

Australians and news

Impartiality and commercial influence

Qualitative research

JanUARY 2020

Canberra

Red Building   
Benjamin Offices  
Chan Street   
Belconnen ACT

PO Box 78  
Belconnen ACT 2616

T +61 2 6219 5555  
F +61 2 6219 5353

Melbourne

Level 32   
Melbourne Central Tower  
360 Elizabeth Street   
Melbourne VIC

PO Box 13112  
Law Courts   
Melbourne VIC 8010

T +61 3 9963 6800  
F +61 3 9963 6899

Sydney

Level 5   
The Bay Centre  
65 Pirrama Road   
Pyrmont NSW

PO Box Q500  
Queen Victoria Building   
NSW 1230

T +61 2 9334 7700 or 1800 226 667  
F +61 2 9334 7799

Copyright notice

[Creative Commons logo](http://i.creativecommons.org/l/by/3.0/88x31.png)

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

With the exception of coats of arms, logos, emblems, images, other third-party material or devices protected by a trademark, this content is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence.

We request attribution as © Commonwealth of Australia (Australian Communications and Media Authority) 2020.

All other rights are reserved.

The Australian Communications and Media Authority has undertaken reasonable enquiries to identify material owned by third parties and secure permission for its reproduction. Permission may need to be obtained from third parties to re-use their material.

Written enquiries may be sent to:

Manager, Editorial Services  
PO Box 13112  
Law Courts  
Melbourne VIC 8010  
Email: [info@acma.gov.au](mailto:info@acma.gov.au)

About the research 1

Context 1

The research 2

Research findings 3

Overall views of news 3

Impartiality 5

Commercial influence 9

Visual diary interviews 13

Impacts on consumer behaviour 15

Consumer safeguards 16

Conclusions 18

Appendix—research methodology notes 19

About the research

# Context

The ACMA is undertaking a work program to:

explore consumer behaviours and attitudes towards news given recent changes to the media environment

help determine whether safeguards are delivering content that meets community expectations and supports an open, pluralistic democracy

support the ACMA’s [compliance priorities](https://www.acma.gov.au/compliance-priorities) for 2019–20.

This research is part of the [ACMA research program 2019–20](https://www.acma.gov.au/research-program).

Heartward Strategic was commissioned to conduct qualitative research that:

explored perceptions, attitudes and expectations of news consumers towards news and current affairs

focused on four key issues:

impartiality

commercial influence

diversity

localism.

This summary report covers the topics of impartiality and commercial influence. It provides key findings and a selection of quotes from participants.

# The research

The research included 136 Australian adults who had read, watched or listened to news in the previous month.

The research was conducted between 12 August and 17 September 2019, comprising:

15 group discussions across four states

10 regional/rural telephone interviews

12 face-to-face interviews, where participants had kept media diaries prior to the interview.

The sample\* included a range of participants in terms of:

age

gender

location (metro/regional/rural)

news consumption level

news source diversity and digital platform usage.

The research and analysis was conducted by Heartward Strategic, with input from the ACMA on all materials and deliverables.

ACMA staff were observers at eight focus groups.

A variety of news and current affairs video clips was shown in group discussions to stimulate discussion.

Participants received an incentive.

\*Details in the Appendix

Research findings

# Overall views of news

## Role and perceptions

News is commonly regarded as serving an important role in society and is used as a talking point.

However, many participants considered the news currently available to be:

negative and depressing

over-dramatised and sensationalist

untrustworthy

trivial or irrelevant

repetitive.

## Consumption

Consumption patterns and active sourcing of news varied across demographics.

Choice was influenced by perceived quality, including perceptions of bias, but also habit, convenience, nostalgia and preference for entertainment.

Consumers noted their increased use of digital news sources at the expense of traditional news sources.

Many avoided news:

entirely (aside from inadvertent/passive)

at certain times of the day

from certain sources.

## Engagement

Higher, and increasing, rates of unintentional and passive consumption of digital news, compared with traditional sources.

Participants varied in how deeply or critically they consumed news:

only some moved beyond consuming content to considering how the content was presented, and its impacts.

## Main concerns

Biased/unbalanced news content and hidden agendas with blurring of fact versus opinion or ‘ads’—lack of trust.

Loss of substantive news content.

Poor accuracy.

Sensational rather than factual reporting.

The impact of online media on journalism.

# Some views of news

‘It’s always bad news … either terrorism, or it’s political stuff that’s going on and people kicking each other out in government.’*(Group participant, Sydney, 18–34 years, low-medium news consumption)*

‘I’m extremely concerned about the death of the traditional news media and the huge rise of social media as a news organisation.’  
*(Group participant, Newcastle, 18–34 years, medium to high news consumption)*

‘I don’t have a TV, so I don’t watch the news and I don’t buy newspapers. I’m very passive. If it comes up on my newsfeed or on my email or someone tells me about it, I might look into it further. But I don’t believe half of it, with what they report. And they sensationalise it … ’   
*(Group participant, Townsville, 35–54 years, low-medium news consumption)*

# Impartiality—perceptions

**Lack of impartiality is seen as commonplace, but is a key issue that is undermining trust in news.**

Impartiality was the topic most often raised spontaneously in the research.

Unbiased news was seen as crucial to most participants.

Lack of impartiality in news was perceived as:

facts not presented neutrally and were often mentioned in relation to sensationalism in news and current affairs

only one viewpoint or one side of a story presented

opinion, and with ‘celebrity journalists’ airing personal opinions or pushing a particular viewpoint

bias arising from political, moral or commercial motivations, including of overall owner/source.

Impartiality was equated with quality news—when lacking, it erodes trust.

Some felt that impartiality was crucial for all types and sources of news and was necessary to allow the community to make their own informed judgements.

Bias was seen as commonplace, and most associated with commercial TV and radio stations, tabloids and online news sources, particularly around election time.

A higher standard of impartiality was expected of news bulletins than current affairs programs, with the evening television news bulletin seen as a highly trusted news source. A lack of impartiality was seen as more common on current affairs programming on commercial television stations. Radio news was seen by some as being the most straight-forward and fact-based.

The perception was that impartiality has declined across news sources over recent years.

Perceived causes for this decline included different journalistic standards in digital news, increasing commercial and time pressures and fewer viewpoints among traditional media.

# Impartiality—detection and impact

**There was variation in abilities to detect and tolerate news content that is not impartial.**

Consumers felt a lack of impartiality was not always easy to detect.

Some participants were more confident in detecting bias than others—but some still did not detect it, even when prompted to analyse news content.

While most considered it important being able to distinguish factual news from opinion, it was seen as more difficult:

on television where there is ‘live’ discussion including casual talk and commentary between news stories, rather than someone reading a script to camera, particularly in the context of news segments within breakfast, morning or panel shows

for news not presented in interview format, which can provide more cues on the interviewer’s position on an issue

when they are unsure of or do not trust the impartiality of the news source, or when they are not sure if and how the story has been presented in other sources, and particularly when their own knowledge of the issue was limited.

Some had never really considered impartiality before for sources they consumed—they assumed that the news they accessed was broadly impartial.

Others were highly critical of the amount of bias and opinion-based journalism impacting their choice of sources and increased fact-checking or seeking alternate views. Others chose to access news that aligned with their own views to avoid bias that was more objectionable to them.

Some were conscious and more accepting of bias arising from their own news source and topic selection.

Lack of impartiality was worse when perceived as an extreme view or opposing participants’ own views.

# Impartiality—concerns

**Lack of impartiality erodes trustworthiness and credibility of news and current affairs.**

Main concerns:

biased content or opinion could be mistaken as objective, balanced and factual

biased content contradicts the perceived purpose of news—to be factual.

Lack of impartiality was seen as particularly problematic—especially where it was difficult to discern—for:

topics relating to government policy or proposed policy

other topics where opinion can be swayed and have serious consequences

information that spreads quickly before verification is possible

less ‘experienced’ and less ‘interested’ audiences.

# Some views on impartiality

‘…often journalists have problems, and news outlets have problems, hiding their position rather than reporting facts.’  
*(Group participant, Sydney, 35-54 years, medium-high news consumption).*

‘A lot of the newsreaders have a personality now and so they also put across their opinion. They get more airplay because they’ve become more popular…everything’s more drama.’  
*(Group participant, Newcastle, 55+ years, low-medium news consumption)*

‘Because they have no bull\*\*\*\* news, the ABC, that’s where you go to if you really want some facts, give it to me now, don’t fluff it…’   
*(Group participant, Newcastle, 55+ years, low-medium news consumption)*

# Commercial influence—perceptions

**The nature and impact of commercial relationships may go undetected.**

Commercial influence was mentioned by some participants in unprompted discussions as a feature of news in Australia.

Prompting focus group participants with an assortment of news video clips led to the realisation for others that commercial associations in news may be widespread. But the level of interest in its potential influence on news varied, as did their capacity to notice.

Detection did not appear to be a straightforward task—association through sponsorship was most familiar and better understood, as well as being seen as more overt and therefore less problematic. Sponsorship was more acceptable for weather and traffic reports than for investigative or breaking news.

Commercial influence by related entities appeared to be the most challenging type of relationship to detect. While rarely spontaneously mentioned as an issue, when prompted with an example its potential impact on news content was seen as concerning.

Commercial influence was considered common on commercial TV, radio and in ‘lighter’ programming but was generally considered not to be acceptable in the nightly news bulletin.

It was accepted by some as a form of advertising. Some found it harmless and easily disregarded it.

Others thought it was:

not appropriately placed, or wrong

irritating

‘advertising’—to be endured, discounted or avoided like other advertising in order to access ‘real’ news.

# Commercial influence—impacts

**Commercial influence undermines perceived integrity and purpose of news and current affairs, which is to inform the public.**

When commercial interests are elevated over reporting relevant, impartial, newsworthy content, it impacts the trustworthiness of:

specific programs

types of programming

news sources

entire news platforms.

Unclear commercial relationships or blurring lines between news and advertising was seen as deceptive.

For some people, the use of affiliated experts can add credibility, and for others it can reduce credibility.

Many prefer independent commentators, or those not obviously seeking commercial benefit.

Detection of commercial influence had a minimal impact on consumer behaviour, with some already avoiding content that they considered to have commercial influence and others conducting fact-checks if they suspected commercial influence.

# Commercial influence—concerns

**Disclosure of any commercial influence builds trust in news.**

The key issue was making the nature of commercial relationships clear so they could understand the true intent of those segments.

Concerns about commercial influence in news included:

it is often not easily detected

it can undermine a fundamental purpose, which is to inform the public.

others could be duped or brainwashed by this type of content—particularly those who cannot detect it

one-sided or overly positive or negative views were being presented due to commercial influences

content being selected due to commercial influences and other newsworthy stories were not presented

it places the burden of responsibility for fact-checking or verification on news consumers rather than the news source.

# Some views on commercial influence

‘It’s okay to have advertising to pay for news, but as long as it’s not advertising that’s portrayed as news.’  
*(Group participant, Newcastle, 18–34 years, medium-high news consumption)*

‘There’s only one positive nice view of it, but they don’t give any other side of any story.’   
*(Group participant, Burnie, 35–54 years, low-medium news consumption)*

‘I would think it would be difficult [to detect commercial associations] a lot of the time, which is why I have a general sort of a lack of trust … You never know behind the scenes what kind of strings are being pulled to decide what stories get run and which stories get cancelled and why they get cancelled or why they are run.’   
*(Interview participant, Mount Gambier, 18–34 years, low-medium news consumption)*

# Visual diary interview

Location: Devonport, Tas.  
Age: 18–34 years

Gender: female  
News consumption: low to medium

Mother of young children, working part-time.

## News consumption and attitudes

Does not watch any television to reduce distraction and keep ‘depressing’ news out of the family home.

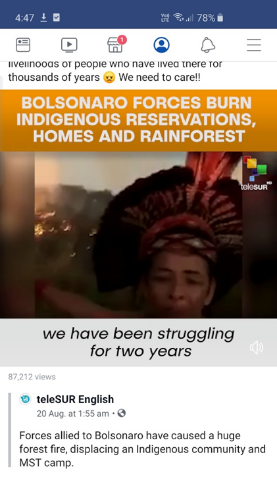
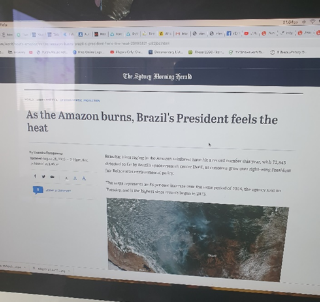
All news sources are online—content initially served through social media newsfeed.

Trusts and relies on Facebook and Instagram to inform her of news she needs: ‘it’s all over the internet straight away’.

If interested, clicks to full article or does Google search and uses mainstream (e.g. SMH online) and less mainstream (NITV) and independent sources.

Values understanding a variety of issues and opinions, so actively mitigates impact of social media algorithms through Google searches and sharing links with others.

## Excerpts from visual diary

Screenshot of social media article  

# Visual diary interview

Location: Townsville, Qld  
Age: 55+ years

Gender: male  
News consumption: medium to high

Father of adolescents, working full-time.

## News consumption and attitudes

Values keeping up-to-date for himself, for social reasons, and to be better informed for his family.

News consumption is via television and online sources, driven by habit and convenience.

Weekday breakfast checks of general news and sports news on smartphone.

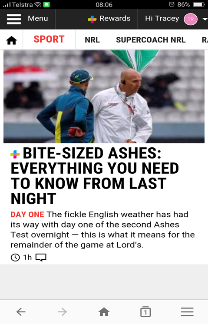
Television news is on first thing at work.

Watches evening television news at home (WIN national and local bulletins).

Routine only varies on the weekend when little news content is consumed.

Has a particular interest in sports news and scores—only tends to actively seek more information for sports-related news.

## Excerpts from visual diary

# Impacts on consumer behaviour

**Responsibility shifted to consumers to filter and fact-check news.**

The research identified a variety of impacts on consumer behaviour due to concerns about impartiality and commercial influence in news.

The four core behaviours adopted by news consumers were:

**Vigilance**  
Staying alert to cues such as emphasis, presence of brands, style of questioning etc. to help detect untrustworthy news.

**Avoidance**  
Deliberately avoiding certain news or current affairs programs, news outlets or platforms to enable filtering of news content.

**Verification**  
Fact checking or verifying news content through online (Google) search or going to source websites.

**Seeking**  
Actively seeking out a variety of different or alternate news sources or opinions.

# Consumer safeguards

**Adequate safeguards support perceived integrity and trust in news.**

## Perceptions

There was a widespread belief by participants that safeguards were in place to protect consumers.

Very few had specific knowledge of rules or regulations.

Few could envisage what safeguards might look like or how they might be enforced.

## Expectations

Disclosure of potential bias or commercial influence seen as important to avoid unduly influencing consumers or shaping news.

Value was placed on regulation to ensure disclosure, but some participants preferred it was prevented altogether.

Disclosure needs to be clear and not able to be overlooked. The method of disclosure should vary depending on if the news is being communicated through auditory or visual channels, or both (for example television would require both forms).

An even playing field of safeguards expected between digital and traditional media.

Consumers accept regulation must account for commercial necessity, provided influence is made clear.

# Some views on safeguards

‘… kind of need to know who’s paying for what you’re seeing, I would prefer to know … then it kind of makes me think well, is this correct? … has this been portrayed in a way that benefits them? And it will make me get out and research and try to find other information on that particular thing?’   
*(Group participant, Newcastle, 18–34 years, medium-high news consumption)*

‘If you’re having truth in journalism it should be stated clearly that even if you’re sponsoring another program on our channel, that’s going to have no influence whatsoever on any broadcasting of our news.’   
*(Interview participant, Port Lincoln, 55+ years, medium-high news consumption)*

‘There was a rule about how much they could each own of certain media like newspapers and different parts as a rule, but I don’t know if that’s been changed lately, hasn’t it?’   
*(Group participant, Townsville, 35–54 years, low-medium news consumption)*

Conclusions

**The importance of appropriate consumer safeguards is supported by the research.**

News and current affairs play an important role in society and are valued.

The basis of consumer expectation is that news provides an honest portrayal of facts.

There is an increasing onus on individuals to adapt their behaviour to identify and seek out reliable news content.

Many consumers do not have the skills and behaviours to do this effectively and some news avoidance occurs.

Disruptions in the media industry are presenting opportunities for greater consumer control and variety in news consumption.

Benefits may not be fully realised due to consumer habits, automation, and whether news is considered critically.

There is a call for consumer safeguards to enable clear identification of content that is not impartial or has commercial influences.

Appendix—research methodology notes

All research participants were Australian adults aged 18 years and over who had read, watched or listened to news in the past month through traditional media formats or online.

The factors that were prioritised within the sampling process were:

**Age**—an equal number of sessions were held with people aged 18 to 34, 35 to 54, and 55 and older.

**Gender**—each group discussion contained a mix of both men and women, with close to equal representation achieved across the total research sample.

**Location**—focus groups were evenly spread across metropolitan and regional locations in four states: NSW (Sydney and Newcastle), Queensland (Brisbane and Townsville), Western Australia (Perth, Mandurah and Bunbury) and Tasmania (Devonport and Burnie).

Regional telephone interviews were conducted with people in Mt Gambier and Port Lincoln, SA; Broken Hill, NSW; Kalgoorlie and Karratha WA; Mildura and Newbridge, Victoria; Emerald, Queensland; Driver and Alice Springs, Northern Territory. The locations of telephone interviews were selected to represent different small regional TV or radio licence areas.

**News consumption level**—half of the sessions with each age group and in each location were conducted with people with low-moderate levels of news consumption and half with people with higher levels.

News consumption level was established by combining measures of frequency of news consumption in the past month and a mix of passive and active news consumption (self-ranked).

Additional factors targeted in the recruitment process, but with a lower priority, were:

source diversity

digital platform usage.

This research was carried out in full compliance with the AMSRS Code of Professional Behaviour, the *Privacy Act 1988* and the Research Calls Industry Standard.