

Australian Broadcasting Corporation responses to questions on notice

Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee hearing on the provisions of the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2024, 17 October 2024

Misinformation, disinformation and emergency coverage

CHAIR: Maybe I could clarify. As you are the providers of critical emergency information across Australia, I was hoping that you would have an opinion on what the challenges are in terms of emergency services when there is disruption and when there is misinformation and disinformation provided out there?

Dr Sutton: Okay. I understand the question now. I'll probably want to take some of that on notice, but fundamentally I think what we find with emergency situations is that, in fact, if anything, that's where we tend to draw audiences to us. I note, for example, that during the COVID pandemic we suddenly had people coming to the ABC in incredibly large numbers, and I think there is a certain sense in which we do get audiences coming to us at those times because they trust us. Are there specific impediments there? Are there things that block us—misinformation? There probably are. I'd probably need to go and talk to our social media people about that. Can I take that on notice?

During emergency coverage, the ABC takes active steps to verify information shared by the public. The Corporation's rolling coverage of natural disasters on radio is generally undertaken by ABC Local teams who have local knowledge and experience that assists in identifying inaccurate claims. Likewise, the Corporation actively moderates comments posted in response to stories on social media during an emergency. While there have been instances of people sharing incorrect or inaccurate information via ABC SMS or social media channels, it is relatively rare.

The Corporation has observed the phenomenon of people reposting images or video of previous natural disasters on community social media channels that are not connected with the ABC, possibly to gain a reaction. Such reposting can create a snowball effect where responses on the channel in which the images or videos are posted can lead to promotion by the platform's algorithm, which can

in turn lead to wider, misinformed sharing. To help reduce such reposting, the ABC closes discussion at the end of an emergency and marks the matter as no longer active.

A more significant challenge to the Corporation's emergency coverage on social media is that changes to some platforms' algorithms have deprioritised ABC stories, reducing their ability to reach the public.

Recruitment of journalists

CHAIR: In terms of the journalists that you employ in your services, are you finding that, as things are evolving in the issues around misinformation and disinformation and as the speed of the proliferation of information is becoming more prevalent and more spoken about, do you find that you're looking for journalists who have got more of those misinformation and disinformation analytical skills?

Dr Sutton: I'd have to take that on notice and take that back to our news people, in terms of who they choose to hire and how they're selecting new recruits to our journalists. But it's obviously an increasingly important skill base for journalists to have.

CHAIR: SBS?

Ms O'Neil: Obviously our journalists undergo constant training and updating of their skills as we go forward. Certainly, in the digital environment, as we're heard, things like verification of images are matters that you need to keep regularly up to date on. Like the ABC, I can take on notice any specific changes that have been made to job descriptions or anything like that, but, certainly, it's an issue that all of our teams are alive to.

CHAIR: If you're both going to take that on notice, I might ask you to consider AI in that as well, in terms of new delights that journalists are having to deal with.

The ABC has not altered position descriptions for journalists to make specific reference to misinformation, disinformation or artificial intelligence (AI).

At the same time, ABC News is in the process of expanding training for staff in online verification and continuously improving and developing standards in this area.

Likewise, in relation to AI technologies, the ABC has introduced editorial guidance on the use of AI in content-making and ABC News is delivering training to its staff in relation to AI.

Definitions of misinformation and disinformation

Senator CADELL: Do each of your organisations have your own separate definitions of misinformation and disinformation, and, if so, what are they?

Dr Sutton: I don't know if we have a formal definition. Let me look that up. I'm not aware of one. I've never seen it promulgated. It certainly doesn't appear in our editorial policies. I can take that on notice for you.

Senator CADELL: So it's not overly front of mind for you people, if it's not in your editorial policies.

Dr Sutton: No, I don't think I'd agree with that. But, rather, I think the way that we see ourselves responding to the information environment that we find ourselves in is that we're a force for accurate information: we actually do our jobs as almost, in a sense, an antidote to misinformation and disinformation. We actually provide accurate, information, and we actively lean into that. We also provide things like media literacy training, particularly in the school sector, through ABC Education. And, as we've previously discussed, we have built out our News Verify function, which may, given it does have misinformation and disinformation in sight, have a definition that it works to it, and I can look for that if that's useful to you.

Senator CADELL: Yes, please.

The ABC does not have formal definitions of misinformation and disinformation.

During training, the ABC Verify team uses a definition drawn from the Australian Electoral Commission to explain the difference between misinformation and disinformation: misinformation is wrong or false information shared mistakenly or through ignorance; disinformation is false or wrong information being deliberately spread for malicious purposes, to influence or deceive.

Fact-checkers

Senator ROBERTS: With regard to your fact-checkers—both SBS and ABC can take this on notice—could you specify the fact-checkers that you use, who else each of them have as clients and where they get their funding?

CHAIR: Senator Roberts, if you're talking about a third party that SBS or ABC might use, they would be open to have only certain levels of information.

Senator ROBERTS: Whatever you can answer on that, please: who are your fact-checkers, who else do they have as clients that you know of and that you can find out about, and who else pays them money—educational institutions, political organisations, activist organisations?

Dr Sutton: We can take that on notice.

The ABC no longer employs external fact-checkers.