

REPORT: Future of the Newscast: The Evolution of Australia's Information Landscape

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Abstract: Australia's media ecosystem is at a crossroads, shaped by the rising dominance of short-form, algorithmically driven content. This report, drawing on the [Digital News Report: Australia 2025](#), explores a deep shift in how citizens, particularly younger demographics, engage with news. For the first time, social media platforms (26%) have surpassed online news websites (23%) as a primary news source for the general population. This change is not merely a technological evolution, but a measurable cognitive and societal shift that poses an existential threat to public discourse and traditional journalism. We present four plausible future scenarios for the Australian news landscape, analysing their strengths and risks for industry leaders, investors, and policymakers.

Future of the Newscast: The Evolution of Australia's Information Landscape

Key Takeaways

- **A Generational Chasm in News Consumption:** The shift to social media as a primary news source is overwhelmingly driven by younger Australians. A staggering 46% of 18-24-year-olds now cite social media as their main news source, a dramatic increase from just a year prior. This is in stark contrast to older Australians, over half of whom (52%) still rely on print newspapers. This chasm signals a fundamental, and likely irreversible, change in audience behavior.
- **The Psychological Toll of Short-Form Content:** The rise of short-form, or "reels," content has a measurable impact on cognitive function, training the brain for fast, intuitive "System 1 processing" over slower, analytical "System 2 processing". Studies show a strong negative correlation between the consumption of short-form videos and attention span. This erodes the capacity for reasoned discourse and deep engagement with complex issues.
- **A Direct Threat to Australian Democracy:** The fragmented, algorithmic nature of social media creates an environment uniquely vulnerable to misinformation and radicalisation, posing a direct threat to democratic health. A significant majority of Australians (74%) are concerned about misinformation, identifying online influencers (57%), Facebook (59%), and TikTok (57%) as major threats. This concern is highest globally for Australians.
- **The Catch-22 for Traditional Journalism:** Legacy news organisations face a critical dilemma: adapt to the short-form model to reach younger audiences on social platforms, or risk losing relevance. A full pivot to a model that prioritises virality over depth and reason could compromise the very journalistic values (trust, depth) that differentiate them from purveyors of misinformation.
- **News Literacy as a Key Enabler:** A critical vulnerability in the Australian information ecosystem is the low level of media literacy. Only 24% of Australians have received formal news literacy training. The data, however, provides a clear path forward, showing that individuals with this training have higher trust in news (53% vs. 41%) and are three times more likely to pay for news.
- **Local News Remains a High Priority:** Despite a decline in general news interest, interest in local news has risen to 51%. This indicates that Australians still desire information relevant to their communities. However, with the closure of many local outlets, social media has become the primary source for local news for many, especially in regional areas. This presents a major opportunity for a new model of local journalism.

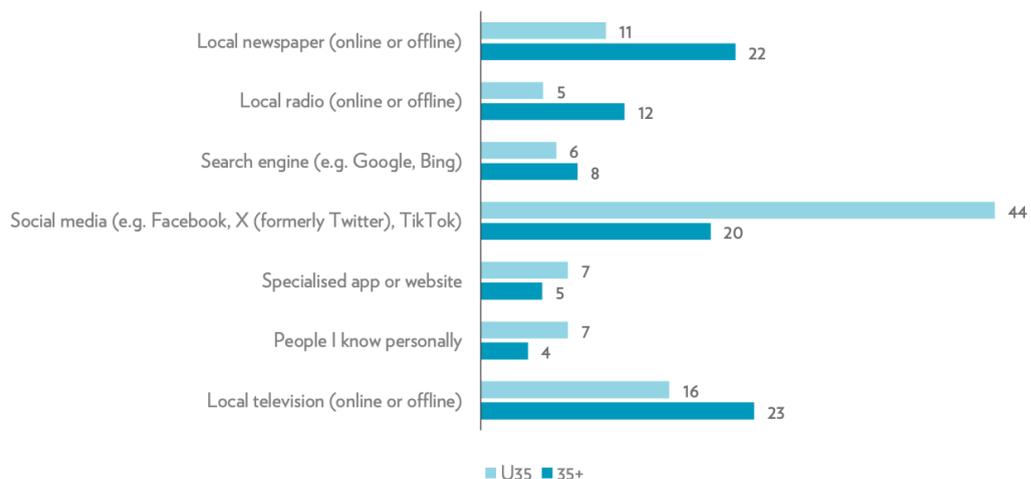
Source: [Digital News Report: Australia 2025](#)

The Great Migration: Australians Ditch Websites for Platforms

A fundamental shift is underway in Australian news consumption, moving away from traditional online news websites and towards social media platforms. This trend is particularly pronounced among younger Australians. The University of Canberra’s [Digital News Report: Australia 2025](#) confirms that the average number of different news sources used by Australians has dropped from 3.5 in 2022 to 3.1.

This consolidation is a direct result of the widespread adoption of social media as a primary news source. The percentage of Australians who use social media as their main source of news rose from 17% in 2022 to 20% in 2023, and for the first time, social media (26%) has surpassed online news websites (23%) as the main source of news for the general population. The youth demographic is the driving force behind this change, with a "staggering 46%" of 18-24-year-olds now citing social media as their primary news source, a dramatic increase from 28% just one year prior.

Best source of local news stories by age (%)



Source: [Digital News Report: Australia 2025](#)

This migration is more than a simple platform preference; it signals a direct replacement of traditional online sources, particularly for younger audiences. This implies that audiences are "actively abandoning the very platforms that host long-form, researched journalism" and are instead moving into spaces controlled by opaque, powerful algorithms.

The Psychological Toll of the Endless Scroll

The colloquial phrase "dumbing down" fails to capture the profound psychological and cognitive shifts accompanying the rise of short-form media. The true threat, as highlighted in the report, is a "measurable erosion of cognitive capacity and the fundamental alteration of how citizens process and engage with complex information".

The format of short-form content, characterised by its emphasis on brevity and emotional response, acts as a new "cognitive training regimen". For example, academics [Haliti-Sylaja and Sadiku](#) have found a strong negative correlation between the consumption of short-form videos and attention span. One study found a correlation coefficient of -0.45, showing that as "reel consumption increases, sustained attention decreases". Heavy consumers of this content, defined as those watching more than three hours per day, exhibited a significantly higher error rate on attention tests compared to low consumers.

This constant, rapid "context-switching" also harms prospective memory, which is a key cognitive ability for planning and completing tasks. The platforms achieve this by engaging "System 1 processing," a fast, automatic mode of thought, in direct contrast to the slow, deliberate "System 2 processing" needed for analytical thought. This trains the brain to seek immediate gratification rather than deep, reasoned analysis.

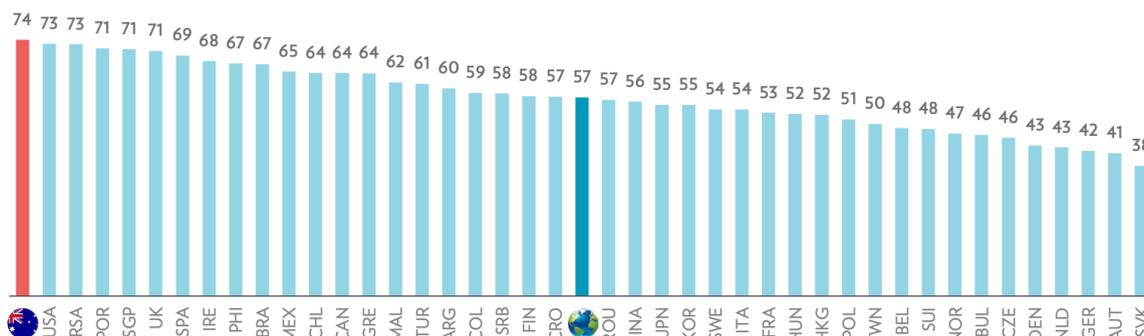
This shift from a reasoned to a reactive mode of information processing has direct consequences for the quality of political and public discourse. The compressed nature of short-form content struggles to provide the necessary depth and complexity for thorough storytelling, reducing complex ideas to snippets and emotionally charged arguments.

A Direct Threat to Democracy: Misinformation and Digital Silos

The information environment created by short-form media is highly vulnerable to manipulation and radicalisation, which poses a "direct threat to the Australian democratic process". A significant majority of Australians (74%) are concerned about misinformation, (the highest amongst countries surveyed) but they continue to rely on the very platforms identified as being the riskiest.

The report identifies online influencers and personalities (57%) as the major threat of misinformation, with Facebook (59%) and TikTok (57%) as the riskiest platforms. This is a uniquely Australian finding, as the perception of influencers as a misinformation threat is the highest globally.

Concern about misinformation online by country (%)



Source: [Digital News Report: Australia 2025](#)

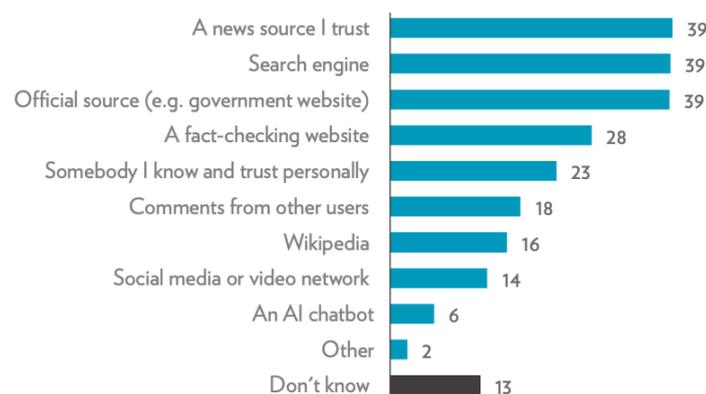
The danger of this ecosystem is exemplified by how algorithms can quickly manipulate a user's information diet. A Guardian Australia test showed that a single, unprompted viewing of a news video on YouTube or TikTok could cause the algorithm to "rapidly shift to a 'flood' of violent, far-right, and conspiratorial content". This creates "echo chambers" where individuals are fed content that reinforces their existing beliefs, making them less willing to consider opposing viewpoints and leading to a decline in trust in public institutions. The report identifies a fundamental paradox: the public is aware of the danger of misinformation, yet their consumption habits are constrained by the "powerful psychological pull" of short-form, algorithmically-curated content.

The Predicament for Public Interest Journalism

Traditional Australian news organisations are caught in an "existential economic battle" with digital platforms, which have become "unavoidable gatekeepers" and "unavoidable trading partners" for reaching audiences. The dynamic has been described by industry executives as a "bait and switch". Platforms initially incentivised publishers to create content for them to build scale, only to later "dial down" organic traffic and hold audiences "hostage" until payments were made. This power imbalance was the impetus for Australia's landmark News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code (2021), which compelled tech giants to compensate publishers.

In response to changing consumer habits, news organisations face a perilous strategic choice: should they fully embrace the short-form model? The report warns that this would be a "catastrophic compromise" of their core mission and brand identity. Short-form content is not designed for the "complex, long-form storytelling that defines public interest journalism". While short-form video can be a "valuable tool to 'hook' a 'cold audience'," a full editorial pivot would mean sacrificing the depth and reasoned argumentation that are the hallmarks of quality journalism. A news organisation that abandons these values risks competing with influencers on an "unlevel playing field" based on metrics like virality, which is not tied to their core mission.

News verification behaviours (%)



Source: [Digital News Report: Australia 2025](#)

Four Scenarios for the Future of News in Australia

It is too early to say how the tensions between social media and traditional newsgathering will play out. In this report, we offer four scenarios for the future of news publishing.

Scenario 1: Digital Trust Deficit

In this future, the current trends of platform dominance accelerate. News consumption becomes almost entirely mediated by social media algorithms and user-generated content. Traditional news brands struggle for relevance, their content often repurposed, summarised by AI, or drowned out by viral influencers. The public's default setting for news is to consume short-form, emotionally resonant content from a fragmented array of sources. Journalism as a profession shifts away from investigative reporting and becomes increasingly focused on creating snackable, platform-native content and on managing a dwindling subscription base.

- **Strengths:** This model is highly accessible and convenient for a broad audience. It is a "digital democracy", fostering a multitude of voices and perspectives, enabling instant, real-time dissemination of information and fostering direct engagement between creators and audiences.
- **Risks:** This is a low-trust, high-misinformation environment. It would exacerbate political polarisation as algorithms create "echo chambers". With the decline of professional journalism, there is a lack of accountability for those in power, and complex issues are reduced to superficial soundbites. This scenario threatens the core pillars of democracy—deliberation, representation, and participation.

Scenario 2: The Return of the 'Fourth Estate'

This scenario sees a public and policy-driven backlash against the negative impacts of social media. Governments, regulators, and a concerned citizenry work together to re-establish the primacy of trusted, independent journalism. News media are heavily regulated, with strict standards for algorithmic transparency, fact-checking, and content moderation on all platforms. Public broadcasters receive robust funding to expand their digital-first offerings, and new legislation ensures fair compensation for publishers. The public, equipped with widespread media literacy education, actively seeks out and supports high-quality journalism, driving a resurgence in subscriptions.

- **Strengths:** This model prioritises public interest journalism, fostering a more informed and engaged citizenry. It would likely lead to a decrease in misinformation and a more civil public discourse. A focus on media literacy would empower the public to be more discerning consumers of all media, restoring trust in the news.
- **Risks:** A heavily regulated media environment could be seen as censorship or an overreach of government control. The cost of this model, both to the government and to consumers through increased subscriptions, could create an information divide between those who can afford high-quality news and those who cannot. There is a risk of stifling innovation by overly regulating the platforms that have become an unavoidable source of news for many.

Scenario 3: The Hybrid Hub-and-Spoke Model

In this future, traditional news organisations recognise the inevitability of social platforms and leverage them strategically. The "hub" is the news organisation's own website or app, which remains the home for long-form, investigative, and high-value content. The "spokes" are the various social media platforms, where news organisations use short-form content as a "fishing hook" to attract a "cold audience" and drive them back to the main site for deeper engagement. Podcasts and email newsletters become key tools for nurturing direct relationships with audiences. This model is supported by a mix of advertising, micropayments, and a growing subscriber base.

- **Strengths:** This is a pragmatic approach that meets audiences where they are while preserving the core mission of journalism. It allows news organisations to diversify their revenue streams, build direct relationships with their audience, and control their own platforms and data. It leverages the reach of social media without ceding editorial control or compromising journalistic values.
- **Risks:** This model is difficult and resource-intensive to execute. It requires a high degree of digital fluency and a tolerance for risk on the part of news organisations. The arrangement is also unstable; there is still a risk of being co-opted by platforms, whose algorithms can change at any time, reducing the effectiveness of the "spokes" and making it harder to drive traffic back to the "hub". This model may also fail to address the fundamental cognitive shifts caused by short-form content.

Scenario 4: The AI-Mediated Information Ecosystem

This scenario is defined by the widespread integration of Generative AI throughout the news cycle. AI chatbots and personalised news summaries become the primary way most people access information, completely bypassing news websites. AI systems can create "digestible nuggets of news" without directing traffic back to the original source, draining news sites of advertising and subscription revenue. While a small segment of the population might still seek out human-produced news for a deeper perspective, the vast majority of news consumption is automated, aggregated, and personalised by AI.

- **Strengths:** This model is highly efficient and convenient. Information is instantly available, and personalised summaries can save time and effort for consumers. News becomes more "up to date" and "cheaper to make". The system is designed to provide immediate answers, satisfying the public's preference for speed and simplicity.
- **Risks:** This is the ultimate "black box" scenario, where transparency is minimal and the risk of algorithmic manipulation and misinformation is high. AI-generated summaries could strip out nuance and context, making it harder for citizens to make informed decisions. The economic viability of professional journalism collapses as the readers and viewers are diverted from news publishing. The risk of AI hallucinating or misrepresenting facts would pose a new threat to public discourse.

Why does this matter?

The future of Australia's media landscape is inextricably linked to the health of its democracy. News is not merely a product; it is a public good, an essential pillar of a functioning society. When citizens are misinformed, disengaged, or consumed by partisan echo chambers, the foundations of democratic deliberation are eroded. The rise of short-form, algorithmically-driven content, coupled with the documented decline in media literacy, creates a perfect storm of social and political risk. The choices made by media executives, policymakers, and investors today will determine whether Australia's information ecosystem remains resilient, or fragments into a disorienting patchwork of unverified content.

For the TMT sector, this is not just an editorial challenge, but an economic one. The traditional business models of journalism are under existential threat from platforms that extract value without fair compensation. Publishers and policy-makers that can together successfully navigate these shifts, build trust, and develop alternative, sustainable models that appeal to both traditional and new audiences will be positioned for long-term success. Conversely, those that fail to adapt, or who compromise their values in a race for clicks, may find themselves abandoned by a public that is increasingly aware of the dangers of a low-trust media environment.

Appendix: 15 Important Facts from the Digital News Report: Australia 2025 Findings

1. Social media platforms (26%) have surpassed online news websites (23%) as the primary source of news for the first time in Australia.
2. 74% of Australians are concerned about misinformation, the highest level globally.
3. Online influencers and personalities are considered a major source of misinformation by 57% of Australians, which is the highest percentage globally for this category.
4. Facebook (59%) and TikTok (57%) are the platforms most often cited as a major threat for misinformation.
5. Only 24% of Australians have received news literacy education.
6. People who have received news literacy education have higher trust in news (53%) than those without it (41%).
7. Interest in local news has risen to 51%, a 6-percentage-point increase since 2020.
8. Almost half (44%) of Australians under 35 consider social media to be the best platform for local news stories.
9. News avoidance remains high at 69%, a slight increase from the previous year.
10. U35s are more than twice as likely as older Australians to avoid news because it is hard to follow or understand.
11. Men (67%) are significantly more likely to be heavy news consumers than women (44%). The gender gap for heavy news consumption in Australia (23pp) is much larger than in the USA (10pp).
12. A third of people (33%) think social media and video networks are not removing enough harmful or offensive content, while 21% think they are removing too much.
13. News consumption via podcasts is emerging, with 9% of respondents using them as a news source in the past week. 83% of podcast listeners agree that podcasts help them understand issues more deeply.
14. News organisations are now relying on a wide array of content creators and influencers, particularly on platforms like TikTok where 39% of Australian users pay attention to news from creators who mostly focus on news, a figure well above the global average of 32%.
15. People with news literacy education are three times more likely to pay for news (45%) compared to those without (15%).

Glossary of Terms

- **Algorithmic Curation:** The process by which content is selected and ranked for an individual user by an algorithm, based on their past behavior and preferences.
- **Public Interest Journalism (PIJ):** A form of journalism that serves the public good by holding power to account and providing citizens with the information they need to participate in a democracy.
- **Short-Form Content:** Media, typically videos or "reels," that are brief in duration, designed for rapid consumption, and optimised for engagement on social platforms.
- **System 1 & System 2 Processing:** A psychological model of thought. System 1 is fast, intuitive, and automatic, while System 2 is slow, deliberate, and analytical.
- **Media Literacy:** The ability to "critically access, analyse, evaluate, and create media". It is a key skill for navigating the modern information landscape.
- **Misinformation:** False or inaccurate information that is spread unintentionally.
- **Disinformation:** False or inaccurate information that is deliberately created and/or shared to cause harm or mislead.

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