



Misinformation audience literature review

Prepared for the Climate Change Authority

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data. strategy. delivery.

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Introduction

Access to information that is accessible, reliable and trusted will be crucial to Australia's energy transition. High-quality information underpins public confidence, good decision-making and the effective implementation of climate policy. In particular, it enables effective climate action by:

- building trust in and understanding of the climate science underpinning policy decisions
- strengthening engagement and facilitating meaningful public participation in democratic processes relevant to decision-making
- supporting and sustaining social licence, which is essential both to long-term climate policy settings and to the delivery of individual projects, and
- reducing delays, confusion and obstruction caused by misinformation.

These principles were recognised in the Climate Change Authority's [Sector Pathways Review \(2024\)](#), which identified the importance of enhancing climate literacy across the community to "strengthen the foundations of social licence". The Report recommended the development of "a dedicated, independent information and engagement campaign to counter mis- and disinformation and to improve public understanding of Australia's Net Zero Plan."

The work is timely given that communicating important initiatives is harder than ever, as trust in institutions declines and media and information ecosystems are highly splintered.¹

In Australia:

- Trust in government sits at 52 per cent - down eight per cent since 2021
- Trust in media sits at 46 per cent - down 12 points since 2021.

Conveying information when both the messengers and the medium are straining for trust becomes increasingly difficult. This represents a challenge for governments, where being official no longer guarantees authority, and leaves open the door to exploitation by interests opposed to the energy transition.

This is also occurring against the backdrop of a rapid evolution in the way Australians consume news and information. One in four Australians (26 per cent) now say social media is their main source of news, overtaking news websites (23 per cent) for the first time. The trend is particularly acute among younger demographics, with more than 60 per cent of 18- to 24-year-olds using social media as their main source of news.² And these numbers don't yet fully account for the explosion of use of AI-mediated search functions (large language models and AI agents).

The information landscape complicates the task for governments, institutions, investors and activists trying to convey information on a public policy issue as complex and contested as climate change. This is despite the international consensus of scientific opinion on environmental and economic risks to the planet from climate change, and consistent research insights showing the majority of the population believe climate change is an important issue impacting households and communities.

89 Degrees East has been engaged by the Climate Change Authority to conduct a rapid literature review on misinformation sources, identifying key audience characteristics, misinformation narratives and channels, and evidence-based messaging and tools to support communication and engagement.

¹ Key Insights from the 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer

² Australian Digital News Report 2025

This work draws on more than a decade of experience in researching public attitudes, information environments and engagement on climate change, as well as delivering communications solutions.

Defining misinformation

For the purposes of this paper, we will consistently refer to misinformation. But we recognise that it comes in different forms and used for different purposes, albeit with the singular goal of undermining faith in the energy transition.



Misinformation

“False or inaccurate information shared without the intent to deceive.”



Disinformation

“Deliberately false information created and shared to mislead or manipulate.”



Malinformation

“True information that is shared with the intent to deceive or cause harm.”

In practice, distinguishing between misinformation and disinformation can be challenging, particularly where intent is unclear. In this review, the distinction is used as an analytical tool rather than to attribute intent to specific actors.

Why it matters

In July 2025, the Australian Senate appointed the [Select Committee on Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy](#) inquire into the prevalence and impacts of misinformation relating to climate change. The Inquiry released its [report in March 2026](#), including a suite of recommendations designed to better combat misinformation, strengthen regulatory responses and capabilities, boost climate literacy and bolster community engagement and social licence.

The Committee received 243 submissions covering an extensive range of perspectives, but a consistent theme of contributions from organisations that are supportive of acting on climate change was the extent and effect of misinformation.

They reinforced that non-government organisations have often been left to fill the breach in combating misinformation, the role it has played in undermining public confidence in progress and the impact it has had on communities on the frontlines of change.

“Disinformation is a serious virus that is rapidly infecting our democracy and eroding our ability to progress climate action in Australia.”

- **Australian Conservation Foundation Submission.**

"Rampant myths and misinformation . . . have arguably derailed, or significantly delayed, climate action in Australia."

- **Climate Council Submission.**

"It is a difficult but necessary task to distinguish between genuine (perceived or realised) concerns on one hand, and the unintentional or deliberate spreading of inaccurate information on the other."

- **Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner Submission.**

Attitudes to climate change

Whilst the climate debate can appear fraught, it is worth remembering that a clear majority of Australians support the overall case for action.

General Population

Since 2020, 89 Degrees East has conducted research into how Australians feel, think and act when it comes to climate change. The research was conducted on behalf of [Sunrise Project](#) and [Renew for All](#), a movement backed by social services, unions, faith, community and multicultural groups, environmental organisations and industry.

The four waves of research conducted since (the most recent being in September 2025) reveal Australians place a premium on the need to combat climate change. Whilst the full results are yet to be released from the most recent wave, the research shows:

78 per cent place personal importance on the issue of climate change - an eight per cent rise between February 2025 and September 2025

76 per cent of Australia believe climate change will harm future generations - a four per cent rise between February 2025 and September 2025

The number of Australians who consider other issues more important than climate change fell to **52 per cent** – a five point drop over the same period.

Support for Australia's transition to renewable energy remains stable at **70 per cent** - with opposition at just 12 per cent.

This is consistent with other research findings, including attitudes held by people living near major renewable energy projects. Farmers for Climate Action commissioned polling in 2024 which showed 70

per cent of rural Australians living in renewable energy zones support the energy shift, with only 17 per cent opposed.³

And research released by the CSIRO in 2024 showed 64 per cent of Australians agreed or strongly agreed that we can act collectively to reduce the negative effects of climate change.⁴

These figures reinforce the increased salience of climate change as an issue across the general population, along with a desire to see stronger action, faster progress, and fairer outcomes in the transition to a clean energy future. However, there are inevitably nuances.

The cautious and the concerned

In 2020, Dr Rebecca Huntley (now 89 Degrees East's Director of Research) worked with the Sunrise Project to create the [Climate Compass](#), a segmentation of Australian audiences based on their attitudes and beliefs about climate change. This segmentation was then refreshed in 2022.

They range from approximately a quarter of the population who believe humans are fully responsible for climate change and believe its impacts will affect current and future generations, to 10 per cent who don't believe climate change is happening at all or think it is a natural process not influenced by humans.

In developing any approach to improve climate literacy, build public trust and combat misinformation, a premium should be placed on understanding the needs and motivations of Australians open to climate change action.

This is largely defined by the *Concerned* and *Cautious* segments. These cohorts are the ideal audience because they still worry about climate change and see it as an important issue, yet need to see the value in acting now to combat its effects.

Concerned (23% of the Australian Population)		The Concerned have slightly lower levels of worry about climate change but still see it as an important issue. They agree with the science of climate change but think it will be more of a problem for future generations so they have less urgency for action.
Cautious (17% of the Australian Population)		The Cautious express some worry about climate change but overall feel it is an issue for the future and that other things are more important right now. Some of them don't fully believe that humans are responsible for climate change and they are concerned about the risks of phasing out fossil fuels.

³ <https://farmersforclimateaction.org.au/blog/2024/11/26/the-quiet-majority-australians-in-renewable-energy-zones-support-the-energy-shift/>

⁴ <https://publications.csiro.au/publications/publication/Plcsi:EP2024-1146>

Of the Concerned segment, 85 per cent are somewhat worried about climate change, and 12 per cent are very worried. Of the Cautious segment, 83 per cent are somewhat worried about climate change, and 6 per cent are very worried about climate change.

They are also concerned about the environmental impacts of climate change, with more than half of both segments regarding extreme weather events, bushfires and floods are the biggest drivers of concern.

The Sunrise Sentiment Tracking data also reveals distinctions in the demographic profiles of Cautious and Concerned audiences. The demographic profile of the Cautious climate segment is in line with the general population in terms of age, gender and location.

However, the Concerned segment separates itself in several ways. It skews younger, that is, more likely to be aged 18-24, Gen Z and Millennial. Women, people who have children at home aged less than 12 years, and people from a culturally diverse background are also more dominant.

Empowering Australians to talk about climate action

Knowledge encourages engagement

The upside of giving Australians reliable and easy-to-digest information that will improve their capacity to engage in climate action and take steps to persuade others to do so is clear. Peer-to-peer engagement acts as a bulwark against false claims and misinformation by reducing reliance on hostile information sources. When people have access to clear, reliable information, they have the confidence needed to question and challenge misinformation.

The results of the [2026 Clean Energy Solutions Index](#) reinforce the principle. The Index measures 'deep support' for the technology-based solutions, ranging from rooftop solar to establishing a green metal industry in Australia, needed to underpin our energy transition. It combines four key metrics, incorporating:

- personal support
- a belief that it is good for Australia
- support in local communities, and
- a willingness to talk positively about it to friends and family.

The latter is crucial, as it will help sustain understanding and acceptance of clean energy solutions that are less familiar or have yet to generate widespread support.

The Index shows that Australians who already have high personal experience and benefit from technology view it more favourably. For example, installing solar panels at home — something over four million Australians households have already done — has a deep support score of 82/100. The conversion of factories and industries to be free of gas — which is still a nascent concept — has a deep support score of 49/100.

What's common in both the Climate Compass and Clean Energy Solutions Index research is the value of Australians being willing to discuss and promote climate solutions with their social networks in growing support for individual solutions and the transition overall.

For example, among the Concerned cohort within the Compass, 35 per cent are open to talking in favour of climate action with friends, family, or colleagues. 27 per cent within the Cautious cohort are willing to do so too.

This is particularly crucial given the shift away from a willingness to trust information generated by traditional institutions and outlets, to an era in which personal relationships and social networks formed online often define the way in which views are shaped.

The information gap

But there is widespread evidence that Australians who are open to engaging in the climate debate need positive news stories, access to reliable information and insights into how successful the nation has been in its climate action.

The [Clean Energy Solutions Index 2026 Report](#) shows the gap between positive and negative noise often plays a significant role in the levels of support for particular solutions. For example:

- The most popular solution, household solar panels, enjoys the widest gap between positive noise (53 per cent) and negative noise (7 per cent).
- The solution that recorded the biggest increase in popular support, electric vehicles, saw a lift in positive noise (23 per cent to 28 per cent) and drop in negative noise (20 per cent to 15 per cent).
- The solution with the lowest score, gas free home conversion, was weighed down by a thin ratio of positive noise (22 per cent) to negative noise (16 per cent).
- One of the solutions that declined, converting factories and industries to be free from gas, saw a decline in positive noise (15 per cent) and has a small gap to negative noise (14 per cent).

Perceptions matter too. Whilst more than half of Australia's main energy grid is now powered by renewables, 62 per cent of Australians believe the figure is 30 per cent or less. These gaps leave space for misinformation to take hold.

The spread of misinformation

The deployment of misinformation by climate change opponents effectively serves two purposes: that is, to undermine the scientific consensus that climate change is real and caused by human activity or to obstruct policy, regulatory, technological and other solutions by eroding public confidence in their merit and effectiveness.

The Select Committee on Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy identified patterns and trends that align with international research. In particular, a landmark 2025 report titled [Climate Obstructionism: A Global Assessment](#) (published by the Climate Social Science Network, an international collaboration of 800 scholars) is highly instructive.

Sponsors

Both the Select Committee and the Network's report identify sponsors of obstructionism and misinformation. Some submissions to the Inquiry drew a direct link between international funders and domestic organisations; others regarded homegrown networks as more independent, but fuelled by the same motivations.

(They also noted that some opponents had an extensive history in seeking to stall or prevent policy reforms, dating back to the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol two decades ago, carbon pricing in the 2010s, or specific measures such as fuel efficiency standards.)

But the mix includes:

 Advocacy and industry organisations that are primarily comprised of commercial interests directly tied to fossil fuel mining, consumption or generation, and present arguments that Australia's short and long-term economic resilience depends on continued use of fossil fuels	 Think tanks that often have funding ties to either international sponsors or domestic commercial interests, promote intellectual and policy arguments that depart from the scientific and economic consensus, and serve as validators for fossil fuel narratives	 Astroturf organisations and campaigns that seek to give the impression of broad community support for opposition to climate action, are often active in regional hot spots, and support the spread of local messaging that is rooted in misinformation	 Denial blogs and online influencers that are particularly active across online platforms, recirculating claims from some of the opponents outlined above, or serving as a platform for contrarian science.
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The information ecosystem

Whilst the presence of organisations on digital platforms varies, the most common platform utilised in Australia is Facebook. It's the one that was near universal in its use, the one where most organisations had the largest following, and where advertising spend was often concentrated among those using such an approach.

However, the approach varied from there. Some organisations engaged heavily across a multitude of platforms.

For example, pro-nuclear advocates have a strong presence across X, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok and LinkedIn, deploying a mix of content ranging from explainer videos on the presence of nuclear power in the energy mix of other countries to longer-form videos featuring media interviews or events.

More explicit anti-renewable advocates often kept their messages framed in the negative or around culture wars, using meme-style social graphics and tiles or short-form attack ads. (It's also worth

noting some organisations did utilise traditional methods, such as print and broadcast advertising, or outdoor billboards.)

They are also increasingly pivoting towards activation of influencers, who already possess social acceptance, have a strong following and can be part of broader paid advertising efforts to secure social licence.

The creep of misinformation is heightened due to two other significant factors. Contributors to the Senate Inquiry on Information Integrity pointed to the role played by animated bots and troll-like accounts. For example, in its submission, Farmers for Climate Action revealed it had been the direct target of coordinated attacks.

“In the lead-up to the federal election, our social media accounts were targeted by a high volume of posts by fake profiles. Around 66 different social media profiles, each of which looked like a farmer, featured conspicuous Australiana . . . in their profile picture, with very few followers, regularly posted comments attacking Farmers for Climate Action and renewable energy. When these accounts were blocked by social media moderators, new accounts reappeared carrying the same names and pictures and continued to post attacking messaging.”

Farmers for Climate Action.

The other is the algorithmic bias inherent in social media platforms and generative AI. Given the social media algorithms place greater emphasis on content based on a past user’s interaction than its accuracy, and generative AI leans into existing content (which may already comprise misinformation), the effect is self-fulfilling, or as the final report of the Senate Inquiry describes it, “an echo chamber”.

Submissions to the Select Committee reinforced how exposed Australians are to misinformation.

The University of Canberra’s News and Media Research Centre highlighted climate change as one of the leading topics where people encountered misinformation. Citing its [Digital News Report: 2024](#), 35 per cent surveyed said they had seen false or misleading information about climate change or the environment. The submission also cited nuclear energy (51 per cent) and climate change (47 per cent) as the second and third most nominated topics where Australians had seen misinformation during the 2025 Federal election.⁵

Other submissions focussed on how online platforms are exploited to spread misinformation. Yet Australians are alert to the risks of misinformation. Three in four Australians have concerns about misinformation when using social media platforms, according to the [Digital News Report 2025](#). When asked if they are concerned about the reality of what they see on different platforms, Australians have the highest level of concern with X (formerly Twitter), which registered a score of 83 per cent, whilst all other platforms (YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook and Facebook Messenger) rated at over 76 per cent. This is higher than those who do not use social media (64 per cent).

⁵ Submission: University of Canberra: News and Media Research Centre.

Thematics and narratives

The Climate Social Science Network's report noted that the "denial of the fact that climate change exists, is human-caused, and is an existential threat has become far less prevalent". Instead, the emphasis is increasingly falling on "delayism", with a particular focus on "challenging the viability of certain climate solutions and policies."⁶

Submissions to the Select Committee on Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy emphasised a similar approach in Australia. Combined with international research, they identified criticism from opponents of climate change centred on several core themes.

And we can identify trends in which actors promote particular themes, and the channels they use to promote them.

Theme	Purpose	Narrative Summaries	Dominant Actors	Dominant Channels
Climate denialism	Dispute the scientific consensus on climate change	"The science isn't settled and predictions have been wrong before." "We've always had bushfires, floods and droughts."	Think tanks Denial blogs and online influencers Astroturf organisations and campaigns	Facebook YouTube TikTok
Irrelevance	Challenge the value of Australia reducing emissions	"Australia produces only a small fraction of global emissions so what we do here won't affect the climate." "The problem is the US and China, and what we do won't make a difference."	Advocacy and industry organisations Think tanks Astroturf organisations and campaigns	Facebook YouTube Instagram
Economic	Erode the value of action by inflating the cost of doing so and encouraging the status quo	"Industries, jobs and entire regions dependent on fossil fuel industries will disappear." "Australia's economic prosperity is built on coal and our tax base will collapse without the wealth it creates."	Advocacy and industry organisations Think tanks Astroturf organisations and campaigns Denial blogs and online influencers	Facebook Instagram TikTok YouTube
Reliability	Undermine the merit of renewable energy technology	"The sun doesn't always shine and the wind doesn't always blow so a grid built around renewables can't keep the lights on." "We still need baseline power like coal or nuclear to stabilise the grid."	Advocacy and industry organisations Think tanks	Facebook YouTube Instagram

⁶ Introduction to the Volume: Climate Obstruction: A Global Assessment, October 2025.

Cost-of-living	Present renewables as the most expensive form of energy	“Renewables are already pushing up the price of electricity.” “Hidden costs for new transmission lines and grid upgrades will only make electricity more expensive.”	Advocacy and industry organisations Think tanks Astroturf organisations and campaigns	Facebook Instagram
Environmental	Confuse the debate over environmental progress	“We’re losing prime agricultural land and industrial-scale developments destroy habitat and wildlife.” “Offshore wind farms kill whales and migratory birds.”	Astroturf organisations and campaigns Denial blogs and online influencers	Facebook YouTube Instagram

Effective communication and persuasion

Messaging

Clear, consistent and compelling messaging is needed to close information gaps, counter misinformation, and build and sustain public momentum in favour of the energy transition. However, it requires a nuanced understanding of what motivates different audiences and respect for diverse views.

For example, Australians who are highly passionate about acting on climate change find messaging rooted in environmental concerns to be compelling. There are others, at the opposite end of the spectrum, who will never engage with such arguments as they reject the scientific consensus.

There are distinctions between the *Cautious* and *Concerned* segments too, according to the latest Sentiment Tracking data.

Cautious audience members are more likely to engage with arguments that respect their economic concerns and illustrate the upside of investment in renewable energy solutions that can benefit their own households, and communities in which they live. They are less likely to be persuaded by messages that solely focus on the environmental urgency of action.

Cautious segment members are most likely to support and be moved by credible, practical messaging. This includes:

- Ensuring a fair transition for workers and regional communities, given economic security is a key for these audiences. For example, 38 per cent support closing coal plants if workers and communities are supported, while 35 per cent are neutral. This indicates a capacity for reassurance on jobs to shift opinions
- Highlighting practical household benefits and cost-of-living policies with direct benefit. 48 per cent somewhat support household battery subsidies and 47 per cent support rental energy-efficiency standards, with many still neutral
- Emphasising the economic opportunities for regional Australia, because moderate agreement exists with 64 per cent saying renewables benefit regional areas

- Providing clear information about the energy transition, as 34 per cent are unsure what is needed for Australians to shift to renewables.

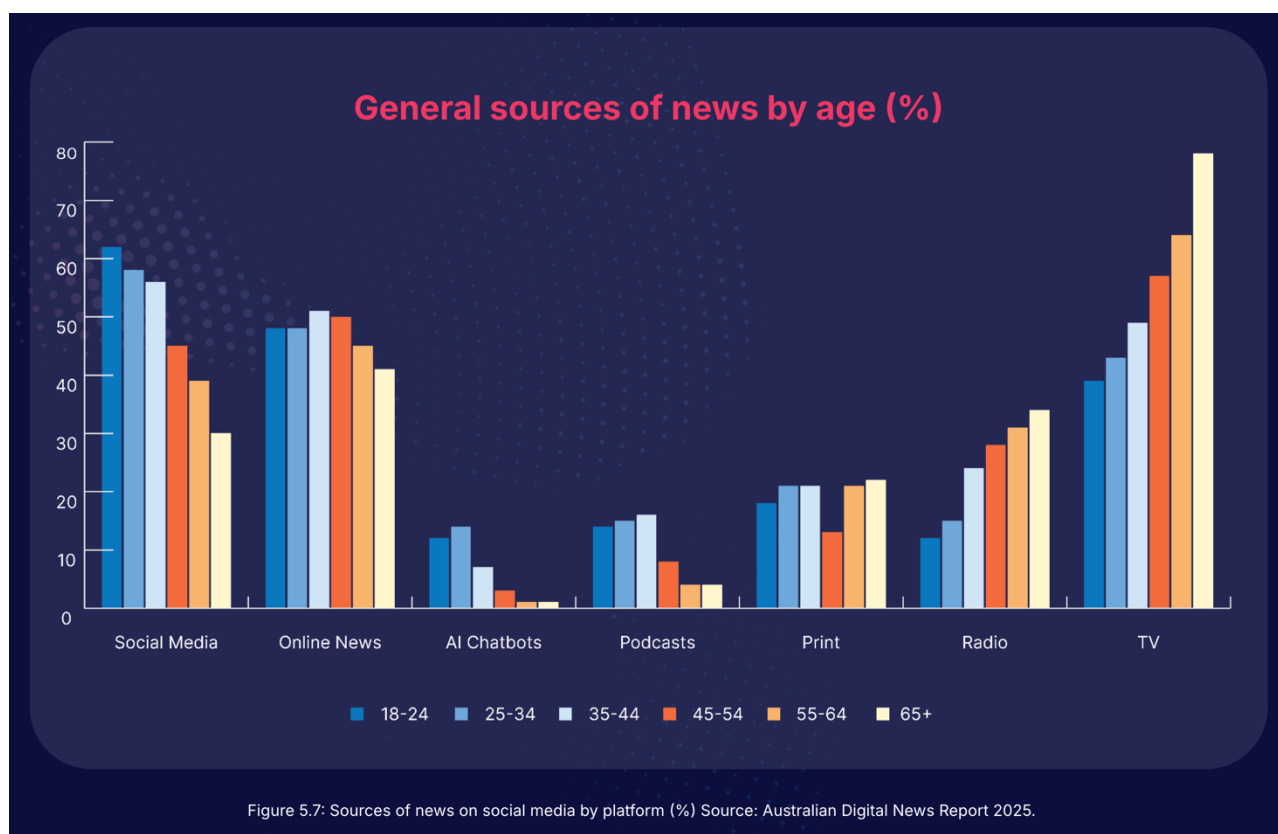
The last point reinforces the information void that needs to be filled and that education has the potential to replace hesitation.

Concerned segment members are more receptive to the fundamental arguments that define Australia's shift to a decarbonised economy, and overwhelmingly believe that a grid built on renewables is the best, most affordable way to do so. They still however value arguments that recognise cost-of-living pressures and describe the benefits of climate action in practical terms. These include:

- Highlighting that expanding renewables is the fastest way to reduce power bills, with 90 per cent believing renewables will lower power bills fastest and 81 per cent agreeing that building more renewables is the fastest way to reduce energy costs
- Promoting household-based solutions such as batteries, solar and energy efficiency because there is strong support, with 89 per cent supporting household battery subsidies, for example
- Highlighting economic opportunities and jobs from renewable industries, with 80 per cent believing renewable-powered manufacturing will create regional jobs
- Emphasising that renewable energy is essential to addressing climate change because this segment strongly believes Australia's actions matter; 97% disagree that Australia's actions won't make a difference, and 86% support shifting to renewable energy.

Platforms and content

What is also clear is that for the "Cautious and Concerned", the demographic and age profile outlined above in particular lends itself to news and information consumption that is increasingly based on social media and online news platforms, as evidenced by the data from the Australian Online News Report. The process will only be accelerated under forecasts that predict AI search and summaries will dominate online information-seeking in the next three years.



It therefore requires content and information to be presented in formats that most suit amplification across these platforms, with a strong focus on short-form social media video (such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts) to effectively reach target audiences and combat climate change misinformation.

These platforms prioritise video content because it increases users' time spent on the platform (which directly supports their ad revenue). For the user, this format is preferred because it is accessible, snack-sized, and meets the need to be informed and entertained while being time-poor.

To counter the documented decline in trust for traditional institutions, content must strategically leverage the growing authority and influence of individuals, such as creators and influencers, as people inherently trust people, particularly those with whom they have established personal or online relationships, over brands.

Effective content for these audiences, particularly the younger-skewing 'Concerned' segment, must be short, sharp, and decisive. This requires explicitly linking the reliance of these audiences on social and online media with formats such as short-form video, explainers, and Q&A-style content, delivered by trusted third-party voices. For video-first platforms like TikTok, content should tap into younger audiences by being authentic and unpolished rather than clean and corporate. The tone should be less negative, leaning into humour and human-interest stories to make it relatable.

Finally, to ensure amplification and persuasion, content must utilise available social media trends data and clarify which formats are best suited for shifting sentiment (e.g. normalising narratives, reducing uncertainty) versus simply providing information, all while providing clear links to more information on platforms that host clear and concise resources.

But the ideal hierarchy for the development and deployment of content would be:

- **Video content featuring third-party or peer voices** . . . given it has applicability across a wide range of popular platforms, captures attention, and can help strengthen bonds with audiences where a premium is placed on trust, strong social networks and overcoming institutional scepticism

Recognising it can take different forms for different purposes:

- **Short-form video content** . . . that works to combat misinformation, dispels myths, build familiarity and resonance, and continually reinforces the role renewables are already playing and will increasingly play in the economy and the transition
- **Explainer or Q&A-style content** . . . that helps close the gap between perceptions and facts, provides digestible information, incorporates high-level data to equip audiences with the information they need to engage in debate, and counters project or technology-specific claims

And whilst non-video content such as static assets, fact sheets and traditional advertising formats (ie: newspaper and billboards) should play a supplementary role, they can provide value by adding depth, reference points to official sources of information, and provide an avenue for audiences seeking verification for information found online.



89 Degrees East is a national data, strategy and delivery agency specialising in strategic policy, communications, research and stakeholder relations. We have more than 50 staff nationwide, and over 15 years of experience in conducting research projects that allow us to understand the right way to distinguish the awareness, beliefs and motivations of audience segments, as well as providing our analysis in a way that informs market opportunities, stakeholder engagement and policy making. We have also been engaged by a host of public and private sector organisations and companies, as well as not-for-profit organisations, to undertake research into the clean energy transition.

Our research team is led by Dr Rebecca Huntley, one of Australia's foremost researchers on social trends and a Fellow of the Research Society of Australia. Rebecca leads a team of research specialists who are all Members of the Research Society of Australia.



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