Australian Library and Information Association: Submission to the News Media Assistance Program Consultation

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is the national body for libraries and information services in Australia. Libraries in Australia work to ensure an informed, literate and inclusive democratic society through the provision of excellent library and information services.

ALIA is a founding member of the Australian Media Literacy Alliance (AMLA) and contributed to the AMLA submission to this inquiry. ALIA is also a participant in the Australian Research Council (ARC) funded project *Addressing Misinformation with Media Literacy through Cultural Institutions*, and we endorse the submission made by Chief Investigators for that project to this consultation. The below submission does not repeat information in the submissions referred to above, but rather supplements them with some additional library-specific context and opportunities related to access to news content and media literacy.

Availability and Accessibility of News and Journalism

- Libraries are critical to providing equality of access to news media
- Key priority groups need extra support for both access and accessibility of news media, and libraries are best placed to deliver that support
- Key challenges for libraries in responding to this need include constrained resources and increasing demand

The consultation paper rightly identifies access as a key objective, noting that news content "provides no benefit if Australians cannot access it, or otherwise glean its informational content." A number of barriers exist to universal access for Australians to news content, including:

- Cost - especially to subscription services
- Access to technology - for example stable internet to access online content
- Accessibility - for example disability access or formats suitable for people with low English literacy
- Human capability - including literacy and media literacy skills

Certain priority groups are more likely to face barriers from one or more of these factors. For example research into media literacy (capability) identifies older Australians, those living in regional or remote areas, low-socio economic households, people with low levels of education, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people living with a disability as priority groups.[1] Similarly the Digital Inclusion Index, which examines access, affordability and ability to create a digital inclusion score, identifies regional and

---

[1] Notley, T., S. Park, M. Dezuanni and S. Chambers, 2021. *Adult Media Literacy in Australia. Research Report*, Sydney, Western Sydney University, University of Canberra and Queensland University of Technology.

Park, S., Lee. J. Y., Atkinson, Sand Su, J. (2021). *Media Literacy in Australia: A Qualitative Study*. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra.

remote, older Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with a disability and lower socio-economic status as more likely to be digitally excluded.[2]

Libraries, including public libraries,[3] play a critical role in ensuring that the whole community is able to access news media, including members of the priority groups identified above. Across Australia more than 1700 public library service points work to support communities from the metropolitan inner-city to remote communities. Public libraries are safe third spaces, open to all, including groups that are otherwise socially isolated and to groups that have no current connection to formal education.

Libraries work to address the barriers to access, purchasing subscriptions to news media so that library users can access without payment. This local and state government funding for educational and public libraries to purchase subscriptions, is an often overlooked stable source of funding for media.

Libraries also work to remove additional barriers to access, providing infrastructure such as wifi and computers, supporting accessible versions including audio and large print and building capabilities and literacies through formal programs and one-on-one assistance.

Demand for this support is growing, a recent study of library staff undertaken by the University of Canberra for ALIA found that some of the most common activities that library patrons asked for help with included finding information online, general internet use, and using digital devices.[4] A new report focused directly on rural public libraries found that since COVID the majority reported that demands for digital support had increased. One librarian noted that the local aging population 'do not have family members close enough to assist them,' and some cannot afford the devices and connections they need to effectively navigate the digital world.[5]

There are challenges to this work of libraries. Funding is a constant challenge, the same study into rural libraries identified the challenge of public libraries being asked to "do more with less". The report also noted that "technology related challenges faced by rural libraries include aging hardware and software that cannot be replaced due to a lack of funds and cannot be repaired due to a lack of qualified IT support staff in their communities. In addition, poor digital infrastructure and internet connectivity in many rural and remote communities restricts the services and programs that their libraries are able to offer."[6]

Meanwhile, not every Australian child has access to a school library, and while there is currently no national data set on school library funding, staffing or resourcing, it is clear that many Australian children are not receiving the access, tools or support that they need to news media due to the under-resourcing of school libraries.[7]

Recommendation: That in developing the news media assistance program that access to and accessibility of news media is identified as a priority.

---

[2] Thomas, J., McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Holcombe-James, I., Ormond-Parker, L., & Ganley, L. (2023). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2023*. Melbourne: ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra.

[3] In this context public libraries are publicly funded libraries with publicly accessible collections, and includes national and state libraries and well as public library networks.

[4] Park, S., Walsh, B. & Su, J. (2023). Libraries and Media Literacy Education. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre

[5] Hider, P., Wakeling, S., Marshall, A., & Garner, J. (Accepted/In press). Public Library Services in Rural Australia: Challenges and Prospects. *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*.

[6] Hider, P., Wakeling, S., Marshall, A., & Garner, J. (Accepted/In press). Public Library Services in Rural Australia: Challenges and Prospects. *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*.

[7] Australian Library and Information Association (2023) Literacy will continue to lag without school libraries https://www.alia.org.au/Web/News/Articles/2023/1-January2023/Literacy_lag_without_school_libraries.aspx

Recommendation: That in developing the news media assistance program, the Department liaises with the Australian Library and Information Association to ensure strategic investment in programs that support public and educational libraries to provide access and support accessibility of news media content to all Australians, including priority cohorts.

Media Literacy

- Media literacy is essential for a democratic society
- There is a need for more media literacy education and support for most Australians
- There is a lack of resources to support library staff and others with certain priority cohorts or with emerging technologies
- There are opportunities for investment in research-led practical interventions to enhance media literacy support provided by libraries

ALIA supports the submissions from AMLA and CIs Notley, Park and Dezuanni, and notes in particular their identification of priority cohorts, priority needs and the benefits that arise from a media literate community. We strongly support the calls for a national media literacy strategy, and continued and stable investment in research to underpin evidence based policy and programs. In addition we add some comments from our experience supporting media literacy in practice.

The demand for media literacy support is often combined with other literacy support, such as digital and information literacy, as well as other support such as access to materials or access to infrastructure such as internet. Certain cohorts who seek media literacy support can also present particular challenges for library staff. For example with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) patrons, librarians may be unfamiliar with the different social media platforms used by these cohorts, which means they are not confident in having the knowledge to discuss how to identify misinformation or disinformation.[8] People who have low literacy levels also need specialised support and there is a lack of research or evidence-based resources to guide library staff.

It can be difficult for library staff to stay on top of the fast pace of change in the news media environment. This can include changes in information sources and platforms, for example needing to understand platforms such as TikTok or Instagram, and changing concepts of "news".[9] The rise of generative AI tools, concerns about turbocharged mis and disinformation campaigns, and continued opacity of the algorithms that mediate consumer's news consumption highlight the broad landscape library staff need to be familiar with to be able to support library users.

ALIA has seen success in programs where we have worked directly with researchers to examine needs, develop evidence-based approaches, apply these in a library setting and evaluate outcomes. An example pilot program with researchers from the University of Canberra led to the development of a library-focused media literacy short course that focused on the skills that library staff needed to support and teach media literacy with library users. The course evaluations showed that 94% of participants developed new skills sets and would recommend the course to colleagues. The evaluation also identified future areas of need.[10]

ALIA is also a partner in the ARC funded *Addressing Misinformation through Media Literacy through Cultural Institutions* and has just started another pilot research program with UTS examining the way that

---

[8] Park, S., Walsh, B. & Su, J. (2023). Libraries and Media Literacy Education. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre

[9] Notley, T., Chambers, S., Zhong, H.F., Park, S., Lee, J. Y., & Dezuanni, M. (2023) News and Young Australians in 2023: How Children and Teens Access, Perceive and are Affected by News Media. Western Sydney University.

[10] Park, S., Walsh, B. & Su, J. (2023). Libraries and Media Literacy Education. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre

generative AI tools affect library users seeking information. This project will develop a range of resources including a library curriculum and public exhibition exploring the findings. While these programs are very important to create evidence-based resources for library staff, further funding to support a national roll-out and continued research in this fast paced field is needed.

Recommendation: That the government funds the Australian Library and Information Association to work with researchers to update and expand evidence-based media literacy programs and fund the roll-out across public libraries in Australia.