a corporation that operates or controls a news business. During the pandemic there has been a growth in journalism and information content produced by a range of sources, other than traditional news outlets. This raises questions about the impact of formalising this shift in digital news and information production on traditional conceptions of the news media.

The News and Media Research Centre has identified a range of issues around the eligibility

criteria that could be addressed through future research investigating if and how the news media industry is changed through the redefinition of journalism by unbundling the content from who produces it. These include:

- The impact of the definition of eligible businesses on perceptions of traditional news producers and journalism. For instance, will the eligibility criteria re-position the definition of the profession based on content, and a commitment to editorial standards, rather than journalism training or organisational type?
- What impact will the end of COVID-19 have on the types of news sources successfully registering? Will all organisations that have been providing public interest journalism during the pandemic crisis, continue to do so in the future?

2. SUSTAINABILITY OF NEWS BUSINESSES, WITH A FOCUS ON LOCAL AND REGIONAL NEWS

Research Priority: A comprehensive study of news media business models in the contemporary Australian context, prioritising regional and local news businesses

Despite the growing amount of international and national research into news consumption conducted by academics, government, private think tanks, and non-government organisations, Roundtable participants identified gaps in knowledge that need to be filled to drive further innovation and policy direction. It is clear a variety of business models and funding approaches are required depending on the context, but there is a need for more assessment of what works and why.

- Examination of different news business models and their long-term financial viability. For example, businesses relying on government interventions, or deals with platforms, versus news businesses operating independently of government and platform support.
- The impact of free public broadcasting (PSB) on the wider news market. So far there is little evidence that PSBs are crowding out the market, but more research is needed in this area.
- Diversified models and platforms for paying for news, and research about what audiences are willing to pay for.

⁹ <https://www.acma.gov.au/register-eligible-news-businesses>

Research Priority: A research gap analysis of existing work into regional news media.

The power imbalance between digital platforms and news outlets has had a greater impact on smaller local and regional news. Compounded by financial difficulties during the pandemic, there is now a considerable news gap in some regional areas of Australia. While research into the state of regional news media has been growing, it is time to conduct a thorough stocktake of what has been done to accurately identify the gaps and avoid overlap in contemporary research.

Research Priority: Impacts of regional news gaps on communities

Contraction of local news, particularly in regional areas, is an ongoing issue that is unlikely to be remedied by the News Media Bargaining Code alone. The longer-term impacts of the loss of local news on communities, and what is filling the news gaps, are largely unknown.

A consistent evaluation of the supply, production, and consumption of regional news is needed. Including:

- The impact of the local news gaps on communities — economically and socially.
- The ability of news start-ups on meeting local information needs, including social media.

- The impact of the NMBC and VCA on regional news and small publishers.

Research Priority: Impact of social media on news behaviour and attitudes

Australians increasingly use social media to access news, but they also encounter misinformation alongside the news, which in both cases are often incidental.

More research is needed into the motivations and impacts of intentional and incidental news and misinformation consumption. We see a need for comprehensive research of the impact of social media on audience perceptions of news trust, news engagement and willingness to pay for news, including:

- The impact of incidental news consumption on news behaviours (i.e., engagement, trust, pay, and avoidance).
- The impact of accessing news brands on social media on news trust and brand trust.
- Audience perceptions of new news products from Facebook (Facebook News) and Google (Google News Showcase) tied into the VCAs, and whether they are increasing or decreasing audience exposure to news, brand identification, and brand trust.

3. MISINFORMATION

Research Priority: Establishing a baseline data and tracking impacts of the Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation (ACPDM)

A lack of transparency around the information collected by digital platforms makes the measurement of the voluntary ACPDM

very difficult. While participants welcomed the ACPDM as a good starting point, the transparency reports provided by the platforms are welcome, but there is still a need for independent researchers to have greater access to data about misinformation activity and their actions to address them. Research in this area should include:

- Cross-platform comparative assessment of platform misinformation measures based on the regular and consistent provision of transparency reports.
- Data-driven assessment of misinformation levels, and platform measures to address them, based on the provision of data to researchers and collaborative research.

Research Priority: Public awareness of and attitudes towards the Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation

There is much debate about the ability of the platforms to effectively deal with disinformation. DIGI has recently announced additional layers of accountability for the voluntary code. There is little research into audience awareness and understandings of the code, and whether any of the interventions, such as flagging and blocking, are changing audience behaviour. Survey and qualitative audience research are needed to gauge public awareness of the ACPDM, attitudes towards it, and assess the efficacy of the interventions by platforms to tackle misinformation on audience behaviours.

Research Priority: Adequacy of formal definitions of dis/misinformation from the perspective of the audience

Roundtable discussions and N&MRC research reveal there is a disconnection between formal definitions of dis- and misinformation used by industry and policy makers, and audience understanding of the terms. The debate amongst participants suggested that it is unrealistic to assume we will reach a uniform definition. A broader definition of misinformation and disinformation might need to be considered to incorporate audience perspectives, along with greater transparency around the definitions being used by researchers, government, and digital platforms. Research to test the formal definitions

adopted by industry and government against audience understandings is needed.

Research Priority: Investigation of the production, spread and reception of misinformation in culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), regional, low socio-economic, and older populations

There is a large body of work focusing on the spread of misinformation on digital platforms, but less into its spread through other social and structural community networks. A range of qualitative research would be useful to investigate the production, spread and reception of misinformation in CALD, regional, low socio-economic, and older populations to assess how they perceive, encounter, detect, understand, and respond to misinformation. Including:

- Audience-based research into how CALD, regional, low socio-economic, and older populations perceive, encounter, detect, understand, and respond to misinformation
- Qualitative content analysis of CALD community news and social media incorporating contested information — health, climate and/ or immigration.
- Analysis of the production, spread and reception of misinformation beyond Google and Facebook, with particular focus on messaging apps and new digital platforms.

Research Priority: Examination of existing misinformation mitigation measures and their efficacy

News media, journalists, government, and digital platforms all state they are acting to mitigate misinformation, however little evaluation is done into the efficacy of these interventions. Further, we know little about how the actions and discursive practices of these multiple stakeholders intersect,

and their effectiveness. A range of research is needed (including content analyses and qualitative studies) to evaluate the measures being taken by news media, journalists, government, and digital platforms to mitigate against misinformation on digital platforms, in news media, and propagated by politicians.

Research Priority: The role of media literacy in mitigating misinformation

Increased understanding of media systems and practices can safeguard individuals from the harms of misinformation. However, Australians are not equipped with adequate media literacy. While many media literacy interventions have been developed, they are ad hoc, and their efficacy has not been evaluated. More research is needed to better understand the media literacy needs of vulnerable groups and what types of education work best.

We identify a need for qualitative research into the impact of media literacy education on audiences' ability to combat misinformation, and trust in news. Special attention should be paid to CALD, regional, low socio-economic, and older populations. Evaluation and development of core educational strategies, such as fact checking, as media literacy is a key civic skill supported throughout life.

While this is not an exhaustive list of research areas to be prioritised in relation to the NMBC and the ACPDM, they do highlight the need for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of these policy interventions on the news and media environment in Australia. We look forward to continuing discussion and collaboration with industry, government and the public about these and other important issues impacting on the future of the news media and public interest journalism in Australia.

GLOSSARY

ACCC

Australian Consumer and Competition Commission

ACMA

Australian Communications and Media Authority

ACPDM

Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation

CALD

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

DIGI

Digital Industry Group Inc

N&MRC

News and Media Research Centre

NMBC

News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code

VCA

Voluntary content agreements

APPENDIX: ROUNDTABLE PROGRAM

Fridays 3 September 2021

SESSION	TIME	TOPIC
Online registration	7.45	Registration
Opening	8.00	Introduction Professor Kerry McCallum, Director, N&MRC Opening remarks Professor Leigh Sullivan, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research and Innovation, University of Canberra
Session 1	8.15	News in the time of COVID-19: News consumption trends and issues Global Insights from the <i>Digital News Report 2021</i> Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford
	8.40	Q&A
	8.50	<i>DNR: Australia 2021</i> Key Findings Professor Sora Park, N&MRC
	9.05	Q&A
<i>Break</i>	9.20	
Session 2	9.30	News and Digital Platforms News Media Bargaining Code update - ACCC and ACMA Round table discussion: Local and global responses, and research needs
Break	10.45	
Session 3	11.00	Combatting misinformation Combatting misinformation: Update on the ACMA's oversight role Round table discussion: Interventions, strategies, and research needs
Close	12.40	



**News & Media Research Centre
Faculty of Arts & Design**

UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA
CANBERRA ACT 2601
AUSTRALIA

Australian Government Higher Education
Registered (CRICOS) Provider #00212K.

Information in this report was correct at time of printing.
Up-to-date information is available on the University's
website: canberra.edu.au/nmrc

canberra.edu.au/nmrc
[@NewsMediaRC](https://www.instagram.com/NewsMediaRC)