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Submission to The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM)

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the JSCEM on civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia.

We are Chief Investigators of the Australian Research Council funded project, [Addressing Misinformation with Media Literacy through Cultural Institutions](#) and we have carried out a series of media literacy research projects over the past decade.

We are making this submission because we believe our current and recent media literacy research projects can be used to inform this Inquiry.

Disinformation is a serious threat to all societies because it can be used to undermine democratic institutions and processes (such as elections) by preventing people from making informed decisions. Disinformation can also polarise societies by pitting communities against each other. Citizens need to be media literate to identify reliable information, avoid disinformation and create high quality information.

For this reason, our submission draws on our research to examine the role of media literacy in supporting civic participation and enabling a functioning democracy.

Sincerely,

Associate Professor Tanya Notley

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Professor Michael Dezuanni

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Below we summarise key findings from our research that we believe are directly relevant to this Inquiry's terms of reference.

1. Civic participation is closely linked to news engagement and media literacy

Our research demonstrates that there is a clear association between news consumption and civic engagement. Effective civic participation is founded on informed citizens, who are aware of local, national and international events and developments. Citizens become informed about local, national and international events and developments primarily through accessing a diverse range of media.

Our research shows that adult Australians who consume online news regularly are 20% more likely to participate in civic activities¹. In addition, more than half of Australian children aged 12-16 who have high interest in news reported getting involved online in social issues (56%), compared to only 9% of those who have the lowest level of interest in news². Furthermore, children who received news literacy education at school reported higher digital civic engagement levels compared to those who did not receive this education³.

Global studies⁴ consistently show that children's media literacy is influenced by their parents' socioeconomic status. Our *Young Australians and News* survey, conducted in 2017, 2020 and 2023 provides valuable longitudinal data about news engagement and media literacy of young people aged 8-16 years. The 2023 survey results show that young people whose parents have a low level of education are less likely to value and engage with news⁵. Given that families are the most frequent and trusted source of news for young people, this likely reflects a lower level of parental engagement with news. Young people whose parent/s have a low level of education and those from regional communities were also less likely to be pro-active news consumers who seek out news independently. Australians with a low level of education are more likely to be living in low-income households⁶.

Our research shows that increasing people's engagement with news and developing their media literacy will likely result in an increased level of civic participation. This provides a clear rationale and impetus for civic engagement efforts to focus on increasing news engagement and media literacy. Our research also provides a strong rationale for ensuring that news engagement and media literacy

¹ Park, S., Lee, J. Y., Notley, T., & Dezuanni, M. (2023) Exploring the relationship between media literacy, online interaction, and civic engagement. *The Information Society*, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2023.2211055>

² Notley, T., Chambers, S., Zhong, H.F., Park, S., Lee, J. and Dezuanni, M. (2023) *News and Young Australians in 2023: How children and teens access, perceive and are affected by news media*, Research Report, Western Sydney University.

³ Lee, J., Park, S. & Notley, T. (2024). Exploring the effects of news literacy education on news literacy and digital civic engagement among young people. Paper to be presented at the the 74rd Annual ICA Conference: Communication and Global Human Rights, Children, Adolescents & Media Division (20-24 June).

⁴ Hatlevik O.E. and Christophersen K.A. (2013) Digital competence at the beginning of upper secondary school: Identifying factors explaining digital inclusion. *Computers & education* 63: 240-247; Tran T, Ho MT, Pham TH, Nguyen MH, Nguyen KLP, Vuong TT, ... and Vuong QH (2020). How digital natives learn and thrive in the digital age: Evidence from an emerging economy. *Sustainability* 12(9): 3819.

⁵ Notley, T., Chambers, S., Zhong, H.F., Park, S., Lee, J. and Dezuanni, M. (2023) *News and Young Australians in 2023: How children and teens access, perceive and are affected by news media*, Research Report, Western Sydney University.

⁶ <https://www.education.gov.au/integrated-data-research/benefits-educational-attainment/introduction>

support is targeted to meet the needs of low socioeconomic Australians as well as those living in regional areas. In addition, it is critical that policies recognise existing inequalities and inequities when it comes to people's ability to be media literate. Our research⁷ shows that among marginalised segments of the population, there are broader challenges related to news media use and news literacy. For example, inadequate access to devices and the internet, insufficient access to trusted sources of information, a lack of understanding of the needs and experiences of these groups within the broader public, attitudinal barriers to using media and technology and having no one to turn to for media and technology support. These barriers should be addressed to support an inclusive, informed and engaged public.

2. A healthy democracy needs well-informed citizens who are capable of identifying and creating credible and trustworthy information

Citizens need to have the requisite skills, knowledge and capabilities to be able to use news media to engage with politics and world events. For example, citizens need to be able to find high quality information online and recognise when information presented via different media forms is false, misleading or deliberately deceptive and they need to be able to investigate media sources to make informed decisions about which sources can be trusted.

However, our *Adult Media Literacy in Australia 2024 study* finds that only 61% of Australians are confident they can find information they need online and just 42% of adult Australians say they can check if information found online is true⁸.

Our *Young Australians and News 2023 study* shows that just 41% of children aged 8-16 years are confident they can tell fake news stories from real news stories⁹.

These findings demonstrate that national initiatives are required to help adult citizens identify and avoid online misinformation.

3. For people to be active and well-informed citizens, they need access to lifelong media literacy education and support

Media literacy refers to the ability to apply critical thinking to media through analysis, evaluation and reflection and it is a critical form of literacy that is essential for full participation in society. Multiple studies have demonstrated that increasing people's capacity for critical thinking in relation to their

⁷ Park, S., Lee, J., Atkinson, S. & Su, J. (2021) *Media Literacy in Australia: A Qualitative Study*. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre. <https://apo.org.au/node/313350>

⁸ Notley, T., S. Park, M. Dezuanni and S. Chambers (2024) *Adult Media Literacy in Australia. Research Report*, Sydney, Western Sydney University, University of Canberra and Queensland University of Technology. (To be launched in mid 2024)

⁹ Notley, T., Chambers, S., Zhong, H.F., Park, S., Lee, J. and Dezuanni, M. (2023) *News and Young Australians in 2023: How children and teens access, perceive and are affected by news media*, Research Report, Western Sydney University.

media use increases their ability to detect and avoid misinformation¹⁰. Media literacy initiatives can also empower citizens to become competent and responsible media producers and consumers.

We note there has been some significant progress to support young people's media literacy including updates to the national curriculum¹¹ and the release of a suite of high-quality curriculum aligned news literacy resources by public institutions such as ABC Education, the Museum of Australian Democracy and the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia as well as commercial enterprises such as Squizkids' NewsHounds program (designed for primary school students). All of these organisations have produced high-quality resources that are well used by teachers. These organisations they should be supported to extend the reach of their media literacy resources.

However, there are no comprehensive Australian national resources to support adult media literacy. Most Australian adults say they received very little or no media literacy education at school and 30% have never received any form of media literacy support across their lifetime.¹¹

Given that almost every aspect of our lives is now mediated, an ongoing, comprehensive and coherent educational strategy for media literacy in Australia is required. This must not involve quick-fix, partial or one-off solutions. Ever evolving media technologies and practices mean that media literacy is a lifelong pursuit and interventions are required throughout a person's life to ensure they are capable of using media to participate in society in diverse ways. However, the level of importance ascribed to media literacy across policy areas in Australia across a diverse number of Parliamentary Inquiries in recent years has not been matched by appropriate state or federal level policy or sustained funding support.

4. Adult Australians have a low level of media literacy

The *Adult Media Literacy in Australia 2024* survey finds that most adult Australians lack confidence in their media abilities. Some groups are far more likely to have a low level of media literacy ability¹². Our 2024 survey finds that older Australians, those in low-income households, with a low level of education, living with a disability and living in regional Australia should be considered priority groups for media literacy interventions because they have an overall lower level of confidence in their own media abilities are more likely to have no or low access to media literacy support. Our previous survey in 2021 found shows these trends remain largely unchanged. There is a need to support our longitudinal evidence base to track any improvements over time, with the introduction of future interventions to develop adult media literacy. Our qualitative media literacy research builds on the survey findings by identifying that

¹⁰ For example Edwards, L., Stoilova, M., Anstead, N., Fry, A., El-Halaby, G., & Smith, M. (2021) *Rapid evidence assessment on online misinformation and media literacy: Final report for OFCOM*, London School of Economics.

¹¹ Notley, T., Park, S., Dezuanni, M., and Chambers, S. (2021) *Adult Media Literacy in Australia. Research Report*, Sydney, Western Sydney University, University of Canberra and Queensland University of Technology.

¹² Notley, T., Park, S., Dezuanni, M., and Chambers, S. (2024) *Adult Media Literacy in Australia. Research Report*, Sydney, Western Sydney University, University of Canberra and Queensland University of Technology. (Report to be launched mid 2024)

there are specific media literacy needs and barriers for Australians who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, living in regional areas, living with a disability and who are older¹³.

5. Australia lags behind developed countries who have established developed media literacy policies and programs

Unlike in many other advanced democracies, media literacy education has not been supported by policy in Australia in a significant or sustained way. Media literacy policies now exist across many European, African and Latin American countries¹⁴, with some policies established for well over a decade. The EU has been particularly proactive in recent years in developing media literacy initiatives to support free and fair elections¹⁵ and member countries are also now required to regularly report on what they are doing to develop media literacy as part of an obligation stemming from the Audiovisual Media Services Directive¹⁶. Australia is yet to act on the 2019 ACCC Digital Platform Inquiry Recommendations regarding the provision of sustained support for adult media literacy¹⁷. We believe a national approach based on international best practice and a national evidence-base is needed to advance media literacy in a rapidly shifting media environment. Such an approach should be supported by the government with adequate funding.

6. A national civic media literacy approach is needed in Australia that builds on the strengths of existing, relevant national public institutions, universities, educational organisations and cultural organisations

For critical engagement in society, citizens need access to quality news as well as the ability to discern low quality news and misinformation (media literacy).

News engagement is associated with civic engagement. However, some citizens and communities find it harder to find, understand, analyse, critique and share and create news media. Australian governments have an essential role to play in supporting national efforts to foster citizens' critical engagement with news and high-quality content, via the promotion and implementation of media literacy initiatives. Providing targeted media literacy support to vulnerable groups is an important role of government to ensure people can fully participate in society and to reduce risks associated with media illiteracy such as vulnerability to scams and deception. In all other international jurisdictions where media literacy has been successfully implemented on a wide scale, government policy has promoted and enabled media literacy initiatives through policy and funding.

¹³ Notley, T., Park, S., Dezuanni, M., and Chambers, S. (2021) *Adult Media Literacy in Australia. Research Report*, Sydney, Western Sydney, University of Canberra and Queensland University of Technology.

¹⁴ For example, Brazil has recently created a Department (Office) of Media Literacy national media education strategy, https://www.gov.br/secom/pt-br/arquivos/2023_secom_brazilian-media-education-strategy.pdf

¹⁵ See https://commission.europa.eu/topics/strategic-communication-and-tackling-disinformation_en

¹⁶ See <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/national-reports-media-literacy-measures-under-audiovisual-media-services-directive-2020-2022>

¹⁷ See <https://www.accc.gov.au/about-us/publications/digital-platforms-inquiry-final-report>

In many European countries, public cultural institutions lead national media literacy efforts in recognition of the strength, capacity and public trust these institutions have. We recognise that the Australian Media Literacy Alliance (AMLA)¹⁸, comprised of national public cultural institutions, has been driving government and public interest in media literacy at a national level for several years while building the capacity of key mediators such as teachers and librarians. AMLA has stated that the development of a national media literacy strategy is essential to provide direction, guidance and benchmarks and to enable organisations and stakeholders to promote a unified approach to media literacy education. Sustained public funding is urgently needed to promote and extend AMLA's work and to develop media literacy research, resources and programs more generally – particularly for adults. We believe government funding should recognise the important role played by public cultural institutions and mediators such as educators, community services and librarians.

¹⁸ See www.medialiteracy.org.au. Co-authors Michael Dezuanni and Tanya Notley are founding members of the Australian Media Literacy Alliance.

Background

We are the joint recipients of a significant grant from the Australian Research Council Linkage Project (2023-2026), *Addressing Misinformation using Media Literacy with Public Cultural Institutions*¹⁹. This project involves a collaboration with four public cultural institutions as partner organisations—the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA), the Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD) and the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA). Together, these partner organisations reach and engage millions of Australians every week through physical spaces (museums and libraries), broadcast media and online media.

Our project aims to address a lack of knowledge about how public cultural institutions can use media literacy to effectively address misinformation in ways that are tailored to the diverse educational needs and interests of adult Australians.

To achieve this our Project will:

1. Identify adult engagement patterns with misinformation online, through a first of its kind nationally representative activity-based survey (report to be released mid 2024);
2. Uncover the diverse experiences adults have with misinformation online, through a qualitative diary study (report to be released late 2024);
3. Develop a model that enables national public cultural institutions to use evidence to design, deliver and evaluate targeted media literacy training programs and resources, through the development of a toolkit and a series of workshop events (2024-2026);
4. Inform policymakers, media professionals, civil society organisations and educators about the role media literacy can play to address misinformation, through public events and an industry-focused handbook (2024-2026).

In addition, we are the lead authors of three relevant studies that we mainly draw on in making this submission:

1. *Adult Media Literacy in Australia* (2021 and 2024 forthcoming)
2. *News and Young Australians* (2017, 2020 and 2023)
3. *Digital News Report: Australia* (conducted annually since 2015 but we cite the 2018 report which specifically examines news literacy)

¹⁹ <https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/addressing-misinformation-with-media-literacy>

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Biographical information

Associate Professor Tanya Notley – Western Sydney University

Tanya Notley's research and teaching focus on the social and cultural impact of communication technologies. She collaborates with cultural institutions, education providers and social justice organisations in the areas of media literacy and digital inclusion. Notley leads The Advancing Media Literacy [research program](#) at Western Sydney University. In the past five years this program has supported 10 externally funded media literacy research projects, involving collaborations with 15 industry partners including Australian Associated Press, Meta, Google, ABC Education, UNESCO, the Museum of Australian Democracy, the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia and the UN Information Center for Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific. This research has informed national school curriculum, government policies and media literacy initiatives that have reached millions of Australians. Notley's research has also resulted in at least 150 media stories, with media including ABC and SBS news, the Australian, Radio National (AM and PM) the Project (Channel 10), New York Times and many more. Notley served as Co-Chair for the Australian Media Literacy Alliance 2020-2024.

Professor Michael Dezuanni – Queensland University of Technology

Professor Dezuanni is a leading Australian media literacy scholar. He is Program Lead for Digital Inclusion and Participation in the Digital Media Research Centre at QUT. He is also a program leader and Chief Investigator in the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child. Michael is an invited member of numerous advisory committees, including the Australian Media Literacy Alliance, the Alanah and Madeline Foundation's Media Literacy advisory group, the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance, the State Library of Queensland's Digital Inclusion advisory group, and NBN Co's Low Income Digital Inclusion Forum. Michael has been an expert advisor for the development of the Australian Curriculum (Media Arts). He is the author of four books and over fifty peer reviewed journal articles and book chapters about media literacy, digital inclusion and the use of digital technologies in everyday life.

Professor Sora Park - University of Canberra

Dr Sora Park is internationally recognised as an expert in digital media users and media policy. She has extensive global experience in government and private sector consulting and has a broad range of research expertise ranging from large-scale surveys to in-depth qualitative methods. As the Project Leader of the *Digital News Report: Australia*, she has an ongoing collaboration with the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford tracking digital news consumers through annual surveys of 40+ countries. She also leads an Australian Research Council Discovery Project 'The Rise of Mistrust: Digital Platforms and Trust in News Media' and a Linkage Project 'Heartbeat of Australia: Tracking, Understanding and Engaging News Audiences'.

Organisation Overview

Institute for Culture & Society, Western Sydney University

The *Institute for Culture and Society* (ICS) is home to the largest dedicated concentration of socio-cultural research in Australia. Its research program is designed to build the cultural intelligence needed to address the challenges, contradictions and complexities of a 21st-century world that is increasingly globalised, diverse and technologically mediated. ICS's current membership of over 60 researchers includes 23 professors, one Future Fellow, three DECRA scholars as well as close to 50 HDR candidates, with a balanced research profile of mid- and early-career researchers, post-doctoral fellows and adjunct appointments. ICS also currently hosts nodes from two Centres of Excellence. ICS members are supported by a team of dedicated professional staff. The Institute operates a vigorous annual program of workshops, seminars, symposia and conferences, attracting leading international visiting fellows. Many of these events provide a platform for the presentation of research findings to a broad and invested audience.

<https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/ics/>

QUT Digital Media Research Centre

The QUT Digital Media Research Centre (DMRC) conducts world-leading interdisciplinary research for a flourishing digital society. The Centre's researchers addresses local, national and global challenges at the forefront of digital transformation, and provide an ambitious, stimulating and supportive research culture for our researchers, students, and partners. The DMRC is a global leader in digital humanities and social science research with a focus on communication, media, and the law. It is one of Australia's top organisations for media and communication research, areas in which QUT has achieved the highest possible rankings in ERA, the national research quality assessment exercise. The Centre's research programs investigate the digital transformation of media industries, the challenges of digital inclusion and governance, the growing role of AI and automation in the information environment, and the role of social media in public communication.

<https://research.qut.edu.au/dmrc/the-centre/>

News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra

The News and Media Research Centre (N&MRC) advances public understanding of the changing media environment. N&MRC is Australia's nationally recognised research centre for the study of news media industries, audiences and public discourse. At a time of epistemic crisis for the media industries, we research and advocate for a media system that builds trust, inclusivity and diversity, to defend and repair the social fabric. The Centre publishes independent reports based on surveys, qualitative and content analyses of news media markets and news consumption. Since 2015, the N&MRC has produced the *Digital News Report: Australia*, a national annual online survey of more than 2,000 adult Australians that monitors changes in consumption, as part of a global study of 46 news markets by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford.

<https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/centres/nmrc>