

# The Digital Experiences of Australian Youth

Accessing Trustworthy Information  
and News Online



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[Young people] ... navigate through the treacherous sea of truths tainted with lies we find ourselves in online.

Female, 16, Queensland

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## The Young and Resilient Research Centre

Based in Western Sydney University, the Young and Resilient Research Centre embraces an integrated mode of research and development, education, training, and enterprise to research and develop technology-based products, services and policies that strengthen the resilience of young people and their communities, enabling them to live well and participate fully in social and economic life.

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## Introduction

This report presents a summary of findings from qualitative workshops conducted by the Young and Resilient Research Centre (Y&R) to support the Telstra Foundation's (TF) annual Australian Youth Digital Index (AYDI) study. AYDI deploys a large scale, nationally representative survey to monitor young Australian's digital access, connectivity, skills, safety, and wellbeing and develops outputs to inform policy and improve online safety and digital inclusion. Drawing on Y&R's long-standing expertise conducting participatory research with children and young people (CYP) about their experiences and perspectives of digital technology (e.g., Third et al. 2011; Third et al. 2013; Third et al. 2019; Moody et al. 2021; Marsden et al. 2022; Third et al. 2024), the qualitative research described in this report bolsters the impact of the AYDI's quantitative findings with deep insights about the experience of CYP in Australia with particular digital phenomena.

## Objectives

The increasing influence of digital technologies presents Australian CYP with wide-ranging challenges as well as opportunities. One key concern identified by young participants in the 2025 AYDI survey was the role and impact of online news and information.

Following that insight, Y&R's workshops were designed to explore CYP's perspectives about accessing trustworthy information and news<sup>1</sup> online. In particular, workshops aimed to:

- Identify CYP's key perceptions about accessing trustworthy information and news online, with a focus on challenges, opportunities and aspirations.
- Explore how CYP access information they consider to be trustworthy and how online information and news impacts them.

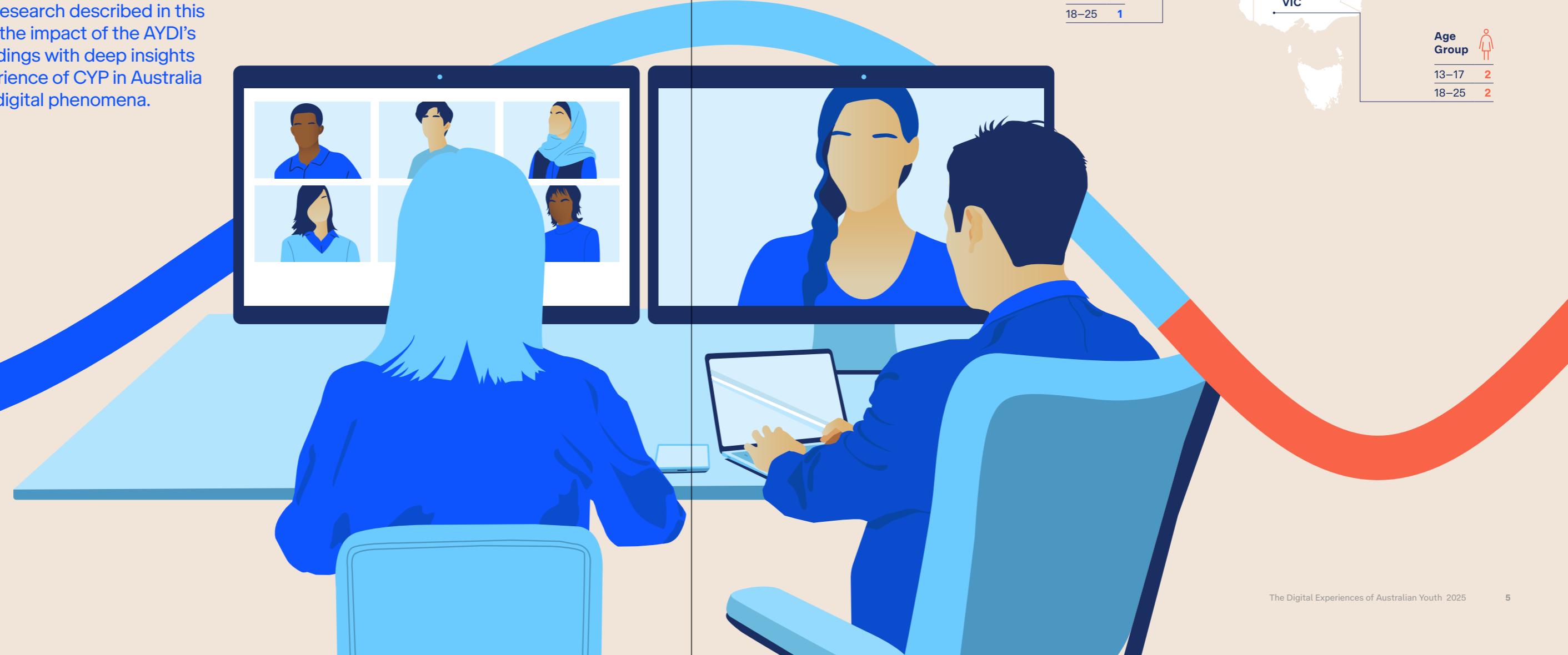
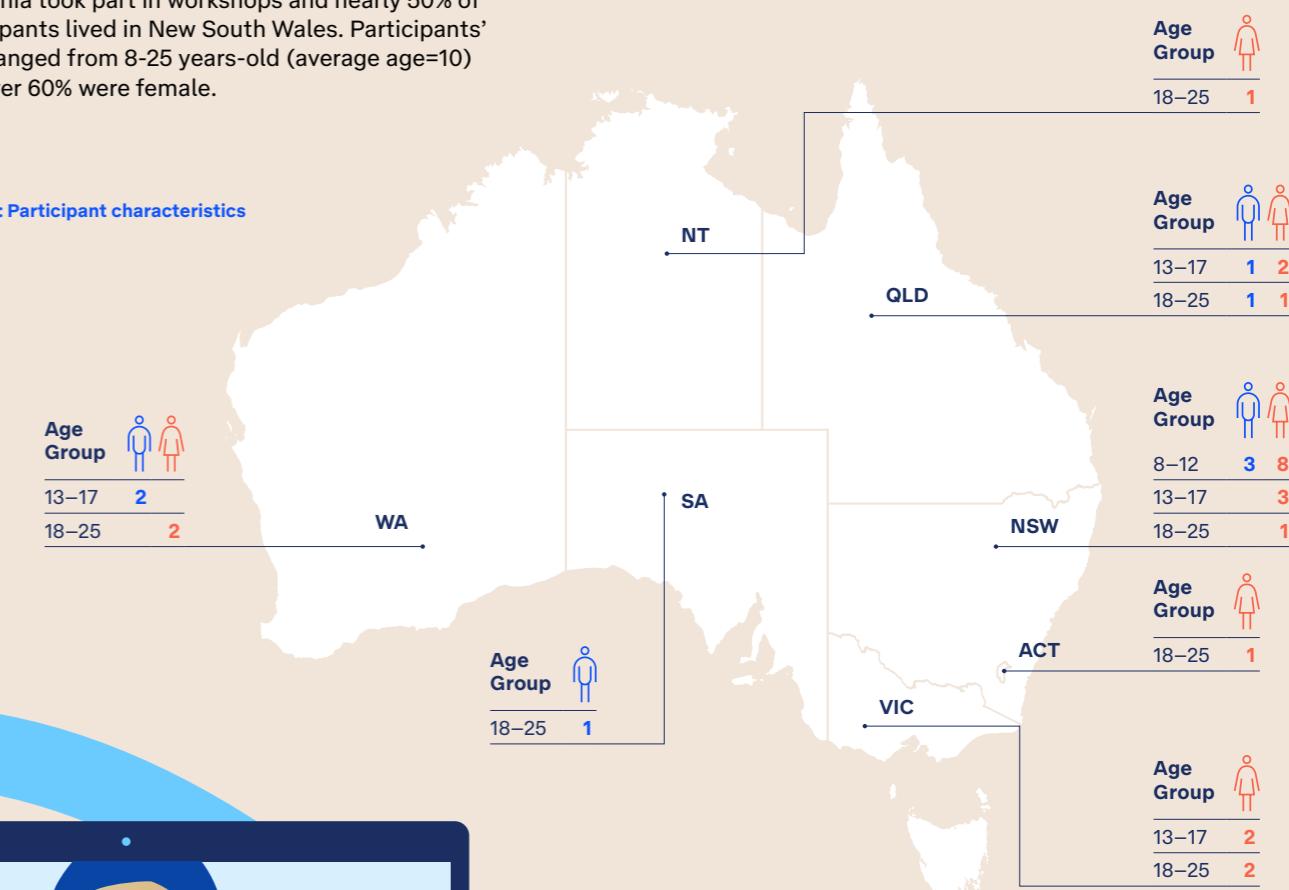
1. Information and news was described as a broad category to CYP in workshops, rather than narrowly defined (e.g., participants were prompted to consider information and news as including "what is going on in your community or around the world; information about hobbies and interests; help with schoolwork, etc.").

## Study design

### Participants

31 CYP from all Australian states and territories except Tasmania took part in workshops and nearly 50% of participants lived in New South Wales. Participants' ages ranged from 8-25 years-old (average age=10) and over 60% were female.

Figure 1: Participant characteristics



### Methodology

Y&R conducted 2 x 2-hour online, participatory workshops with CYP from across Australia (ages 13-17 and 18-25), and 1 x 2-hour in-person workshop with children aged 8-12 in Western Sydney.

All CYP completed similar, age-appropriate creative activities in respective workshops (e.g., drawing, storytelling, discussion), either individually or collaboratively in small groups. Activities encouraged CYP to discuss and reflect on their experiences related to online news and information, including identifying challenges, opportunities and aspirations. Online workshops were hosted and recorded on Western Sydney University's corporate Zoom video conferencing workspace, and utilised Miro digital whiteboards for collaborative activities. Recordings were transcribed using Otter AI software for qualitative analysis. Transcripts and other qualitative data created in workshops (e.g., physical/digital worksheets) were analysed using thematic analysis techniques to organically draw out key insights about CYP's perceptions, experiences of, and ideas about accessing trustworthy information and news online. Key quotes and excerpts supporting findings are identified by participant or group and have been lightly edited for clarity.

### What did CYP say about workshops?



*“Reminded me to engage more with the world around me, and even if it is time consuming it is really important to check and validate sources of information.”*

18-25, Australia

*“How interactive and engaging it was. It was actually fun, and I learnt stuff too!”*

18-25, Australia



*“Good, it felt like a safe space for you to say your thoughts on the topics.”*

13-17, Australia

*“It was good because we all got to express our feelings about what is happening.”*

13-17, Australia



## What did we learn from children and young people?

### CYP want access to trustworthy information and news online

The CYP who took part in our workshops access information and news online for many reasons, and their responses suggest that as people age and develop and their everyday worlds expand, they access information and news online more frequently. Our participants report they consume information and news on a variety of online platforms, including BTN, Google, 9 News, Wikipedia, 7 News, YouTube, Government websites, ABC iView news, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Australian websites (ending with .au). However, despite this varied platform use, across all age groups CYP say they find it difficult to distinguish between real and fake news online.

*“Misinterpretation.....negative influences; misinformation; fake accounts; rumours; decipher between true or false; manipulative information...”*

Online group, 15-16, Australia

*“There is so much information online and it is hard to find trustworthy information. There are a lot of people believing in information online without checking if the information is true or not. We need to educate people about how to get trustworthy information online and not to believe everything we read on the internet. We should have a source of trustworthy info we get from.”*

Male, 24, Victoria

### CYP access information and news online to expand networks and opportunities, make friends, and help them learn

CYP say having access to trustworthy information and news online benefits them in multiple ways. Primarily, they say having easy access to information helps them to learn and gain knowledge and makes it easier to do schoolwork and study.

*“To have a whole variety of trustworthy information; to get better knowledge and education; being able to access reliable websites for work.”*

Gender unknown, 11-12, NSW

*“Doing schoolwork is easier because you can get real news and information easily.”*

Gender unknown, age unknown, NSW

*“The more variety of opinions you can get the better of a decision you can make.”*

Online group, 19-20, Australia

CYP also note how online information and news helps them expand their knowledge more broadly by offering opportunities to stay up to date with current world events and global affairs, underscoring the importance of online information for CYP's civic and political learning and engagement.

*“[Online information can help us] to understand what is going on in the world.”* Gender unknown, 8-10, NSW

*“[We can use online news to] stay up to date with different world issues.”* Online group, 13-17, Australia

*“[Young people are] politically aware, [and have a] greater understanding of the world around them.”* Online group, 18-25, Australia

Our findings suggest that recognition of online news as necessary for social awareness increases as children age. Children over 13, in particular, say access to information and news online can expose them to different worldviews and perspectives, enhancing their ability to engage with content that promotes awareness of different cultures, values and ideas.

*“[Exposure to] different people's perspectives to things or how they feel about it.”*

Online group, 13-17, Australia

*“Get different perspectives.”* Online group, 13-17, Australia

# What did we learn from children and young people?

Continued

Young adults (i.e., participants 18 years and older) note some unique benefits of information and news online not identified by their younger peers. They see the speed at which information is available as a significant benefit: having access to information faster than ever before; access to learning/educational materials and information on a vast range of topics. For young adults, this fosters skill development and empowers them as independent learners. They also say having access to a diverse array of information supports critical thinking and decision-making.

While not explicitly addressed in the data, one potential reason young adults identify rapid access to information as a benefit while their younger peers do not, might be because older participants accessed traditional 'slow' information resources when younger but over the years transitioned to faster online, information sources making the shift more apparent to them. In contrast, their younger peers may only ever have accessed fast online sources of information and news.

*"Self-led inquiry – can use the internet as a resource."*  
Online group, 18-25, Australia

*"Most things that people would like to know or learn are able to be found within mere minutes of searching on your browser... This gives people almost unlimited learning capabilities without having to go to the local library or seek out each individual expert on a given topic in the real world which is/was very time consuming."*  
Online group, 18-25, Australia

Participants also identified the value of information and news for personal development more broadly, including the potential to promote social awareness or connectedness.

*"Can give us a purpose/obligation."*  
Online group, 18-25, Australia

The role of information access in fostering sociality also figured in participants' assessments of benefits. Across all ages, CYP say that accessing online spaces generally provide opportunities to create new and meaningful relationships with others who share similar values, ultimately fostering a sense of belonging and nurturing their social connections.

*"Being able to talk to friends."*  
Online group, 13-17, Australia

*"[We can] build a community/network."*  
Online group, 18-25, Australia

*"Develop strong relationships online with likeminded people."*  
Online group, 18-25, Australia

## CYP routinely access information and news online, but are cautious and uncertain

Over 80% of CYP in our workshops report that being able to access trustworthy news and information online was important to them. At the same time, some participants say they and their peers are not always attentive to the challenges, often underappreciating or ignoring issues of trustworthiness of information in their daily online engagements.

*"I definitely think it is an important issue however it is not one that comes to mind first up when I am thinking about the state of the world atm; but I also think it is because of that that many people (including me) haven't realised the depth of the issue [of trustworthy information] and how much it can affect the rest of our lives... I get most of my information from Tik Tok and only if I am really interested do I google for more. That being said I am mindful of who the poster is and whether or not I should trust them; it's so scary but I guess I am just used to it- it's a part of my life growing up in the digital world in a time where it is minimally regulated..."*  
Female, 19, Western Australia

CYP's views about the importance of trustworthiness online are primarily driven by their perceptions of the potential negative consequences of exposure to untrustworthy information.

*"[It is] Super important. It can lead to really bad ... decisions politically, could lead to really bad decisions for somebody's finances, your livelihood. You can get scammed, there's so many reasons why getting the right information online can be important for you, even relationships can get ruined people can be heartbroken. A lot of high stakes sometimes when it comes to news and your information, and it can even destroy families sometimes, too, when people are getting misinformation, different information, it's quite important in that sense."*  
Male, 24, NSW

CYP highlight three main ways exposure to, and unwitting acceptance of untrustworthy online information or news can have negative consequences, pointing to adverse influences on wellbeing, harmful social impacts, and negative material consequences. Firstly, they say untrustworthy information can impact negatively an individual's physical and mental health.

*"Because deep fakes and fake news could really effect some people....like make them sad with something that never happened..."*

Male, 15, Western Australia

*"Being bombarded with so much information constantly that it has given the younger generation 'brain rot.'*  
Online group, 18-25, Australia

*"[The] burden of all the bad news can be really overwhelming – especially if you feel helpless..."*

Online group, 19-20, Australia

*"The internet can just become a frustrating place when all you get is negative news e.g. house prices, war topped with the latest trend to lose weight/ change yourself."*  
Female, 19, Western Australia

Secondly, our young participants note negative impacts at the societal level like increased bullying or racism.

*"False information can carry on through people talking about the info, this can cause society to view a matter in a distorted way."*

Female, 16, Queensland

*"Language barrier; misunderstanding; bullying; not being able to tell if someone is lying; friendships; breakups; racism; you have to question yourself; viral things can spread misinformation."*

Online female group, 13-14, Australia

*"Algorithms are designed to spread information or trends decided by the company/highest bidder, this is on purpose to get people talking about random things and distracted from more important issues, it is active psychological warfare on a global scale."*

Online group, 18-25, Australia

Finally, CYP are sensitive to the negative material implications of untrustworthy information such as financial loss through online scams. Indeed, scams feature prominently as a safety concern among CYP alongside fake news, disinformation and advertisements. These issues of trustworthiness make it increasingly difficult for CYP to navigate the online world comfortably and safely, consistently putting the onus on CYP to determine whether information is genuine or false as they navigate their day-to-day lives online. This is an issue for CYP of all ages, and particularly so for younger children and teenagers under 18-years-old.

*"Can't always find true and reliable information; having people editing on Wikipedia; False info; if its reliable or not; getting scammed; advertisements popping up randomly."*  
Gender unknown, 11-12, NSW

*"It also makes it hard to trust a source if you know that they could benefit financially from possibly spreading fake news."*  
Male, 15, Queensland

*"Using Google is going to get results that are sponsored and paid, de-google and switch to open source search engines can help to see different results that google does not want to show, e.g., google paid apple billions for the default search engine in safari to be google, if they can spend so much on this it must be important, they want everyone to use google and not other search engines, most people do not even know there are other search engines that are not google."*  
Online group, 18-25, Australia

While CYP focus mainly on negative repercussions of untrustworthy information online, they do also note benefits of being able to access trustworthy information and news online, particularly highlighting outcomes such as hope, clarity and closure.

*"It's just important because it's the truth, right? And I think that's something that a lot of us strive for in life, and when you know what the truth is, I think things in life are a lot more clear... It can give you a lot of hope, it can give you a lot of understanding. Closure, even. So, that's why I think it's important."*  
Male, 15, NSW

# What did we learn from children and young people?

Continued

## CYP use targeted strategies to assess the genuineness of information and news online

The way participants assess and make decisions about whether or not to trust information and news they find online are complex and multi-layered. They draw on an array of critical thinking strategies to guide their decisions about whether to trust the content they see online.

Table 1: Strategies used by CYP

 Triangulating information from a variety of sources	<p>One clear difference emerged between how younger children approach their assessment of online information compared with the approach preferred by young adults. Young adults tend to focus on triangulating information from a variety of sources to assess genuineness, whereas younger children are more likely to draw from across the wider range of strategies. This does not imply that young adults do not use other strategies like applying safety checks for other purposes, but that triangulation is by far their key method for assessing the truthfulness or genuineness of information online.</p>
 Applying both behavioural and technical safety checks and processes	<p><i>If I see the same piece of information pop up more than once from different sources or different platforms then I will start to believe it may hold some truth to it.</i> Female, 16, Queensland</p> <p><i>If there's a lot of people saying the same information, I just assume that its mostly true.</i> Female, 14, NSW</p>
 Checking with parents and trusted adults	<p><i>Do not click on unwanted ads, as you may get scammed. The most important thing is to stay safe.</i> Female, 9, NSW</p> <p><i>Be aware of scams or pop-up ads; don't click on things you don't know. P.S. you can use an ad blocker for no pop-up ads.</i> Male, 12, NSW</p> <p><i>Talk to mum and dad, the right websites and go to the internet.</i> Male, 8, NSW</p>
 Being wary of AI platforms	<p><i>I think ChatGPT is insanely bad because it draws information from random places and we don't know if we should trust them.</i> Female, 13, NSW</p> <p><i>I don't use ChatGPT but when I google things it gives me an AI summary which is quite helpful, but I never know when to trust it.</i> Female, 14, NSW</p>
 Sourcing information from trusted websites	<p><i>First of all, check all the URL's so if you know it's trusted, you can use only that website.</i> Female, 9, NSW</p> <p><i>If they are a reputable news site/people.</i> Male, 15, Western Australia</p> <p><i>If its government site or source. For social media account based on the followers on their accounts.</i> Gender unknown, 18-25, Australia</p> <p><i>I did fact-check... I'm more likely to trust the news and something online if... to me, it feels like it's been fact-checked.</i> Female, 20, Northern Territory</p>

As children age, they are more likely to seek corroboration for online news and information from other online sources and by assessing conversations and opinions of others online. Young adults are also more aware of, and have a more sophisticated understanding of, technical mechanisms like algorithms that online platforms use to select and present information. One potential interpretation of this trend is that, as CYP age and develop, they tend to rely more on their own critical-thinking skills to scrutinise and assess online information and news.

*"Instagram, TikTok, I've noticed that because of my algorithm I've developed I'm only filtered a very specific category of news now."*

Gender unknown, 18-25, Australia

*"Look at the comments and see if anyone else is challenging what is said or presenting another side."*

Gender unknown, 18-25, Australia

*"I also take a look at the comments and see the type of people engaging with it and see if I feel like I align myself with the beliefs of these people."*

Gender unknown, 18-25, Australia

*"I always search further, before I believe something I want minimum 3 sources that support a perspective."*

Gender unknown, 18-25, Australia

*"I always check to see whose posting it, I believe that bigger new[s] channels have a larger reputation to hold when delivering news."* Gender unknown, 18-25, Australia



# What did we learn from children and young people?

Continued

## CYP say ensuring access to trustworthy information and news online is a shared responsibility

While acknowledging the importance of personal responsibility (e.g., suggesting individuals should proactively adopt technical and behavioural strategies), CYP assert that being able to access and recognise trustworthy information and news online requires a collective approach. For example, when asked what they would say to decision-makers, CYP highlight whole-of-community responses.



CYP emphasise the duty of responsible actors such as adults, governments, media sources and schools to develop and implement safeguards that better support their awareness of and protection from unsafe information and news online. They identify the need to balance and support their own online autonomy and empowerment with appropriate regulation and online protections prescribed and enforced by relevant authorities.

CYP say equipping them and their peers with better education that expands their capacity to identify trustworthy information online is a key priority for them. They ask for government and schools to provide more effective education and awareness campaigns to develop their digital literacy and critical-thinking skills and teach critical media literacy. At the same time, CYP say education itself is not sufficient, they also want access to practical tools to help them distinguish reliable, trustworthy information from mis/disinformation. In pursuit of those outcomes, our young participants emphasise the criticality of meaningful partnerships between different authorities and stakeholders to ensure education and practical resources are actualised and effective.

"Dear Mr Prime Minister, There is lots of false information which is being spread online through various platforms. A way to help all young Australians would be by telling them the dangers of trusting AI, not credible sources, and information from parents/friends without researching it yourself. I think it could help if you made campaigns targeted to young people & used them to show young people how to correctly research. I also think it could be a good idea to ban/highly regulate use of AI, as we never know if it's correct because it can pull information from anywhere, even if it's false." Female, 13, NSW

"Dear Prime Minister, Trusting information online is a big problem for teenagers because sometimes we don't have the right access to find out if stuff is truthful or not. We could put team that goes around to different schools and having a day where we learn about how to identify fake news and scams." Female, 14, NSW

"We need to educate people about how to get trustworthy information online and not to believe everything we read on the internet." Male, 24, Victoria

"On behalf of young people in Australia we need your help to navigate the challenging world that is the vast and endless abyss of the internet, and we need it now, too much misinformation is being allowed to damage and derail young people's future, and something must change." Female, 21, ACT

"[Government] funds public campaigns to improve awareness of trustworthy sources. Young Australians need the tools to think critically and engage with reliable information." Online group, 18-25, Australia

CYP want confidence that news/information sources are trustworthy. They are often alert to potential underlying purposes or motives behind news and information sources, perceiving trustworthy sources as ones that are objective and published by unbiased third parties, excluding actors such as political parties, private corporations and other financially motivated outlets. Also, legacy and new media outlets are encouraged to be transparent e.g., about the standards they use and sources of their information. Consequently, CYP call for transparency and accountability from those responsible for providing and circulating news online.

"News is not paid for or the research has been completed by the company or party trying to do the reporting independent of government and private companies backing; News is usually more accurate when presented by unbiased / unaffected parties; Information is based on real research that is relevant to the article being presented..."

Online group, 18-25, Australia

"Make news open source - research sources being open, money trails being open, who is funding what being open and this will help people understand what they should and should not trust."

Male, 25, South Australia

CYP want news and media outlets to ensure that content is reflective of a diverse range of perspectives and views, rather than being purely one-sided. For them, that means representing views from marginalised communities as well as ensuring published content is presented in ways that can be understood by more diverse audiences (e.g., people with low English fluency or literacy).

"[Should be] friendly to the non-expert."

Online group, 18-25, Australia

"From all sides of the story." Online group, 18-25, Australia

"Including perspectives from marginalised groups."

Online group, 18-25, Australia

# What did we learn from children and young people?

Continued

“Dear Free to Air News in Australia, We need more honesty and integrity when publishing news. This generation is particularly susceptible to ‘echo chambers’ and accepting the first opinion provided. We need to ensure that news is not biased and that all sides of a story are represented. No amount of money or status should influence what stories are told and whose side is heard.” Female, 19, Western Australia

As well as championing governmental support for programmes or initiatives, CYP also recognise the role of regulation and policy, for example for prompting online service and platform providers to provide safeguards to help audiences verify the truthfulness of content. And some CYP also ask online developers and platforms to play a more proactive role in verifying the accuracy of information and content posted online.

“Mr Albanese, I am writing as a young Australian concerned about the impact of online misinformation. With social media as a main source of news for many in my generation, it’s often hard to know what’s true. I urge your government to develop national policy that supports digital and media literacy education, promotes responsible platform regulation, and funds public campaigns to improve awareness of trustworthy sources. Young Australians need the tools to think critically and engage with reliable information. Strong policy leadership in this area is vital for protecting democracy and supporting informed, engaged citizens.”

Gender unknown, 18-25, Australia

“Some of the information we find online is sometimes not truthful and a way for you to prevent people from claiming things that aren’t real, is to verify some info like how news channels do it and is also seen on TV, social media apps. Try informing the creators or people who own Google or something on how they could start verifying websites...” Female, 13, NSW

## CYP want parents to support them but feel they are underequipped

Along with a collective approach, CYP advocate for parents and trusted adults to take responsibility for helping CYP identify reliable and trustworthy online content.

“Learning about it at school; talk it out with parents; family; they go to counsellors; talking to friends.”

Online group, 13-17, Australia

“Guidance from parents and other supportive figures.”

Online group, 18-25, Australia

“Dear... parents, The Internet now makes information easily accessible to all, even younger generations. It is up to you to ensure that you are providing enough support and guidance to your children, so they learn to understand the difference between what’s right or wrong, or what’s true and false, to prevent them from being misled.” Female, 16, Victoria

“Parents and teachers can help you.”

Face-to-face group, 11-12, NSW

However, some CYP feel that their parents are not equipped to help them access trustworthy information and news online. They say parents often do not have the knowledge or skills to help their children access trustworthy information online or discern what online content they should trust, particularly highlighting the rapidity of change as a challenge to parents’ capacity to give effective support.

“A lot of parents don’t know how to help or set limits. The tech is evolving faster than the education around it.” Online group, 18-25, Australia

“Kids are teaching themselves how to use the internet without any guidance.” Online group, 18-25, Australia

“Parents unlikely: mum wouldn’t be concerned about fake news.” Face-to-face group, 8-10, NSW

At the same time, CYP feel parents and trusted adults are also sometimes insufficiently appreciative of the benefits of accessing information and news online. Driving perceptions of this generational difference are CYP’s suspicions that adults make value judgements about the role of online information and news: viewing it as a less reliable ‘shortcut’ used by CYP to sidestep the more rigorous work involved in accessing traditional media and news which adults view as more trustworthy.

“Teachers and parents might be concerned with the newer generations being disconnected to reality.”

Online group, 18-25, Australia

“For my parents they prefer listening to news on television and radio instead of social media.”

Online group, 18-25, Australia

“Adults don’t trust, nor they recommend their children to get access [to] news and information from social media.”

Online group, 18-25, Australia

“Adults thinks we are lazy to verify or do some research on the news and information. But we think it’s time saving to get information on social media rather than browsing it and verifying.”

Online group, 18-25, Australia

## CYP want to be heard

CYP strongly believe they are not being listened to or taken seriously when it comes to the challenge of trustworthy online news and information. They want to be recognised and for their voice to be heard but believe that decision makers and authorities do not respect them or pay them the attention they deserve. CYP say the future is not safe unless their opinions are heard and acted upon, a point they clearly articulated during the online workshop:

“I think decision makers should communicate with young people more, to create a collaborative understanding of where our minds are at.”

Gender unknown, 18-25, Australia

“Banning social media for young people is a strawman to a bigger issue that is silencing people – making people use their ID to access or use anything on the internet makes [it] so easy for the government and social media companies to silence and ban people who provides alternative opinions on issues that are important.”

Gender unknown, 18-25, Australia

“No, there is a lack of consultation (and listening for that matter) when it comes to issues like this e.g., banning social media for children – this doesn’t solve the actual problems just provides a cover up.”

Gender unknown, 18-25, Australia

“I feel as though... my opinion (as a young person) is gathered just to tick a box. It is not listened to or viewed as important or valid in any way.”

Gender unknown, 18-25, Australia

“I feel young people have a very limited voice in politics despite being the individuals who have experienced it.”

Gender unknown, 18-25, Australia

“Unpopular opinion, we have no effect on this or any other issue - unless someone here is a billionaire and can lobby (bribe) the government to make laws that suit you.”

Gender unknown, 18-25, Australia

“I feel as if younger people don’t get a say as I think many policy holders don’t see eye-to-eye with the younger gen.”

Gender unknown, 18-25, Australia



## Key takeaways

### CYP's motivations vary:

CYP have a variety of motivations for seeking out news and information online and as they mature, their motivations and the range of online sources they access also evolve and grow. Yet even though the ways and extent of their online information seeking changes over time, young people of all ages are not fully confident about differentiating between trustworthy and untrustworthy online information.

### CYP want to connect:

As they mature and become more social, CYP are more inclined to access information and news online. At the same time, CYP also recognise that access to information can play a role in stimulating connection and sociality. CYP are motivated to connect with others primarily by an eagerness to stay informed about trends and events, to connect over shared interests, and to expand their networks for strategic reasons (e.g., education, work) as well as personal development (e.g., friendship, fun and play, instilling a sense of purpose).

### CYP recognise consequences:

CYP are attuned to negative personal and social consequences of untrustworthy online information like fake news and online scams and so having access to trustworthy information and news online is important to them. However, CYP feel they do not have enough access to trustworthy online sources, cannot always easily differentiate between trusted and untrusted online information, or can sometimes accept online information as true when they should be more critical.

### CYP's approaches vary:

CYP's decision-making when accessing information and news online is shaped by targeted strategies including information triangulation, using online safety checks, consulting with trusted adults, relying on trusted sources, and wariness of AI platforms. As they age and develop,

children tend to sharpen and become more confident in their critical-thinking skills and rely more heavily on those skills to scrutinise online information and news. Rather than always blindly trusting information and news online, CYP are often evaluating to determine what is authentic and safe to engage with across online spaces.

### CYP want collective solutions:

CYP believe a broadly collective, or ecological, model is required to help ensure audiences of all ages have access to and can identify trustworthy information and news online. That is, CYP assert individuals, communities, government, and news and digital industry share responsibility for equipping CYP and adults with the knowledge, skills, and tools to recognise and decide how to respond to trustworthy and untrustworthy online content.

### CYP say adults are underequipped:

CYPs want advice from trusted adults about how to differentiate trustworthy and untrustworthy information online but say parents and other adults are poorly equipped to provide that guidance. They say adults in their trusted circles commonly do not have the knowledge or confidence to give effective advice. And they feel adults can be biased against online information altogether and so sceptical of any of its benefits, making them resistant to providing balanced, constructive guidance.

### CYP want to contribute:

CYP have a sophisticated understanding of the challenges and opportunities resulting from online information and news and hold clear and considered opinions about addressing challenges and maximising opportunities. At the same time, CYP are unequivocal that they should have a larger role and greater influence in deliberations and decision-making processes that affect their online experiences.

## Conclusion

CYP hope for a future in which information and news online is accessible, safe and trustworthy for all. In the present, they have an advanced toolkit of strategies that they employ to keep themselves safe online. But, they call for practical familial and institutional support to achieve their vision of a future where trustworthy information is ubiquitous online. At the same time, CYP want better protection now from exposure to untrustworthy information and news online, and to learn more about how to protect themselves. They want key actors and decision-makers to monitor, prompt, and regulate online environments in ways that

make them safer and more trustworthy, to support CYP in their endeavours to thrive online. And finally, CYP want their voices to be heard so they can help shape an internet with safe online spaces for all. In the future, they hope:

“*No one makes fake news and websites. Everyone is happy.*” **Female, 9, NSW**

“*Life is way better now, the internet is better, the world is a better place... Every website is always reliable; the news is better than ever! Computers are more advanced, students are smarter, more reliable sources equal more knowledge...*” **Male, 12, NSW**

## Recommendations

### Platforms and providers

- Intergenerational multi-stakeholder approaches (involving online providers) should explore and implement online platform features to encourage consumers to think about and verify online information.
- Youth-led and/or intergenerational initiatives should be developed to identify key deficits in CYP's online information access, and co-design interventions that are meaningful and effective for CYP.
- Youth-centred peer-to-peer programs to effectively enhance CYP's digital literacy and ability to maximise their online information and news access should be designed and deployed.
- Platforms should develop features and embedded education resources to reinforce CYP's effective surveillance of information and news online and grow their capacity to protect themselves from potential harms associated with untrustworthy information.
- Online and media industry bodies should develop mechanisms to formally seek and capture intergenerational ideas and opinions about how to address issues related to the trustworthiness of online content and develop clear and accessible mechanisms that report how those ideas and opinions are addressed (e.g., through in-platform feedback).

### Institutions and authorities

- Governments, news channels, online platforms, schoolteachers, parents, and trusted adults should be motivated and equipped to support CYP's capacity to assess the information and news they encounter online.
- Governments and industry should privilege social good outcomes related to online information and news, and governments should be willing to responsibly regulate for those outcomes where necessary.
- Government and decision-making bodies should develop initiatives that encourage meaningful inclusion of CYP in planning, design, and implementation processes related to online oversight and regulation.
- Institutions like government and education providers should work with CYP to identify and deliver knowledge and resources that are relevant and meaningful, and that facilitate CYP's informed engagement with content online.

### Education

- Coordinated, consistent multi-stakeholder initiatives should reinforce CYP's knowledge and skills for appraising the veracity of online information and strengthen confidence in their ability and intuition about how to safely access information and news online.
- Digital literacy initiatives should do more to raise awareness about the risks of untrustworthy online information contrasted with the benefits of trustworthy information and news online.
- CYP should be better educated and equipped to activate knowledge about the trustworthiness of online information, so they become accustomed to habitually applying critical thinking strategies to the information they encounter.
- Intergenerational teaching and learning initiatives should be made available to deliver accessible, engaging, and compelling training to adults about the challenges and the benefits of online information and news.
- Digital literacy training should be designed to inform CYP about the respective value of traditional and new forms of media, including strategies for using complimentary sources to aid in their considerations of news and information veracity.
- Initiatives should be developed that inform and educate CYP about pathways through which they can meaningfully contribute to efforts and initiatives to improve online environments and made available (e.g., through civics education in schools).
- Age-appropriate initiatives should be aimed at strengthening CYP's own knowledge, abilities, and confidence to self-manage their assessment of online information and news.

### The role of CYP

- CYP themselves should be invited and encouraged to collaborate meaningfully with other stakeholders in the design and delivery of policy, education, resources, and interventions.

## Case Study: perceptions of children and young people about the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

In our exploration of CYP's experiences of and attitudes towards accessing trustworthy information and news online, Artificial Intelligence (AI) quickly emerged as a key point of interest, particularly for young people aged 12-19. Participants report that when navigating the increasing prevalence of AI across digital environments, they exercise caution. AI technology continues to evolve, but CYP say that currently, they are generally capable of identifying when the information they are accessing is generated by AI, and that they recognise the importance of fact-checking to ensure they are not misled by unreliable or false news.

In contrast to previous research (Third et al., 2024), consistently across all age groups CYP in our current study express significant concerns about the proliferation of AI and how it impacts their access to reliable and accurate information. CYP are also definitive in their views about the frequent unreliability of AI-generated information and content, asserting that such content should be regarded as inherently untrustworthy or fake until otherwise confirmed.

*"I think ChatGPT is insanely bad because it draws information from random places and we don't know if we should trust them."* **Female, 13, NSW**

*"... using AI can rot your brain."* **Female, 12, NSW**

In describing the impact of the increasing prevalence of this misinformation, CYP express concern about AI-generated content misleading themselves and others. They are frustrated about the extra burden of constantly needing to think about whether news content is authentic or created by AI.

*"It's also annoying when I see a product I want or something I find cool all just to find out it's not real or true."* **Female, 14, NSW**

*"Trying to discriminate between real and AI."* **Online group, 19-20, NSW**

*"[In my ideal future] ... everything has changed a lot. In your future, the online space is much safer, there's a lot more trustworthy sites you can use instead of all the AI stuff, just try and don't click on anything that you don't know what it is."* **Female, 11, NSW**

CYP are aware that AI is used in many ways across digital contexts, referring to other social media users sharing AI-generated content for the purpose of building their online audience or simply spreading misinformation for fun:

*"... it could be AI generated, and people attempt to gain clout from it or they just sometimes [know] for spreading [a] lie that was meant to be taken as a joke."* **Female, 13, Victoria**

*"Please monitor fake information on social media especially the use of AI in certain scenarios. It's tricking people to believe unrealistic things."* **Female, 14, NSW**

When our participants were asked to consider what changes should be made to address barriers to accessing trustworthy news online, they refer to the importance of education, highlighting the particular need for media literacy in light of the proliferation of AI-generated news. They believe that targeted campaigns focused on supporting CYP to use the internet to access information from credible and trustworthy sources will help mitigate challenges presented by AI-generated misinformation. Further, CYP want increased regulation of the spread and use of AI. When tasked with drafting letters to someone with the power to affect change, a number chose to ask the Prime Minister for action on AI.

*"Dear Mr Prime Minister, there is lots of false information which is being spread online through various platforms. A way to help all young Australians would be by telling them the dangers of trusting AI, not credible sources, and information from parents/friends without researching it yourself. I think it could help if you made campaigns targeted to young people & used them to show young people how to correctly research."* **Female, 13, NSW**

Some participants also identify the negative impact the rapid and seemingly unrestrained rush of AI technologies have had on their academic performance, including examples of being falsely accused and bearing the consequences of using AI in their studies.

*"... AND why does AI overview always come up when I search something up, it's like ChatGPT and idk if to trust it or not. ALSO, STOP FAILING ME FOR PRE WRITING MY ENGLISH WORK AND SAYING IT'S AI."* **Female, 13, Victoria**

*"AI often is 'in your face' essentially, I find when I am trying to research a topic, which makes it quite hard to find sites that are genuine and reliable."* **Female, 16, Queensland**

*"Dear Principal, I did not use AI in my exam, stop giving me 0."* **Female, 11, NSW**

Other CYP want greater regulation of AI to occur alongside legislation regulating the publishing of disinformation online more broadly, viewing those joint actions as a more discriminating and effective strategy than blunt instrument blanket bans on social media access.

*"Please don't ban social media and make a new law that makes it so if people want to share fake news as a joke they have to put (it's a joke) at the bottom very small."* **Male, 15, Western Australia**

*"Dear Prime Minister, please monitor fake information on social media especially the use of AI in certain scenarios. It's tricking people to believe unrealistic things."* **Female, 14, NSW**

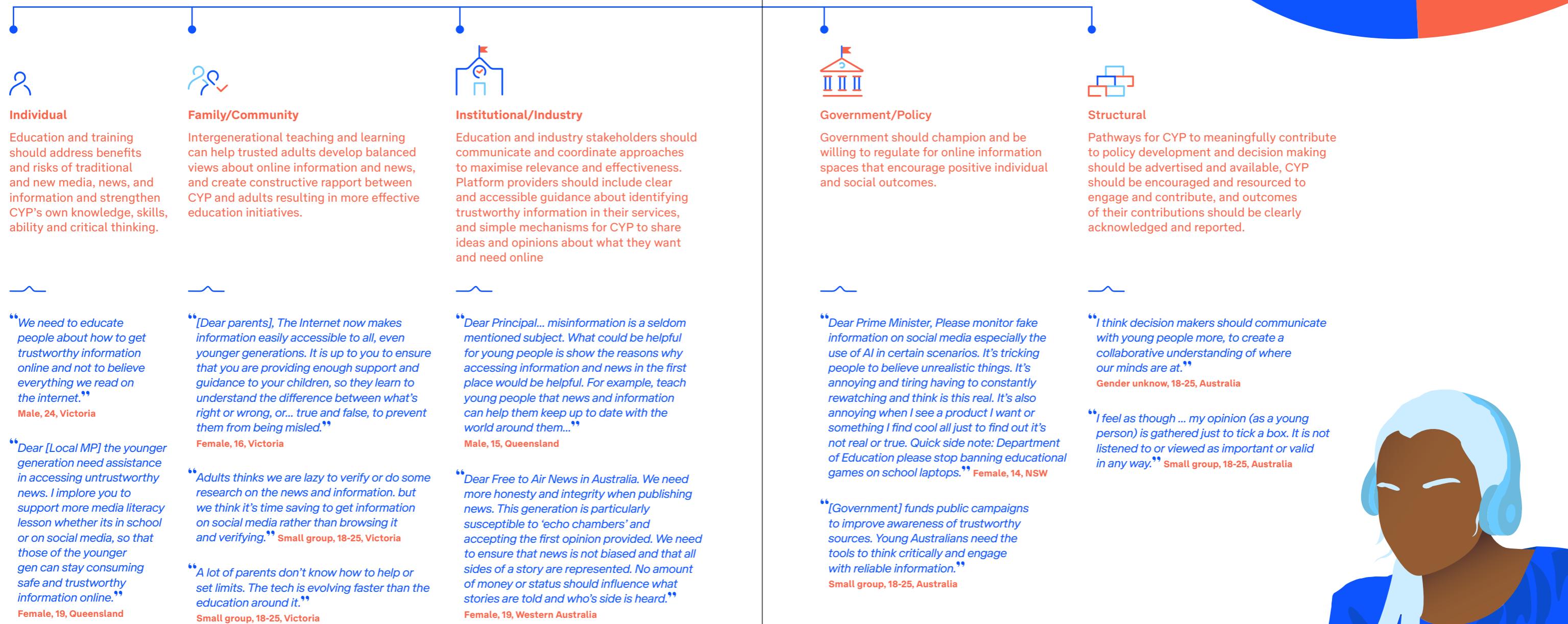
*"Dear Mr Prime Minister... I also think it could be a good idea to ban/highly regulate use of AI, as we never know if it's correct because it can pull information from anywhere, even if it's false."* **Female, 13, NSW**

*"Have a regulator to control how news is controlled."* **Online group, 13-17, Australia**

There is no doubt that CYP are aware of the impact AI has on the platforms they use to access trustworthy news and information online, and the nature and quality of the content they consume. When asked to consider the challenges and barriers associated with their access to trustworthy content, CYP are quick to identify the extent to which AI complicates their online experiences. Whilst CYP exercise caution navigating online spaces alert for misinformation and misleading AI-generated content, they champion the role of government in monitoring digital environments to keep all people safe online. As the proliferation of AI makes it more difficult for audiences to determine what constitutes reliable information online, Australian CYP call for increased vigilance from decision makers about the risks of AI technologies and effective actions, including nuanced and appropriate regulation, to prevent the spread of false online news and information.

# What we heard from children and young people

Children and young people want a holistic approach that will require action from individuals through to platforms/providers through to institutions and governments.



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