

Response to the Australian Government's News Media Assistance Program Consultation Paper

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AUSTRALIAN
MEDIA
LITERACY
ALLIANCE

ALIA House, 9-11 Napier Close, Deakin, ACT 2600

As the peak body advocating for media literacy as a national priority, the Australian Media Literacy Alliance (AMLA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the News Media Assistance Program Consultation paper.

Summary of key points

AMLA urges the Government to consider the following key points:

1. **High quality and sustained public interest journalism *and media literate citizens* are crucial for healthy democracy**
 - News media play a critical role in an advanced democracy.
 - AMLA agrees that public interest journalism should reflect the “pluralism and urges diversity of our society” and provide “fair, accurate, trustworthy, timely and topical information to all of its citizens”.
 - We argue that it should also seek to be factually correct and without the intention to mislead or influence for private or partisan reasons. In light of this, we would support a stronger definition of public interest journalism than the ACCC definition cited in the discussion paper.
 - For public interest journalism to be of value, citizens need to be media literate so they can identify and engage with it to become well-informed and participate in society.
 - Citizens need to be capable of identifying, using and creating credible and trustworthy information, and critically reflecting on the media they engage with.
 - For this, they need:
 - the skills, knowledge and capacities to be able to use media effectively;
 - the ability to find high quality information online and recognise when information is false, misleading or deliberately deceptive;
 - to be able to investigate media sources and make informed decisions about whether these sources can be trusted.
2. **Access to media literacy support for citizens throughout life is crucial to maintain media literacy in the population**
 - In a changing media and information landscape, critical thinking skills are crucial to our ability to be able to detect and avoid misinformation.
 - Media literacy education needs to start early and continue throughout life.
 - Successful media literacy initiatives empower citizens to become competent and responsible media producers and consumers.
3. **There is an urgent role for Government in supporting and funding a national approach to media literacy and media literacy education**
 - The Adult Media Literacy survey found that most adult Australians lack confidence in their media abilities, and that some groups are far more likely to have a low level of media literacy ability.
 - AMLA advocates for a national approach in Australia, based on international best practice and the national evidence-base, building on the strengths of existing, relevant national public institutions, universities and educational and cultural organisations, to advance media literacy in an evolving media and complex media environment.
 - A national approach should be supported by the Australian government with sustained financial investments.

Response to Discussion Paper Questions

AMLA provides the following specific responses to discussion questions in the consultation paper:

Q4.3: What are the appropriate roles for government and industry in pursuing this objective? For example, does government have a responsibility to foster citizens' critical engagement with news content?

Media literacy and quality public interest journalism are essential to ensure active and informed citizens in an Australian democracy. Government, in a healthy democracy, has not only a role to play, but a responsibility to take steps to ensure both are present. This responsibility is as significant as the responsibility of Government to ensure the presence of other key elements of democracy, such as a functioning electoral system, mechanisms for the collection and distribution of public monies, and the collection of data to inform policy-making.

Investment from the Federal government in our national broadcasters, which play an important role in both delivering news and journalism and developing resources for media literacy, is important. Ensuring that these organisations continue to be adequately resourced to produce high quality public interest journalism will continue to be crucial.

To ensure citizens have the skills to identify and engage with this media, however, requires support for media literacy. Australian Government leadership and funding to support this is crucial, including by setting policy directions.

We recognise that there has been some targeted support from Government for media literacy efforts. We also acknowledge the support from some commercial organisations, including but not limited to news organisations, for media literacy initiatives, some of which AMLA has engaged in partnership activities. However, current policies and educational activities have not been sufficient. AMLA's 2021 Adult Media Literacy survey found that only 56% of Australians were confident they could find information they needed online. Just 39% of adult Australians said they could check if information found online was true. Only 30% of Australian adults said they had ever had any form of media literacy support across their lifetime (Notley et al 2021).

Australia is yet to act on the 2019 ACCC Digital Platform Inquiry Recommendations regarding the provision of sustained support for adult media literacy and we lag behind developed countries who have developed media literacy policies and programs and support media literacy education in a significant and sustained way. Most European countries now have media literacy policies and many have had strong policies for well over a decade.

To address this, AMLA's 2021 national consultation report [Towards a National Strategy for Media Literacy](#) advocates for a national approach in Australia, based on international best practice and the national evidence-base. This approach should build on the strengths of existing, relevant national public institutions, universities and educational and cultural organisations, to advance media literacy in an evolving media and complex media environment. AMLA's national consultation report contains a number of recommendations to inform the development of a national strategy, including that it should involve consultation with a wide range of stakeholders (Dezuanni et al 2021).

It notes that the Government's leadership in this area should recognise both:

- the key role of public cultural institutions (including museums, galleries, libraries, universities and national public broadcasters) which have been driving government and public interest in media literacy at a national level, through AMLA and their own efforts, and building the capacity of teachers and educators; and
- the important role of educators, librarians, community workers, and digital inclusion support services.

A national approach should be supported by Australian governments with financial investment which should be:

- sustained and ongoing;
- open, competitive and transparent and available to national cultural institutions and organisations at the community level;
- designed to improve the sustainability of existing work to develop media literacy education research, capacity, resources and programs, particularly for adults.

We recommend that Government funding should incorporate a shared monitoring and evaluation framework to contribute an evidence-base about what initiatives are most effective for different groups. We also urge the Government

to support ongoing longitudinal studies to maintain strong understanding of the state of media literacy in Australia and support evaluation of the impact of intervention.

AMLA advocates a whole of community approach to raising Australian media literacy. Individuals, families and diverse community groups need media literacy initiatives, learning resources and support that will resonate and connect with their everyday media practices. Some need more media literacy support than others – either because they are more vulnerable to media attacks or exploitation or because they have not had targeted opportunities to develop critical media literacy skills. Priority groups are outlined in more detail in response to question 10.1 below.

We recommend more robust Government funding of media literacy activities targeted to building media literacy in diverse communities and priority groups across the life span of all Australians.

A sustained grant scheme that prioritises those groups who have been shown through our research to need additional support, would be a valuable way of ensuring appropriate support is developed and delivered.

Q10.1 What segments/groups/demographics in the community most need support from government to improve media literacy?

All Australians will benefit from ongoing media literacy support. However, AMLA's [national consultation report](#) identified several priority groups who experience specific barriers for the development of media literacy.

- People living in low-income households
- People with a low level of education and/or with low literacy
- People living with a disability
- People living in rural, regional and remote Australia
- Older Australians
- Indigenous Australians
- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Australian

Research informing the report found these groups were more likely to experience a lack of access to digital technologies, including internet affordability, connection and devices and, according to the Australian Digital Inclusion Index, and increasingly spend a disproportionate amount of their income accessing technology (Thomas et al. 2023). There is a clear Media Literacy divide that intersects the 'digital divide'.

Young Australians are also worthy of particular attention. The [2023 News and Young Australians survey](#) (Notley et al 2023) found that:

- Young Australians have low levels of trust in Australian news media organisations (less than one in five young people – 16% - reported a high level of trust)
- Most young Australians don't believe they can identify misinformation and many don't take active steps to do this (just two in five - 41% - believe they know how to tell real news from fake news)
- Most young Australians are not receiving regular media literacy lessons in schools (only one in four – 24% - said they had received a lesson in the past year)

Media literacy is essential to enabling students to engage thoughtfully and critically across learning areas, as well as to equip them to understand, respond to and manage what they see, hear and create in their everyday lives, as young people and into the future.

We know that media literacy is developed over time and with experience, so media literacy education must start in the early years and continue throughout school and into adulthood. Previous Federal Government funding to support media literacy for high school students is welcome, but there are significant gaps in media literacy support other age groups, and few opportunities for young children and primary school-aged children to engage in explicit media literacy activities supported by the Government.

Educational frameworks are beginning to pay attention to media literacy. There is provision in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF 2.0) for educators to support young children using the media. Version 9 of the Australian Curriculum,

identifies opportunities for teachers to develop students' media literacy through the Media Arts strand of the Arts, in the English curriculum, and links to cross-curriculum priorities. However, few teachers have received any training in media education. In particular, early years and primary school teachers have limited formal education or professional learning support to implement these aspects of the curriculum (McKenzie et al. 2014; Levido, 2021). Teacher librarians have expertise in critical information literacy, however not all schools have a school library with qualified staff. While there is no national dataset of school library resources, evidence suggests that schools in regional and lower socio-economic areas are less likely to have a school library with qualified staff supporting students (Dix et al 2020).

Q10.2 In what areas (e.g. Access to trusted news, media technologies and environments, evolving news consumption habits etc) is media literacy education or research most needed?

Media literacy education is required for all Australians across all ages. It should be seen as a life-long pursuit. The foundations for media literacy should be developed by strengthening efforts in the Australian Curriculum for school-aged children and young people and ensuring that adults of all ages have access to ongoing opportunities to develop their media literacy throughout their life.

Media literacy should be broadly based, with priority given to developing core skills that are applicable across existing and emerging platforms and sources. Current priorities include:

- misinformation on digital platforms
- rapid changes in the media and communications technologies (including related to Generative AI)
- threats to our democracy
- promoting civic discourse online
- rising distrust of mainstream media
- supporting media diversity in terms of who is included and represented in media
- issues related to how people, places and ideas are represented in the media, including racist stereotypes.

Participants in AMLA's consultation process identified a range of practical evidence-based materials resources that are needed to support media literacy education including program outlines, toolkits and engaging interactive resources, training packages and educational experiences.

AMLA would be well placed to develop these for a range of contexts if funding were available.

Further research is required to understand the needs of Australians, including specific communities and target groups, to help inform approaches to media literacy that respond in community contexts. This can be addressed by:

- providing ongoing support for the National Adult Media Literacy survey, conducted in 2021 and currently being implemented in 2024;
- supporting research that addresses specific media literacy challenges, such how to address as misinformation; and the impacts of Generative AI;
- supporting research that examines how to best meet the needs of marginalised groups with low media literacy abilities.

Q10.3 What are the social and economic risks of low media literacy levels in the community?

Low media literacy levels in the community impact on the health of our democracy by limiting the potential for free and open exchange of ideas and debate. The emergence of the internet and associated online and mobile platforms have changed how people receive and share information. News and information are now delivered through multiple channels and rewritten and re-posted with multiple authors and consumers along the way. With little time for consumers of information to check sources, claims or opinions, many participants in AMLA's consultation workshops suggested a recent erosion in civic discussion and the ability of the 'mainstream' media to garner the trust of community members. This has both social and economic costs.

Low media literacy is also already likely to be contributing to an increasingly polarised society, and less engagement with civil discourse or democratic process. An inability to counter misinformation, for instance, means individuals are less able to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate information.

The economic risks of a society with low media literacy levels include decreased consumer confidence, lower productivity levels, market instability, increased costs for businesses and impacts on education and training especially in widening the digital skills gap.

Finally, low media literacy -- in particular an inability in people to access trusted information and respond appropriately to poor quality information or information that seeks to cause harm – reduces the ability of public interest news to keep citizens informed in times of crisis.

Q10.4 What further research and evidence is required to inform understanding of the impact of media literacy levels on the quality of news and journalism?

AMLA is aware a need for more recent research in Australia and internationally focused on the relationship between broad-based media literacy levels and the quality of news and journalism.

A literature review to gather any available recent research about this relationship would be valuable.

Q10.5 What metrics and data sources should be considered to track media literacy levels of Australians in the future? What can Australia learn from approaches adopted in other countries?

Trend data from an Australian longitudinal national survey on media literacy is an essential foundation for effective media literacy policy making.

AMLA urges the Government to commit to long-term funding for a national survey using Australia's first nationally representative survey on media literacy, carried out by leading media literacy scholars from Western Sydney University, Queensland University of Technology and the University of Canberra in partnership with AMLA in 2021. The 2021 Adult Media Literacy Survey was designed with input from diverse voices in the media literacy field, including researchers, media producers, policymakers, government agencies, educators and public cultural institutions. The survey followed an extensive review of international media literacy survey instruments.

AMLA launched the survey report at events in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and online on April 13 2021, and subsequently carried out extensive outreach to share the findings with a large number of stakeholders as well as the general public. The survey has been recognised as providing comprehensive data that is essential to informing media literacy policy and practice.

AMLA is currently collecting data for a second national adult media literacy with our university partners. However, limited access to funding has restricted our capacity to carry out a second survey earlier and has limited our capacity to carry out 'booster' survey samples that would allow us to talk specifically about findings for First Nations Australians or multilingual Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Australians.

AMLA's 2024 Adult Media Literacy Survey also introduces a series of new questions to focus on news access and use, news literacy and experiences with mis- and disinformation. The findings will directly link to additional research data that is being collected as part of an Australian Research Council project by AMLA members. This project, [Addressing Misinformation with Media Literacy through Cultural Institutions](#), will develop an evidence-base that can be used by AMLA members to inform the design of adult media literacy initiatives.

Measures from AMLA's 2021 and 2024 Adult Media Literacy Survey that can be tracked over time are:

- Media use patterns of adult Australians
- % of Adult Australians with and without access to media literacy support
- % of adult Australians who believe that different forms of media literacy support is important
- % of adult Australians who believe it is important to perform different media activities

- The role and impact of entertainment media on people's attitudes, perceptions and worldviews
- The level of media abilities in different adult demographic cohorts including the ability to
 - check if information found online is true
 - check if a website can be trusted
 - edit a video and post it online
 - find an online community to become involved in
 - interpret a social media platform's data policy
 - use software to improve a photo
 - determine if they are being harassed online and seek help from the right authorities
 - change privacy settings
 - find information they need online
- % of adult Australians that believe misinformation on social media is an issue that needs to be addressed
- % of adult Australians that believe the collection of personal data by social media platforms is an issue that needs to be addressed
- % of adult who believe racist and racially insensitive content on Australian television is an issue that needs to be addressed

About AMLA

The Australian Media Literacy Alliance represent a unique consortium of key public institutions and networked organisations and university research centres that are well-positioned to tackle media literacy as a national priority. The breadth of AMLA's current research and practice, alongside that of our core members, makes us well-placed to respond to the questions posed in the News Media Assistance Program consultation paper about the role of media literacy education in supporting public interest journalism.

The members of AMLA are:

- ABC Education (ABC)
- ACMI (Australian Centre for the Moving Image)
- Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA)
- Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD)
- National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA)
- National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA)
- Queensland University of Technology (QUT)
- Special Broadcasting Service (SBS)
- Western Sydney University (WSU)

Our efforts focus on supporting lifelong media literacy learning for all Australians, especially those who may be vulnerable to disinformation or digital exclusion.

Our primary goal is to develop and promote a government-endorsed national media literacy strategy for Australia, which:

- states the importance of media literacy for all in society
- articulates the achievements and challenges in the Australian context
- is founded on evidence about media practices and needs
- provides direction for educators and curriculum development
- raises awareness and encourages a whole-of-community response
- ensures all Australian citizens can access the support they need to benefit from diverse forms of media and avoid media harms.

Since forming in 2020, AMLA has:

- brought together hundreds of stakeholders from across Australia through national community consultations, the first Australian Media Literacy Research Symposium series in 2021 (in Canberra, Brisbane, Sydney and online) and

the first public Australian Media Literacy Symposium in 2023 (in Sydney and online) to co-develop a national agenda for change

- supported the capacity building of media literacy stakeholders
- developed a widely-adopted national framework for media literacy education
- led research that has informed public policy and media literacy education initiatives.

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