UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA

NEWS & MEDIA RESEARCH CENTRE

Submission to the Environment and Communications References Committee Inquiry into Media Diversity in Australia

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Background

The News and Media Research Centre (N&MRC) at the University of Canberra advances public understanding of the changing media landscape, focusing on the impact of digital and mobile systems on news consumption, public discourse and democratic participation.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the terms of reference of the Environment and Communications References Committee *Inquiry into Media Diversity in Australia*. The Committee's scope is broad and covers a range of important issues pertinent to Australia's changing media and political landscape. Our focus is on the way audiences consume news, the barriers to Australians accessing reliable, accurate and independent news, the impact of digital platforms on news consumption, and the needs of regional audiences and journalists to serve their local communities.

Since 2015, the Centre has published the *Digital News Report (DNR): Australia*, a national annual online survey of more than 2,000 adult Australians which monitors changes in news consumption over time, particularly within the digital space. The 2020 Australian survey forms part of a global study of 40 news markets by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. The *Digital News Report: Australia* can be downloaded via https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/faculty-research-centres/nmrc.

Our submission addresses the following terms of reference:

a) the current state of public interest journalism in Australia and any barriers to Australian voters' ability to access reliable, accurate and independent news;
b) the impact of significant changes to media business models since the advent of online news and the barriers to viability and profitability of public interest news services;
c) the impact of online global platforms such as Facebook, Google and Twitter on the media industry and sharing of news in Australia; and
d) the state of local, regional, and rural media outlets in Australia.

This submission provides context for, and evidence of, the way audiences are changing how they get the news in the context of a contracting traditional media industry and a growing presence of digital platforms to access and consume news. Evidence for our submission is draw from the findings of several reports published by the News & Media Research Centre based on surveys of Australian, local, and older news consumers, and a survey of regional journalists (see References). The submission authors are happy to provide further information to the Inquiry if requested.

Definitions and scope of the submission

The scope of the Senate Inquiry into Media diversity in Australia is very broad and includes all aspects of media diversity, independence and reliability that influence the Australian public. We define the following key concepts and limit our scope primarily on issues that are relevant to news consumers and news consumption, as outlined below.

News market

The provision of quality news is an essential component of a pluralistic democracy. With the introduction of digital platforms and online media, there have been considerable structural and operational changes in the news market across all areas of production, distribution, and consumption of news. This has resulted in an emergence of various news sources but a decline in the provision of traditional news. For the purposes of examining media diversity, however, we are only including traditional or legacy media outlets across all major platforms (TV, radio, print, online, social media) and new digital only publications. However, we are not including other user-generated alternative websites (i.e. blogs).

Diversity

Public discourse surrounding the Media Diversity Inquiry has emphasised the undeniable fact that Australia's newspaper ownership is dominated by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. The concept of diversity has been interpreted in many ways. Here, we characterise diversity as having three aspects that correspond to different parts of the communication process: source diversity, content diversity, and exposure diversity (Napoli, 1999). *Source diversity* refers to the need for diversity in media content, outlet, and workforce; while *content diversity* refers to the need for diverse viewpoints, program types, and demographic representation in media. *Exposure diversity* is concerned with the diversity of content or sources consumed by audience members. These three aspects have traditionally been are related to one another in a unidirectional way, from source to exposure - both horizontally (across available sources) and vertically (within individual sources) (Joris et al., 2020). However, the relationship between the three dimensions is not always related. For example, source diversity may not result in content diversity or exposure diversity. Among the various dimensions, the end goal is to provide sufficient diversity to citizens so they can consume a diverse range of news that will inform their decision-making in all aspects of their lives. Our submission focuses on diversity in news consumption (exposure diversity) based on our research on news and journalism.

Public interest journalism

Public Interest journalism is defined as having 'the primary purpose of recording, investigating and explaining public policy and issues of public interest or significance with the aim of engaging citizens in public debate and informing democratic decision making' (PIJI, 2019). There is an assumption underlying the use of this term that news and journalism can be separated out from the myriad of information and entertainment produced and consumed in media. News consumers do not necessarily distinguish between political/policy news, gossip, sport, or lifestyle content. There is also an assumption that news is produced by professionals, which belies the fact that information content is produced by both media professionals, politicians, companies, NGOs, *and* everyday citizens, and circulates and engages citizens in public debate. The growing sector of non-profit journalism is one example of the fracturing and reconfiguration of what we understand by 'news', let alone 'media'.

The changing media landscape

Any discussion of media diversity must acknowledge the realities of the digital media landscape and the changing ways Australians are accessing news and information. Increased news consumption during the 2020 Australian bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic shows that there is an appetite for quality news and information in times of crisis. In Australia we have seen the contraction in the number of newspaper titles, the concentration of newspaper, radio and television ownership, the closure of more than 200 regional news services, and an alarming loss of professional journalism roles. There is little doubt this has impacted on the supply of locally produced professional public interest journalism. At the same time, we see the emergence of start-ups, a rise in the range of digital media platforms, the burgeoning of social media, ubiquitous use of mobile devices, and an increase in subscription news services. Australians are increasingly accessing news and information from online sources, including via social media platforms. The proliferation of information and misinformation on these sites means news consumers have access to more content than in the past, but of varying quality and declining levels of interest and trust in the news generally. Detailed research is required to accurately map these changes over the past 20 years to get a true sense of whether the diversity of public interest journalism has reduced or grown in response to digitization.

Chadwick (2017) describes a contemporary media landscape characterised by the melding of 'traditional' (print, broadcast) and 'new' (online, social media platforms) media. In a hybrid media system, citizens do not rely solely on journalism produced in newsrooms but on news and information circulated on digital, mobile, and social media platforms. This dramatically complicates knowledge of what citizens understand of politics and policy and offers new challenges for regulators to ensure citizens have access to independent, reliable, and fair public information.

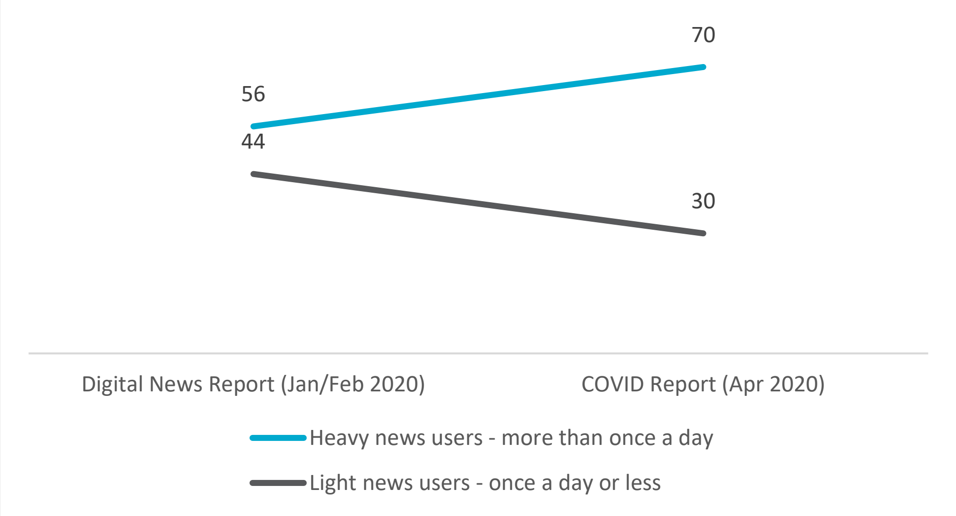
In the digital era, news media have become more dependent on digital platforms for audiences. Advertisers have also turned to digital platforms to reach consumers, whereas in the past, news media were the main source of advertising. Due to this alternative way of reaching consumers, the advertising revenue of news media has declined significantly in the past decade. An issue being addressed by the government's new Mandatory News Media Bargaining Code, which has now been tabled in the parliament.

News media have adapted to this environment by providing news online as well as actively linking their content on digital platforms with an aim to reach a wider audience. As a result, digital platforms are increasingly becoming a major source of news among Australians. However, digital platforms are not news companies and do not have full editorial control over the content that is distributed on the platforms. There are emerging platforms that do have editorial functions and digital platforms are exerting a certain level of monitoring and management of content, but they are rarely equivalent to the editorial standards of professionally produced journalistic content. News consumers are exposed to a myriad of content on digital platforms and are left to their own devices to find and filter relevant information. In this environment, it is not easy for news consumers to differentiate news from other content. And it is very hard to separate false information from facts.

Access to news in Australia's hybrid media system

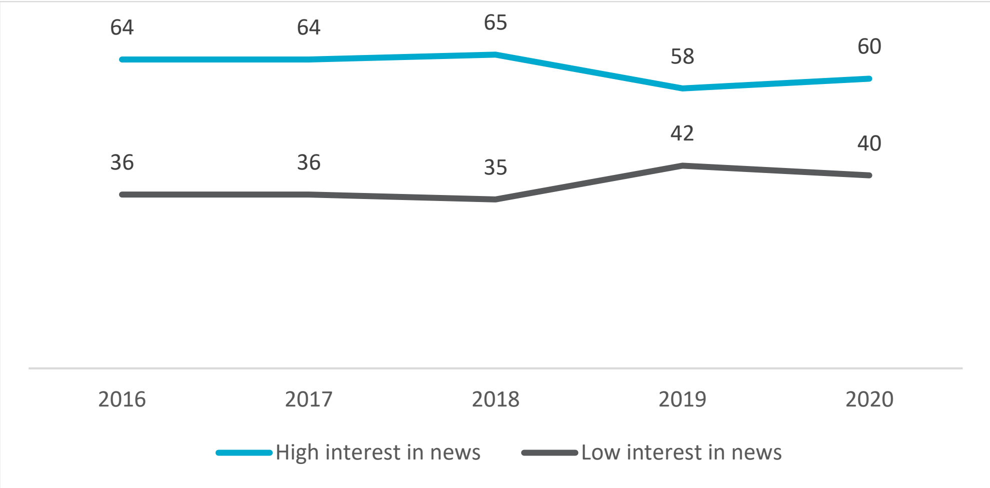
News consumers were accessing news more than ever before. At the end of January/early February (when the DNR survey was conducted), more than half of Australian news consumers accessed news more than once a day (56%), which was a 4% increase from 2019. This Increased even further during the pandemic when more than two-thirds (70%) of respondents were accessing news more than once a day during the first national lock down in April (see figure 1). Additional research is being conducted to see if this increase has changed.

FIGURE 1: FREQUENCY OF NEWS ACCESS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC (%)



Despite the increase in news consumption among Australians, interest in news has declined over the past five years. In 2020, 60% of Australian news consumers say they are extremely or very interested in news (-4% from 2016) (see figure 2).

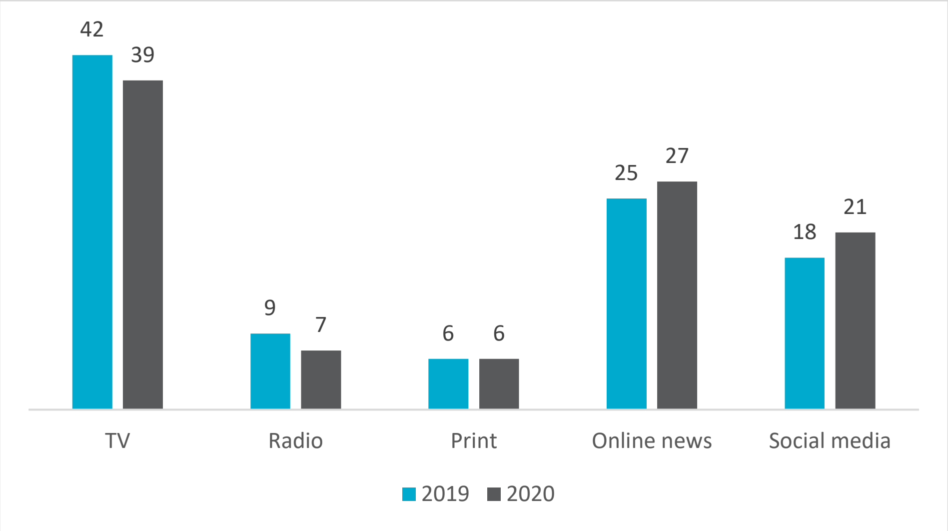
FIGURE 2: INTEREST IN NEWS (%)



Sources of news

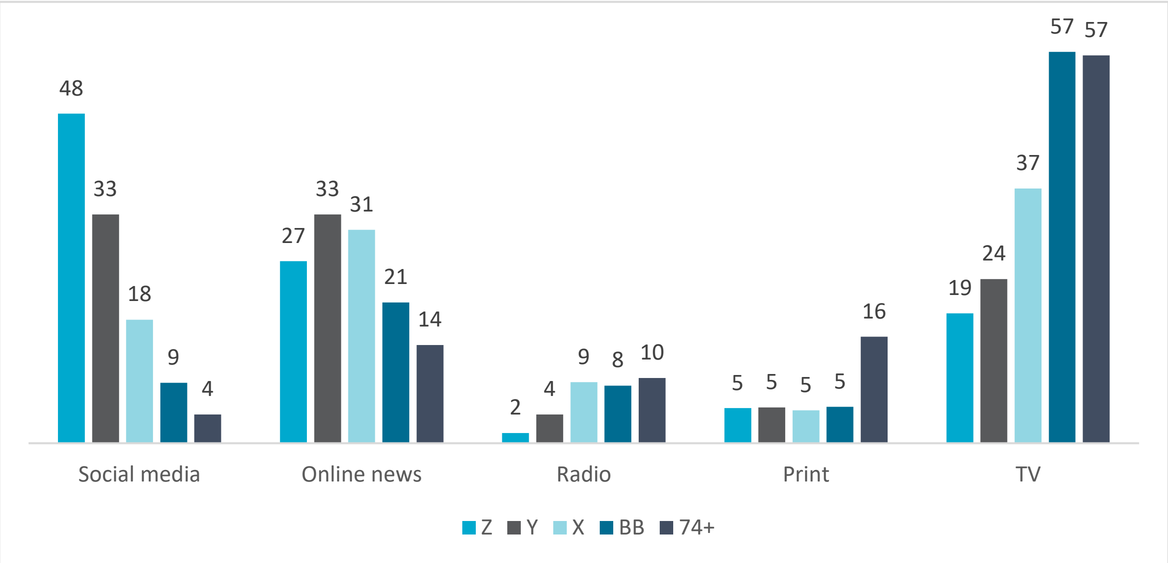
TV remains the most used source of news in 2020, but there has been a slight decline over the last year (-3%) (see figure 3). Seven percent of respondents say radio is their main source of news, which is a 2% decline from 2019. Print is the least mentioned main source of news (6%). Instead of traditional news sources consumers are turning to online and social media for news.

FIGURE 3: MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS (%)



There is a massive disjuncture between how old and young people access news. Older generations rely on TV much more heavily than younger, who are increasingly relying on social media for news, which they are accessing via their mobile phones (see figure 4).

FIGURE 4: MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS BY GENERATION (%)

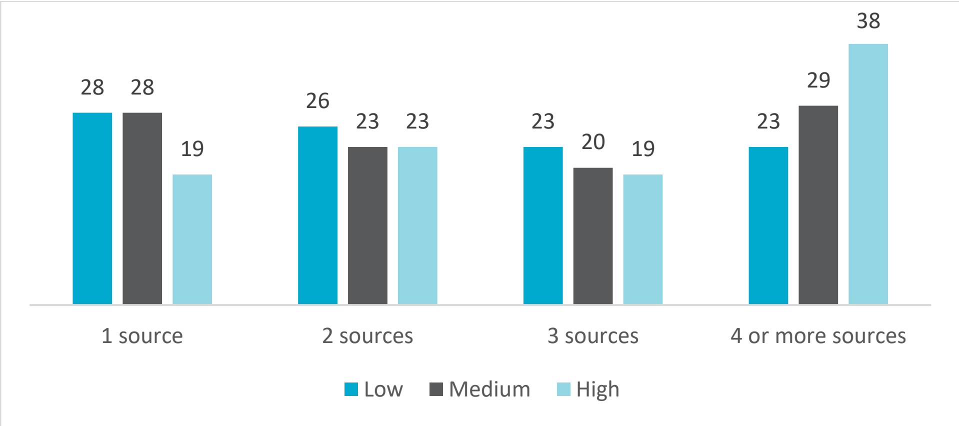


Exposure diversity

The *Digital News Report: Australia 2019* analysed the number of sources and news brands accessed by news consumers, as well as who avoids the news. Please note, 'sources' here refers to the type of media platform, such as radio, newspaper or TV, whereas 'brand' refers to individual news outlets.

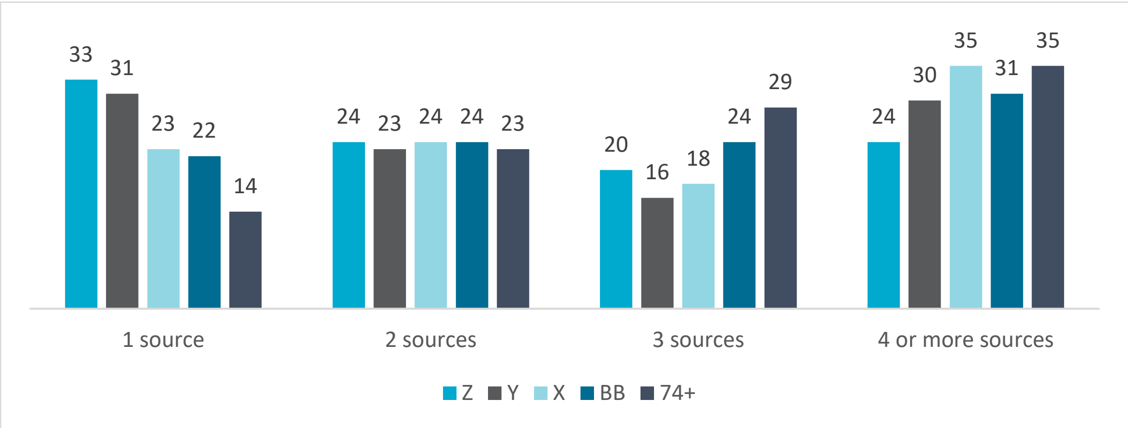
Overall, Australian news consumers use an average of three sources to access news. That means, they are accessing news across a range of media platforms such as TV, online and social media. Highly educated news consumers access news via a larger number of sources than those with lower levels of education (see figure 5). A similar pattern is found in relation to income.

FIGURE 5: NUMBER OF NEWS SOURCES BY LEVEL OF EDUCATION (%)



There is a difference in the number of sources used between generations. Younger generations are more likely to rely on a single source to access news (see figure 6). A third of Gen Z access news via one media platform (33%), compared to 14% of people aged 74 or older. This coincides with the fact that Gen Z heavily rely on social media platforms to access news. In contrast, more than one-third of 74+ access news via four or more sources.

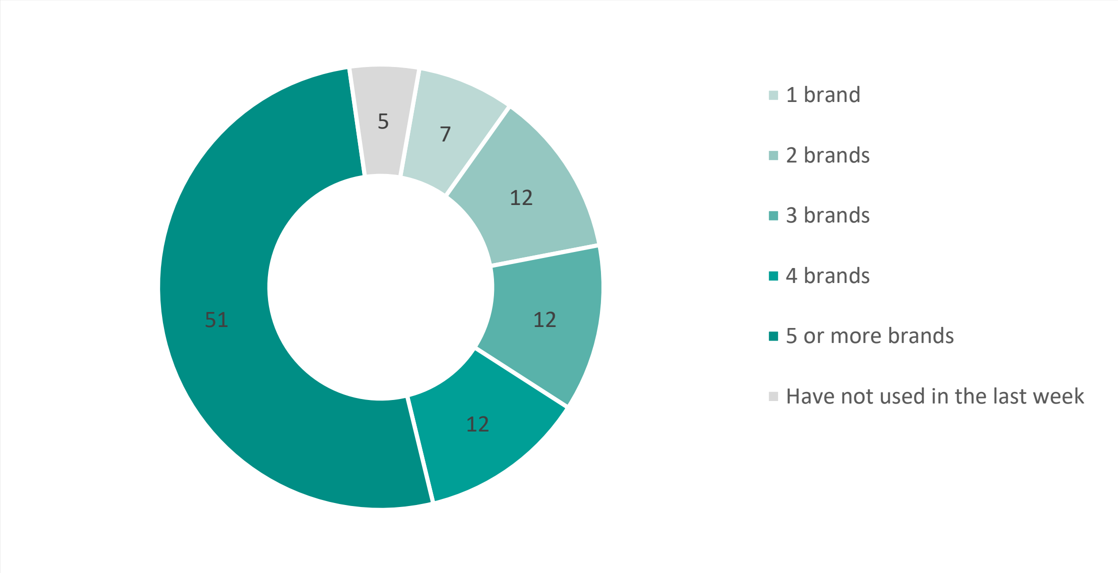
FIGURE 6: NUMBER OF NEWS SOURCES BY GENERATION (%)



Brand diversity

In 2019, more than half (54%) of Australian news consumers surveyed consumed five or more news brands in the past week. This was slightly less in 2020 (51%) (see figure 7). This suggests most news consumers are being exposed to a diverse range of brands.

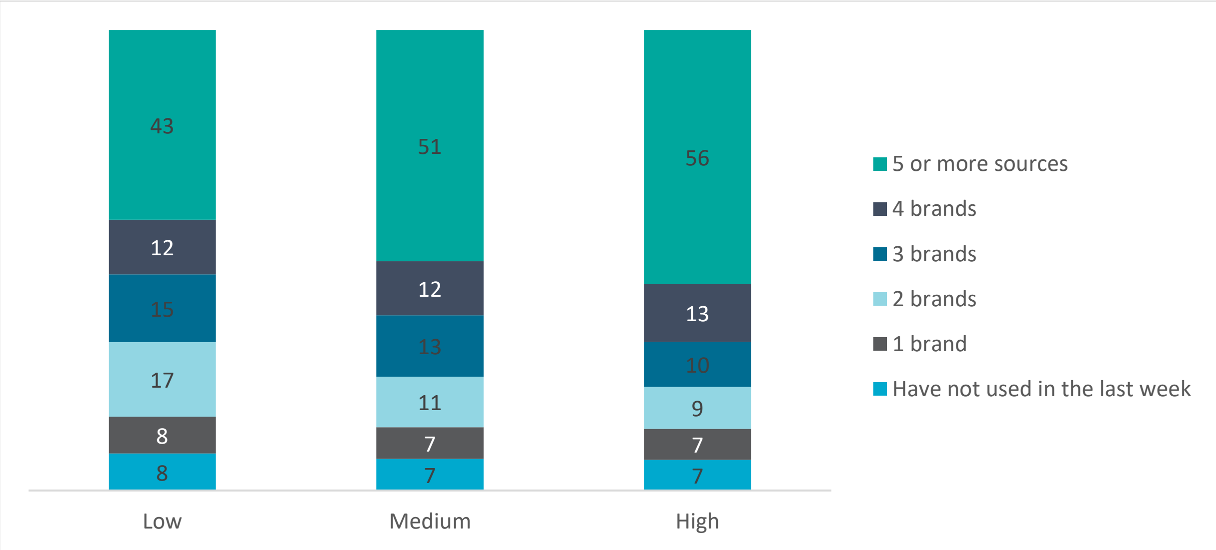
FIGURE 7: NUMBER OF NEWS BRANDS ACCESSED (%)



However, the number of news brands is significantly impacted by education levels, age, gender, and political affiliation.

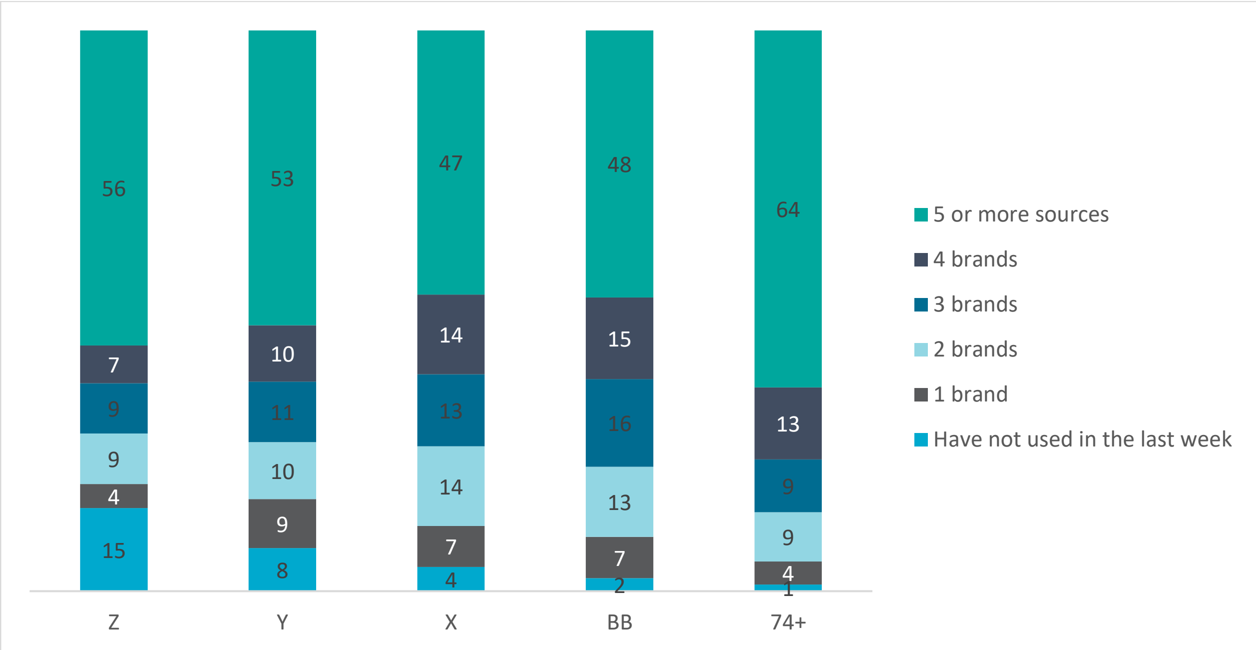
As shown in figure 8, those with high levels of education (university education) are more likely to access news via 5 or more brands (56%), compared to those with lower levels of education. Those with the lowest levels of education are the most likely to get news from one or two news brands.

FIGURE 8: NUMBER OF NEWS BRANDS ACCESSED BY LEVEL OF EDUCATION (%)



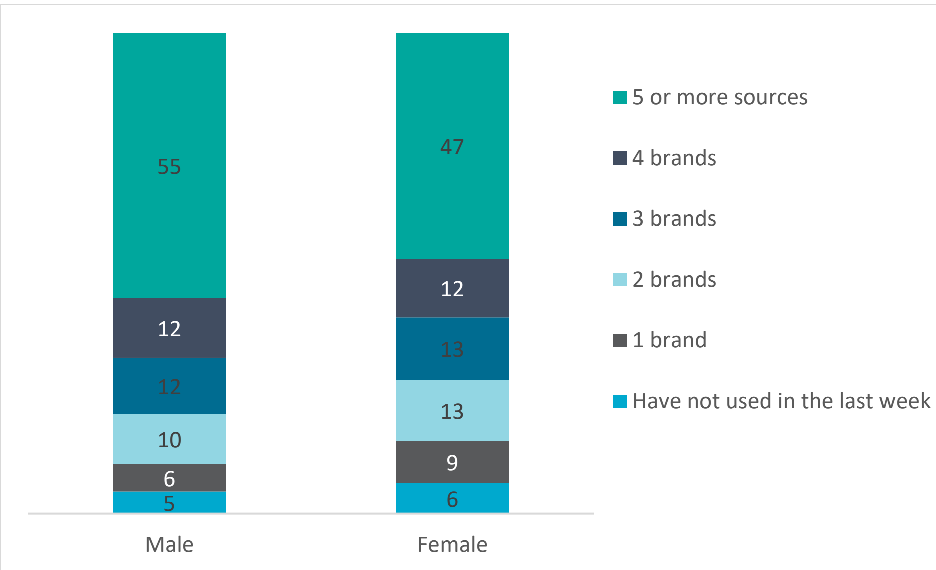
Those aged 74+ are more likely to get news from 5 or more news brands compared to other age groups (see figure 9). Encouragingly, more than half of Gen Z news consumers say they get their news form 5 or more news brands too. Given the majority of younger news consumers access news via social media platforms, it suggests they are encountering a variety of different news brands there. However, it should be noted they are also the most likely generation not to consume news.

FIGURE 9: NUMBER OF NEWS BRANDS ACCESSED BY AGE (%)



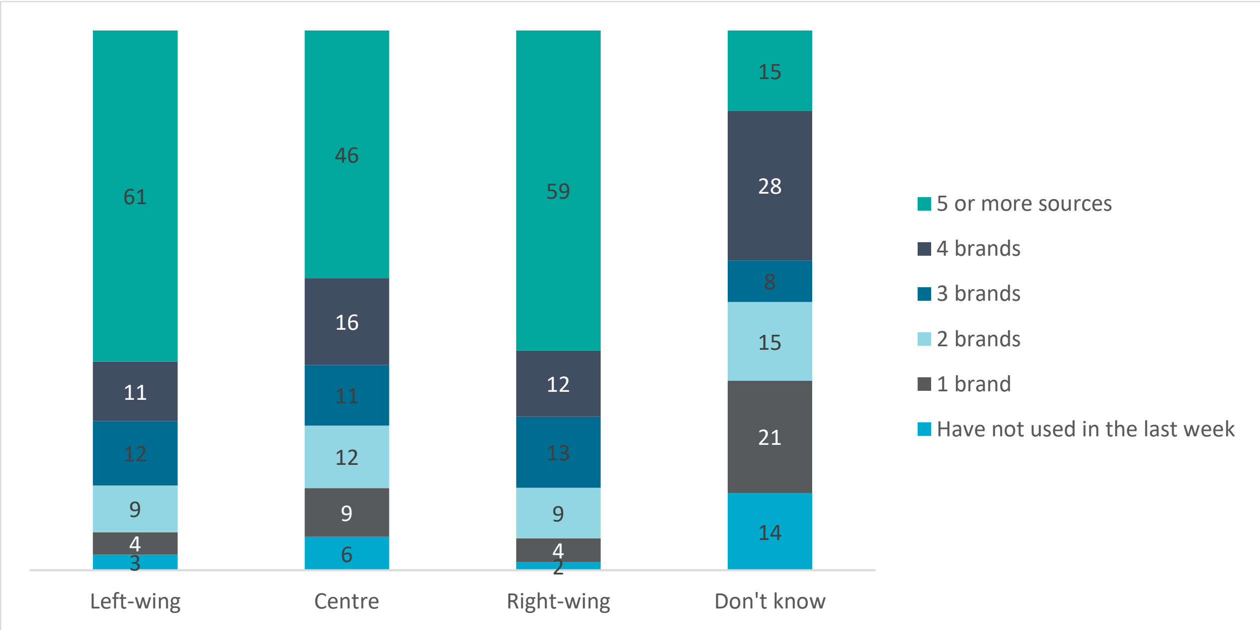
There are also gender differences. Men are more likely to access news via 5 or more brands (55%) than women (47%) (see figure 10).

FIGURE 10: NUMBER OF NEWS BRANDS ACCESSED BY GENDER (%)



News consumders who identify as left-wing (61%) or right-wing (59%) are more likely to access news via 5 or more brands than those who nominate their political leaning as 'centre' (46%) (see figure 11). Those who do not know their political orientation (21%) are the most likely to get news from only one news brand or to have not consumed news at all in the past week. There is a strong association between interest in politics and news consumption. This data raises concerns about the quality and diversity of news and information being accessed by disengaged Australians.

FIGURE 11: NUMBER OF NEWS BRANDS ACCESSED BY POLITICAL AFFILATION (%)



What news brands are people consuming?

The most popular news brands vary depending on whether they are online or offline brands.

The ABC is the most popular offline news brand and is ranked equal first with news.com among the online news brand (see table 1 and 2). It should be noted, it is not possible to ask about every news brand in our survey, therefore some of the smaller and less established ones are not included. The survey list is revised over time.

TABLE 1: OFFLINE NEWS BRAND ACCESSED IN THE LAST WEEK

	N	%
ABC News*	871	41
Channel 7	805	38
Channel 9	804	38
Channel TEN	465	22
A regional or local newspaper	344	16
SBS TV	327	15
Herald Sun	249	12
Sky News	247	12
Commercial FM radio	224	11
Daily Telegraph	214	10
BBC News	208	10
The Australian	183	9
Prime7	183	9
WIN Television	176	8
Sydney Morning Herald	167	8
CNN	153	7
Commercial AM radio	142	7
Courier Mail	138	6
The Age	127	6
Fox News	127	6
Australian Financial Review	101	5
The Advertiser	100	5
Other Capital city newspapers	74	3
Other newspapers or broadcast news channels from outside country	68	3
News channels or newspapers in languages other than English	58	3

*ABS News includes ABC TV (33%) and ABC Radio (18%)

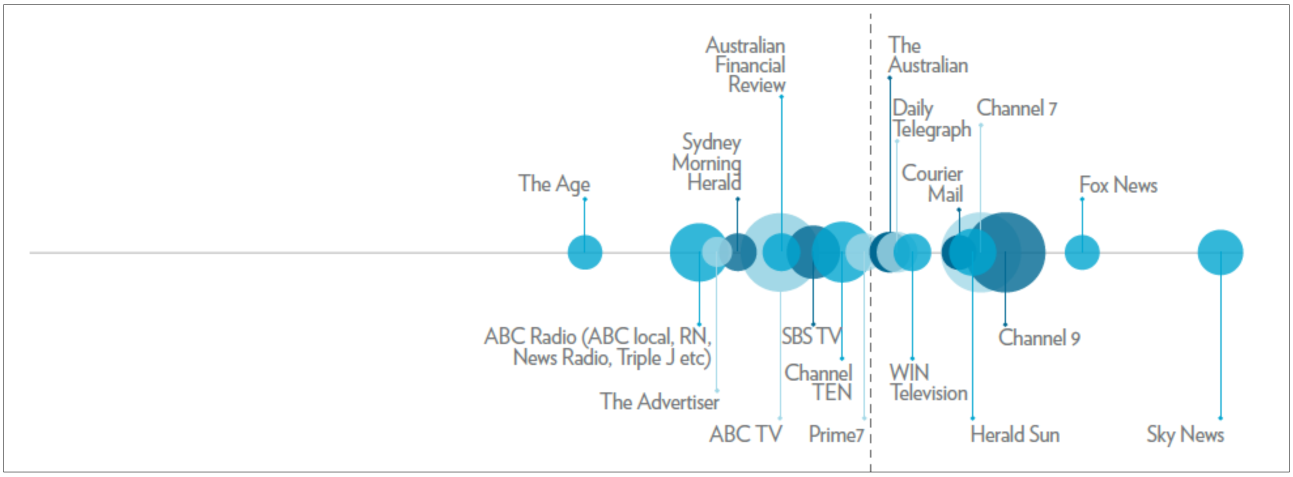
TABLE 2: ONLINE NEWS BRAND ACCESSED IN THE LAST WEEK

	N	%
News.com.au	491	23
ABC News online	491	23
nine.com.au	392	18
7News.com.au	299	14
BBC News online	263	12
Guardian Australia online	260	12
Sydney Morning Herald (smh.com.au)	248	12
Skynews.com.au	192	9
Daily Telegraph (dailytelegraph.com.au)	188	9
BuzzFeed News	187	9
The Australian (theaustralian.com.au)	174	8
The Age (theage.com.au)	172	8
Herald Sun (heraldsun.com.au)	171	8
CNN.com	161	8
Other regional or local newspaper website	147	7
New York Times online	125	6
Courier Mail (couriermail.com.au)	122	6
The New Daily	122	6
HuffPost (Huffington Post)	106	5
PerthNow.com.au	96	5
10Daily.com.au	95	4
Australian Financial Review (afr.com)	91	4
Vice News	82	4
The Conversation	82	4
The Advertiser (adelaidenow.com.au)	78	4
Mail online	71	3
Other online sites from outside country	66	3
BrisbaneTimes.com.au	64	3
Junkee	47	2
The Saturday Paper online	47	2
Crikey	41	2
Other non-English online news sites	34	2

Political polarization and news consumption

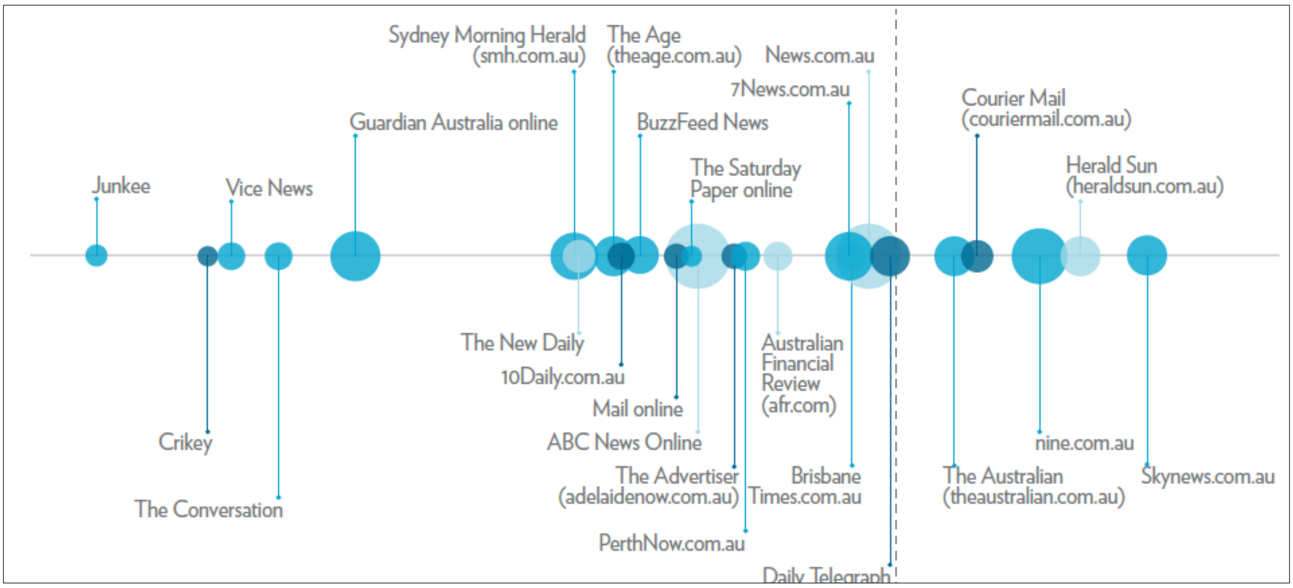
We asked a series of questions about which online and offline news brands were used by survey respondents and then analysed the political orientation of the audience for each brand. Figures 12 and 13 show the diversity of news consumers for each brand across the political spectrum. Overall, we found that those who identify as left-wing are the least likely to read newspapers and by far the most likely to access news via social media and online-only brands. Those who identify as right-wing are the most likely to access TV news and the least likely to get news from online-only brands. Online news brand consumers are slightly more left-leaning overall and reflect a wider range of political orientation. Users of traditional offline brands with an online presence tend to be clustered closer to the centre of the spectrum.

FIGURE 12: POLITICAN ORIENTATION OF OFFLINE NEWS BRAND AUDIENCES



Midpoint within country (3.857)
Polarisation score for each brand is the difference between the mean score out of 7 of the news consumers and the mean score of the population as a whole, expressed in multiples of the standard deviation of the mean score of the population as a whole.

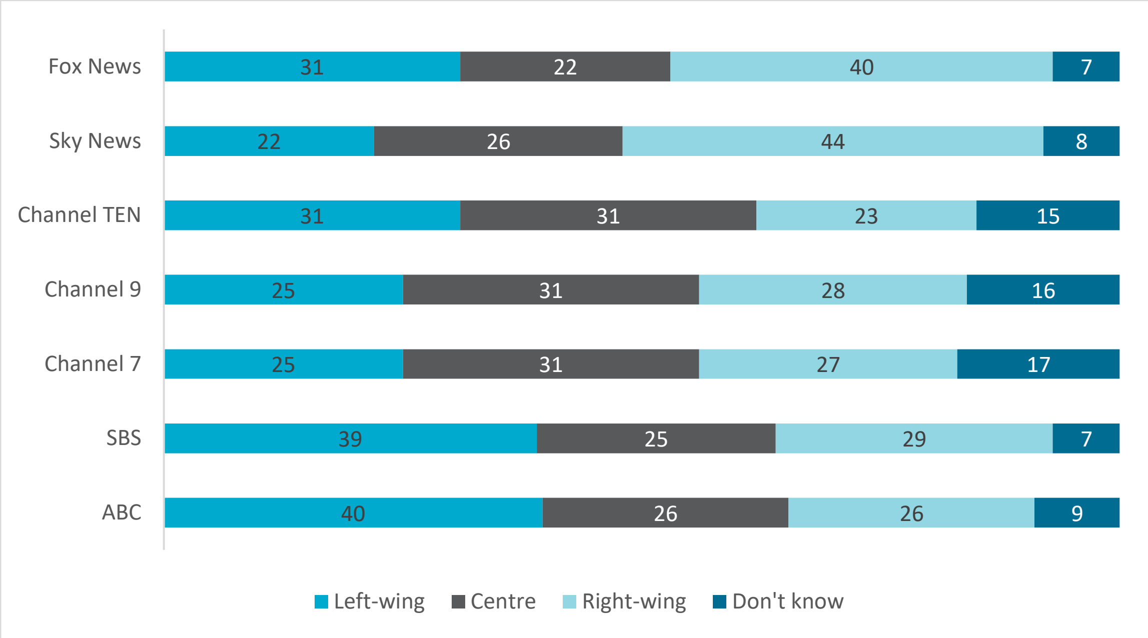
FIGURE 13: POLITICAN ORIENTATION OF ONLINE NEWS BRAND AUDIENCES



Midpoint within country (3.857)

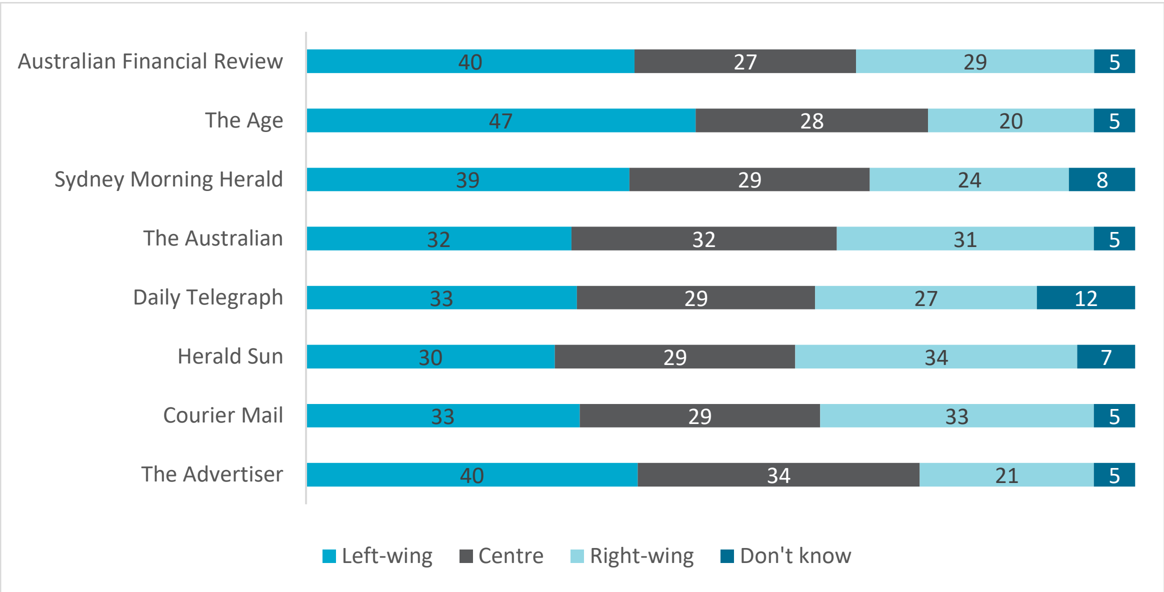
When analysed by political orientation, there is a mixed political audience for traditional offline TV and newspaper brands. Figures 14 shows that more than one-quarter of left-wing right-wing TV news consumers access TV news brands that are not strongly associated with their political orientation. For example, 31% of Fox news viewers identify as left-wing and 29% of SBS viewers identify as right-wing. It is interesting to note that the largest proportion of TV news consumers who do not know what their political orientation is watch commercial TV news brands. This is likely a reflection of lower education levels and interest in politics.

FIGURE 14: POLITICAL ORIENTATION OF TV NEWS VIEWERS (%)



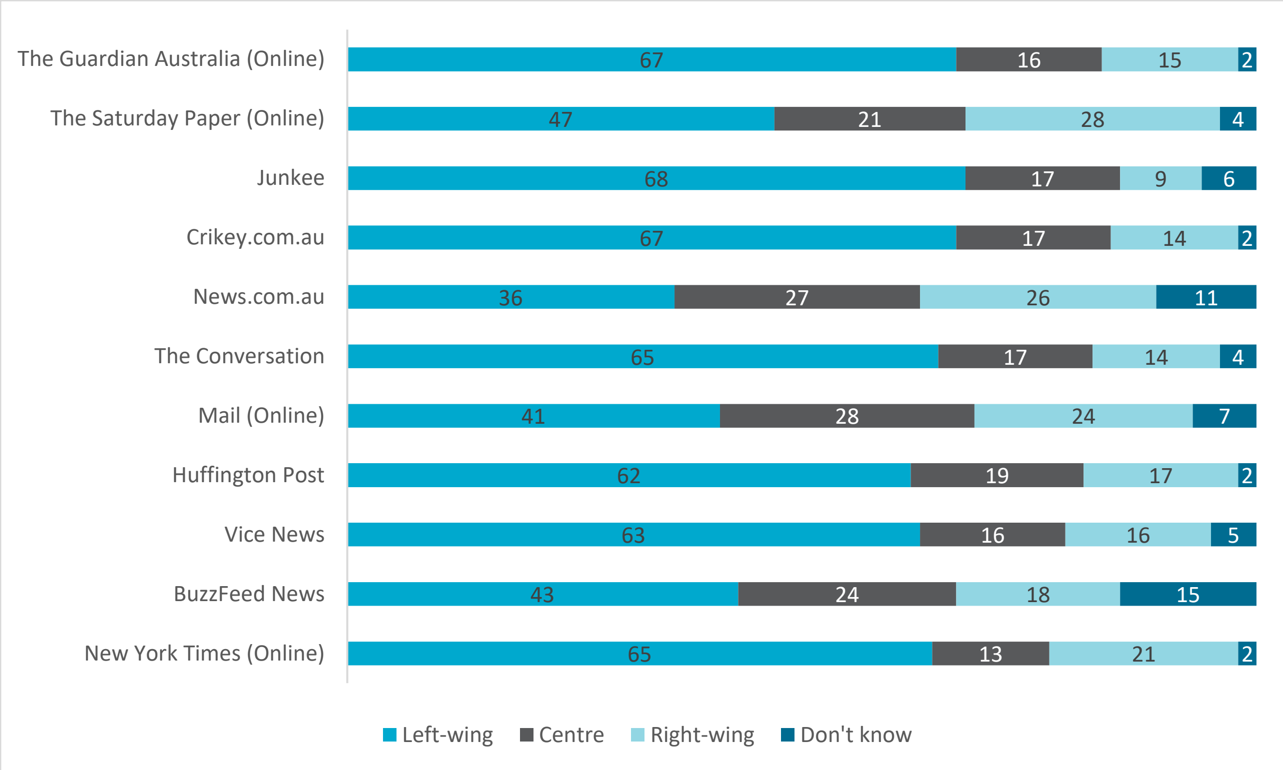
Again, in relation to newspapers the audience is spread across the political spectrum. Almost one-third of readers of *The Australian* identify as left-wing and 24% of those who read *The Age* identify as right-wing.

FIGURE 15: POLITICAL ORIENTATION OF NEWSPAPER READERS (%)



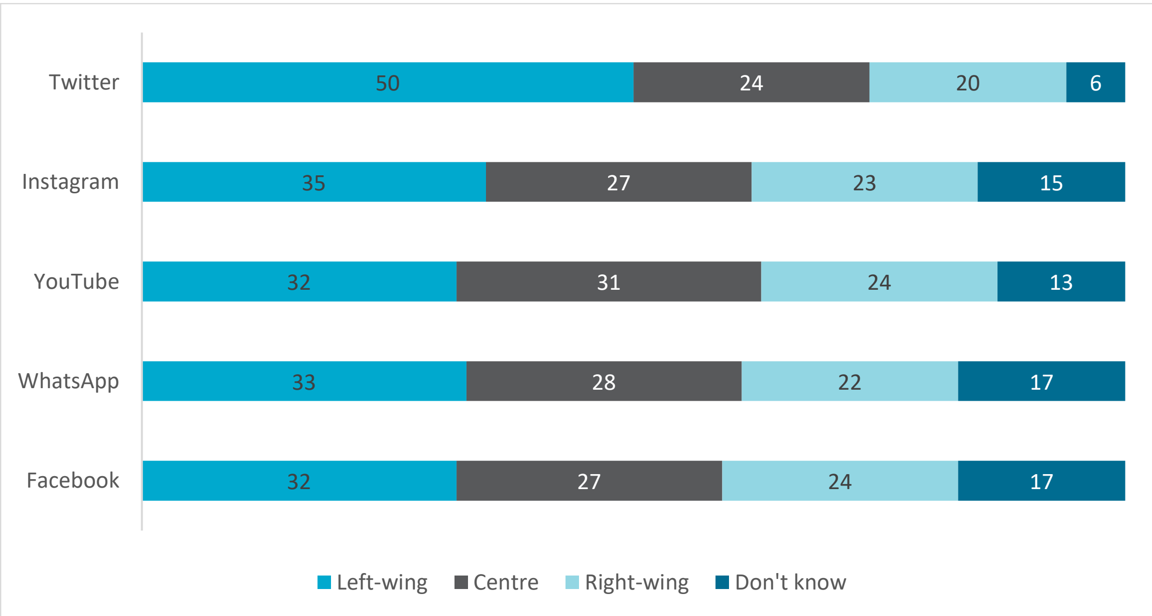
However, for some online brands such as The Conversation, Crikey.com or the Guardian, the audience leans more strongly towards the left-wing of politics (see figure 16). This is reflection of education levels and age.

FIGURE 16: POLITICAL ORIENTATION OF ONLINE NEWS CONSUMERS (%)



In relation to the social media platforms, users tend to be evenly spread across the political spectrum except for Twitter, where half of the news consumers who use it identify as left-wing (see figure 17).

FIGURE 17: POLITICAL ORIENTATION BY SOCIAL MEDIA BRANDS FOR NEWS (%)

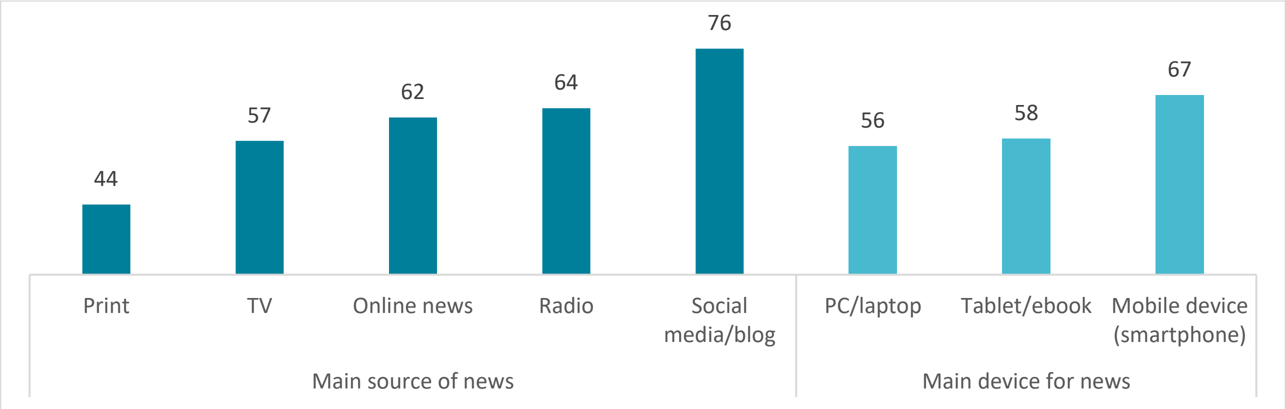


News avoidance and the disengaged

In the context of this inquiry and its concern with the concentration of the newspaper industry, it is important to examine sources of news and avoidance. Those for whom newspapers are their main source of news are far less likely to avoid news (44%), compared to those who rely on social media for their news (76%) (see figure 18). However, there is a high level of news avoidance among those who rely of TV (57%) and radio (64%).

Interestingly, those who mainly use mobile phones to access news (67%) are more likely to avoid news than those who get news via their computer. This likely reflects that mobile news consumers are also higher social media users, who access social media platforms for a range of reasons other than finding news.

FIGURE 18: NEWS AVOIDENCE BY MAIN SOURCE OF NEWS AND MAIN DEVICE FOR NEWS (%)



However, additional research in the US conducted by Yang et al. (2020) shows that those who use their mobile phone to access news have a less fragmented news diet, and "actually leads to higher exposure to diverse content" (p. 28678). These findings need to be tested in the Australian environment.

Importantly, there is a cohort of disengaged citizens who consume little to no news and who are not captured well by existing studies. This cohort is understudied here and in other countries and represents a section of the population that is potentially more vulnerable to misinformation.

Regional and local news

There is growing concern about the future of regional and local news media. Research shows the decline of newspapers has affected regional areas more than the cities. Estimates prior to the COVID-19 outbreak on job losses from print newsrooms amounted to more than 1,000 jobs (Zion et al., 2016; Zion et al., 2017). This fall in newspaper consumption is clearly reflected in research which shows a rapid drop in the use of newspapers by regional and rural news consumers since 2016 (Digital News Report: Australia, 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019). A report by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC 2019, p.18) stated "between 2008 and 2018, 106 local and regional newspaper titles closed across Australia, representing a net 15 per cent decrease in the number of these publications". Further, 21 Local Government Areas (LGAs) are not being covered by local newspapers. Sixteen of those LGAs are in regional parts of the country. Not only has there been a decline in covering local government, but also a decline in covering local courts (Simons & Bosland, 2019). There have since been further closures. In the US, research shows the lack of media scrutiny of local institutions led to increased spending and costs to local communities (Gao, Lee & Murphy, 2020). Important work is being done by the Public Interest Journalism Initiative (PIJI, 2020) and others, to map the closure of news outlets across Australia in response to the economic impacts of the coronavirus outbreak.

These changes not only impact communities, but the regional reporters working for the news outlets that are under increasing pressure. The N&MRC conducted research into the regional journalists and how they see the future (Fisher et al., 2020a). The full report can be accessed at (https://apo.org.au/node/306523).

Key findings relevant to this inquiry include:

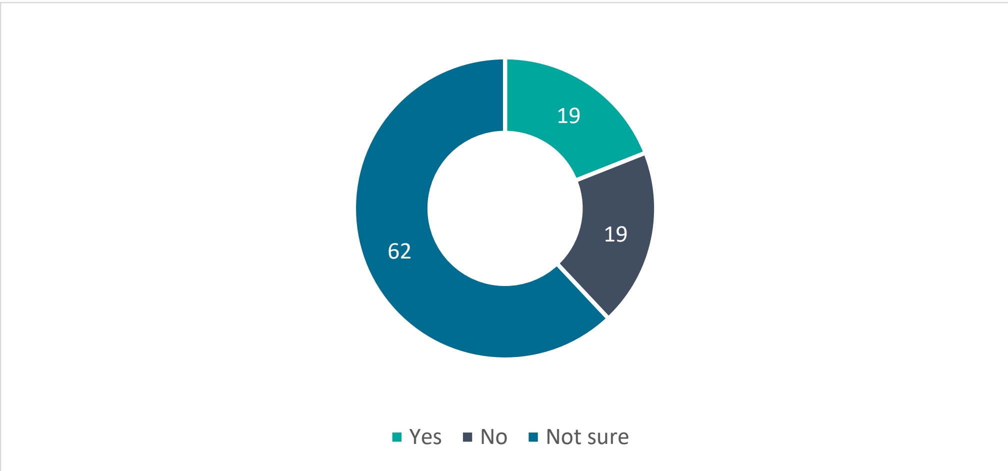
- Social media was ranked as having the biggest impact on their work by 95% of respondents, followed by the need for visual content for online and social media publishing.
- While social media was deemed important to their news brands, it was taking up valuable time for research and reporting.
- Older journalists, in particular, need training in a wide range of digital skills.
- While there was overall satisfaction with being a regional reporter and the task of journalism, low pay, heavy workloads, and a lack of resources were a big issue. This meant many local stories were not covered, particularly on weekends because the reporters would not be paid for their overtime. This naturally meant the range and diversity of coverage about the community was restricted.

Importantly, there were big differences in perceptions of connection to community by reporters who worked for independent news outlets and those who worked for larger news companies based in capital cities. Those who worked at local independent newspapers, had higher job satisfaction, and strongly identified themselves as champions of their target community; whereas those who were employed by larger companies, expressed this sense of community service less.

Access to local and regional news

We are witnessing a rapid decline of local newspapers, particularly in the region. During the COVID-19 pandemic more than 200 news outlets have been suspended or closed and this has left a critical news gap. Our study shows that one in five regional Australians have experienced a closure or merger of a news service in their area in the past five years (Park et al, 2020).

FIGURE 19 EXPERIENCE OF LOCAL NEWS CLOSURE IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS



Source: Park et al (2020). Local News Consumers

The majority (88%) of regional news consumers access local news regularly. But a quarter of respondents said they do not have a local TV news service (24%) or a newspaper (25%).

One-third said there is no local commercial radio (33%), and more than half (55%) said there is no physical ABC local radio in their area. Almost a quarter (23%) were accessing local social media sites to get local news. This is the fourth most used source of local news among regional news consumers.

Another 47% said they have joined a social media group, such as Facebook Groups or group chats on WhatsApp to get local news. This clearly indicates a news gap in the regions (see table 3).

TABLE 3 LOCAL NEWS PROVISION AND CONSUMPTION IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

	Available (%)	Access Regularly (%)
Local commercial TV	76	50
Local print newspaper	75	28
Local commercial radio	66	34
Local community radio	48	14
Local ABC radio	45	13
Local ABC website	29	6
Local newspaper website	46	15
Local commercial TV station website	25	5
Local radio website	27	4
Local newsletters	22	5
Local council newsletter or website	35	9
Local social media sites	37	23
Other websites with local content	15	4
None of these	4	12

Source: Park et al (2020). Local News Consumers

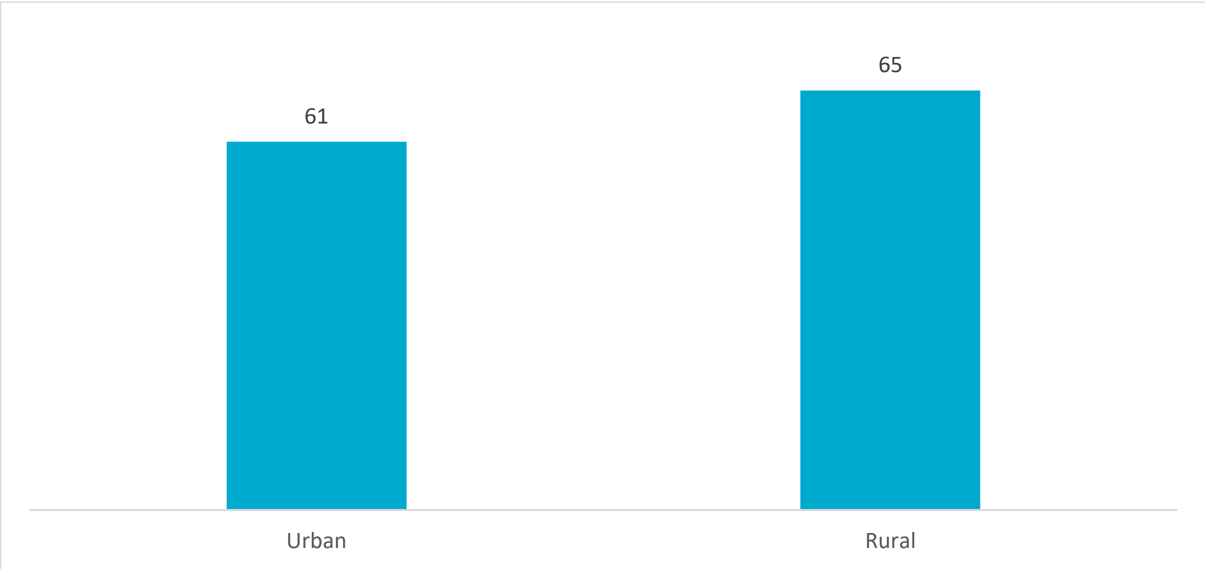
If we look at why people access local news, community connection is key to news consumption for regional audiences. The top reasons for consuming local news are to know what is going on in their local area (87%) and to understand how things may affect them (86%). These reasons were much higher than for entertainment or out of habit. Regional audiences access local news to stay connected to their community and keep abreast of critical information (see figure 20).

FIGURE 20: REASONS FOR ACCESSING LOCAL NEWS AMONG REGIONAL NEWS CONSUMERS (%)

Source: Park et al (2020). Local News Consumers

Despite the importance and value of local news to regional news consumers, they tend to avoid news more than those who live in the city. More rural news consumers avoid news (65%) than urban (61%) consumers (see figure 21).

FIGURE 21: NEWS AVOIDANCE BY REGION (%)

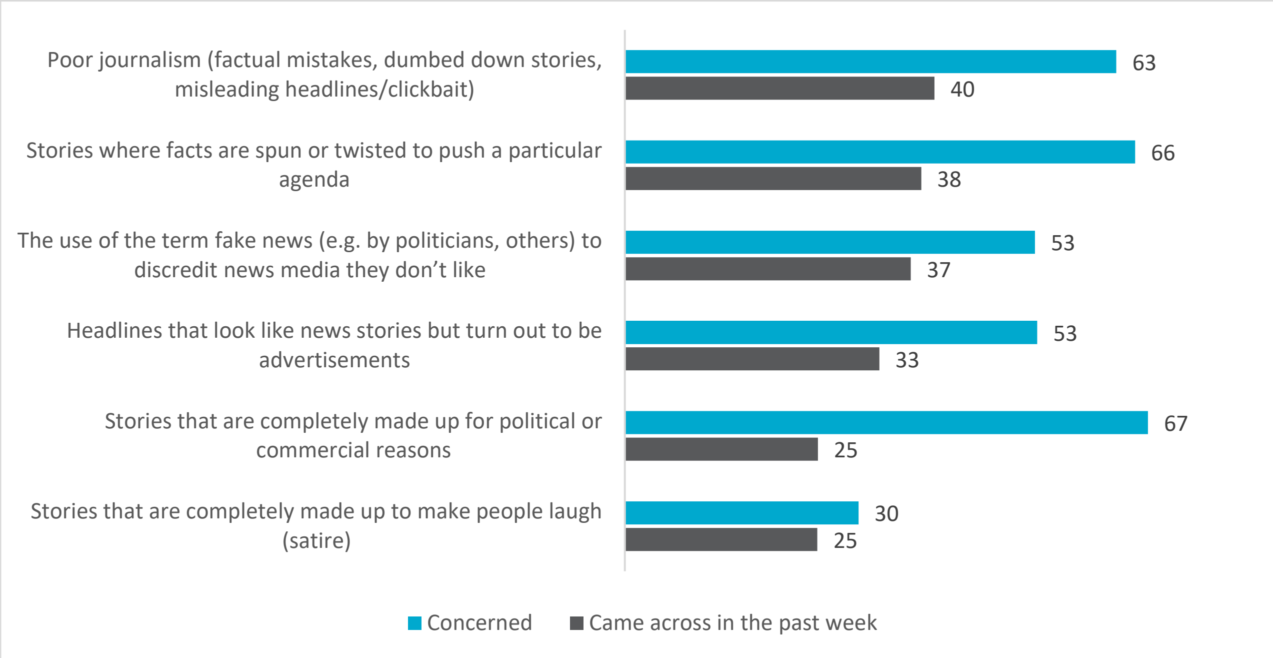


Misinformation and media literacy

The level of awareness of misinformation that is circulated online is not very high among Australian news consumers. According to *DNR 2018: Australia*, about 65% of news consumers are concerned about fake news they encounter online. This has not changed in 2020 with 64% expressing concern. The majority (73%) said they had experienced one or more types of 'fake news' in the last week. The more people are online, the more likely they are exposed to 'fake news'. Heavy news consumers experience it more than light news consumers (82% > 62%). However, 12% of people said they did not know if they had encountered any 'fake news'.

The most common experience is 'poor journalism' (40%) and spun stories (38%). Fewer people experience completely fabricated stories for political or commercial reasons (25%).

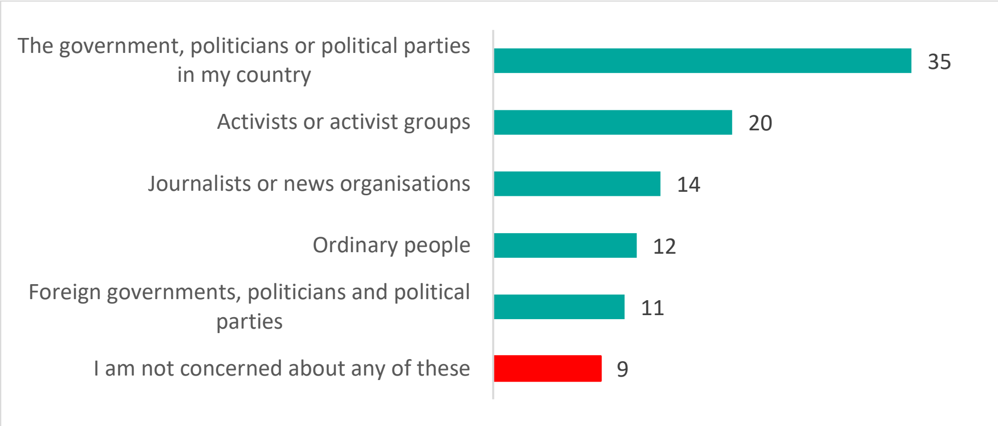
FIGURE 22: EXPERIENCE OF AND CONCERN ABOUT FAKE NEWS



Source: Park et al (2018, p.35)

When we examine the source of misinformation, news consumers are more likely to be concerned about misinformation produced by the Australian government, politicians and political parties (35%), compared to misinformation generated foreign governments and political actors (11%) (see figure 23). More are concerned about misinformation generated by activists and activist groups (20%), and only 14% say they are concerned about journalists and news organisations as sources of misinformation.

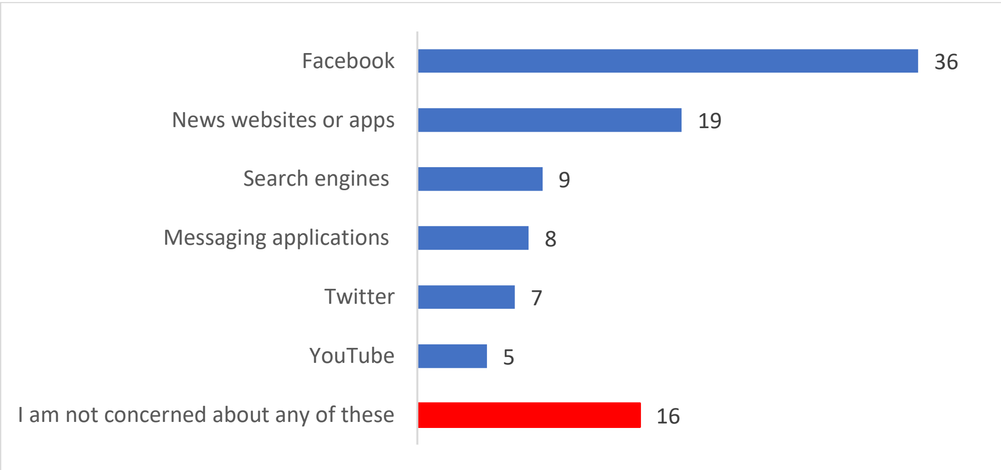
FIGURE 23: Concern about source of misinformation (%)



Source: Park et al (2020a, p.79)

Among the digital platforms, people are most concerned about encountering misinformation on Facebook (36%), followed by news sites (19%), and search engines (9%). Fewer people are concerned about Twitter (7%) or YouTube (5%).

FIGURE 24: Concern about source of misinformation by platform (%)



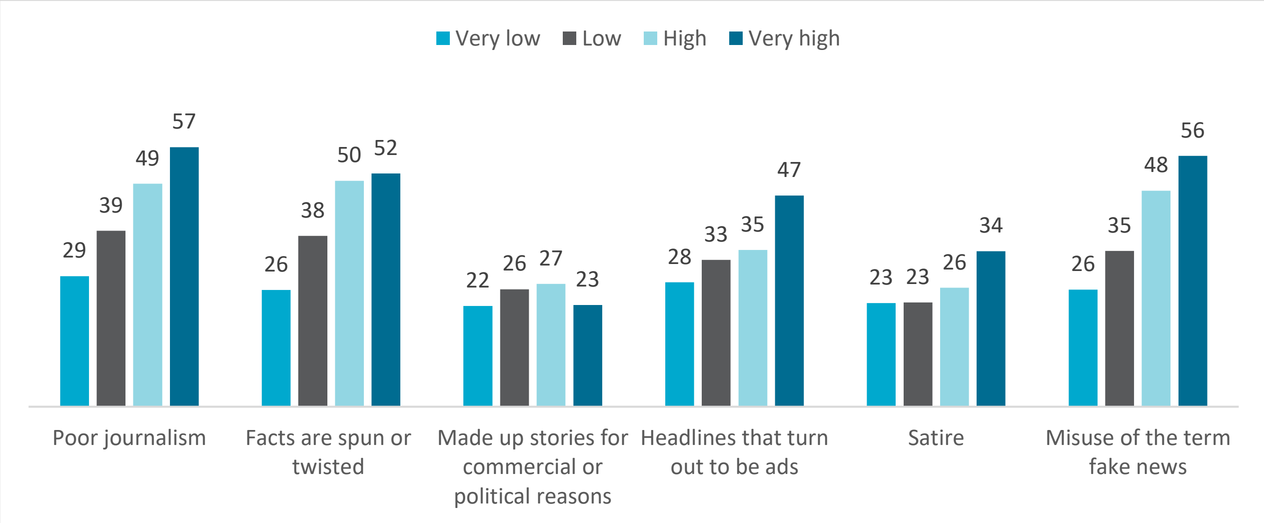
Source: Park et al (2020a, p.81)

Media literacy, which includes news literacy, information literacy and digital literacy[1], is an important element of the solution to combatting misinformation. Those who have higher news literacy report higher levels of misinformation experience, with 92% of those with very high news literacy saying they encountered misinformation. Poor journalism was experienced by 57% of those with very high news literacy whereas only 29% of those with low news literacy encountered poor quality journalism (see figure 24). The average level of adult media literacy is very low in Australia compared to other countries. For example, there was a higher number of incorrect responses among Australian news consumers when asked about incorrect information about the Coronavirus compared to news consumers in the UK, US, and

[1] For a full discussion of media literacy options, please see: Fisher, et al (2019b) which was commissioned by the Department of Communication and the Arts (currently the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications) in 2019. It is available on request.

Germany (Nielsen et al, 2020). Figure 25 shows that those with higher media literacy are better able to detect different types of misinformation than those with lower levels.

FIGURE 25: NEWS LITERACY AND EXPERIENCE OF FAKE NEWS - 2018



Source: Park et al (2018, p.47)

Additionally, our DNR Australia 2019 report also showed that older Australians are the least likely than younger people to engage in fact-checking behaviours. This is partly due to their lower use of online platforms as well as lower confidence with navigating digital media. A report we conducted in 2020 (Fisher et al., 2020b) examining the news consumption of older citizens revealed most older participants were relatively savvy at performing certain digital tasks, but many still need assistance.

Conclusion

To summarise, there is a lack of research into the full impact of digitization on the diversity of news brands, news content and news exposure in Australia over the past 15 - 20 years.

The data provided in this submission offers insight into the diversity of news consumption by Australian news consumers. It reveals that more than half of Australians access news via 5 or more brands, but there is a worrying cohort of Australians with low levels of education who access their news via a single brand or consume little to no news at all.

There is evidence that around one-third of news consumers access news that would not be associated with their political leaning. However, the majority do not. This points to polarization among news consumers that needs monitoring.

In regional and local Australia where news consumers have experienced closures and news deserts are emerging there is desire for new offerings to replace those that have gone. It is clear from research into the needs of regional journalists that the ABC is not able to fill the gaps and at times struggles to cover its own local area. Regional journalists also say they are overworked, underpaid and under-resourced which reduces the amount and diversity of coverage they can offer their communities.

While many older Australians are digitally confident, many are not, and this is reducing their ability to access a wider range of news offerings online.

Recommendations

In response to these key findings we offer the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Federal government to fund research to map the impact of digitization on the diversity of the Australian news media.

One of the limitations this inquiry faces is the lack of an accurate overview of the changes to media diversity in Australia in response to digitization. We strongly recommend the government commission research to map these changes to get a thorough overview of the issue. The PIJI project is mapping contemporary changes to news outlets, and this is making an important contribution to our understanding of the news media environment. However, to have a true understanding of the shifts in media ownership and journalism offerings, a retrospective mapping exercise of closures, openings and contractions is required to include important events such as the emergence of *Guardian Australia*, *The Saturday Paper*, the *Mail Online, New York Times* and *The New Daily;* the failure of the *Global Mail, Huffington Post* and *Buzzfeed Australia*; as well as the loss of the State-based nightly edition of the ABC's *7.30 Report*, staff reductions and amalgamations of newspaper bureau in the federal parliamentary press gallery. These events are just a few examples of change that have had an impact not only on the diversity of ownership of news media in Australia, but also on the diversity of editorial content available to Australian citizens. Having a thorough retrospective map to combine with the contemporary work of PIJI, would provide a valuable policy and research tool to aid deliberations about the future of the Australian news media.

Recommendation 2: Federal government to fund research into the 'disengaged'.

Given the importance of having a well informed electorate to make decisions and participate in democracy, our findings around Australians with low to no news consumption, low political awareness, and or rely on a single news brand, is of concern. It is important for policy makers and news organisations to understand the information diets of these citizens, why they do not consume news, and how to better respond to their information needs.

Recommendation 3: Greater support for regional and local journalism.

It is clear from this study that there is an urgent need to increase the resourcing in regional journalism, and that the overworked and underpaid environment with a shrinking workforce is not sustainable. A range of solutions is needed to resolve this issue, including developing new forms of public funding, reallocating existing resources for improved business models, and adopting strategies to increase advertising revenue and consumer subscription. Additional short-term funding has been provided by the federal government during COVID-19 via the Public Interest News Gathering Program. However, long term solutions need to be found to ensure the sustainability of the regional news media.

Recommendation 4: Increased funding to ABC to help fill regional news gaps.

Based on our data about lower engagement with news by rural and regional Australians and the news gaps in parts of regional Australia, we not only recommend an increase in funding to regional journalism outlets, but also to the ABC. A increase in funding specifically for regional news provision would help the ABC fulfil its charter by providing coverage of courts and council - basic public interest journalism – in areas where there is no local reporters and help maintain the health and identity of those communities.

Recommendation 5: Targeted media literacy programmes for older news consumers.

A proportion of older Australians required assistance with digital technologies to access a greater diversity of news and information and help discern fact from fiction online. We recommend the federal government fund targeted media literacy programmes for older Australians in line with models we have previously provided to the Government[2].

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