

Global tech firms in Australia launch anti-disinformation code

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Global tech firms in Australia unveiled a new code of practice Monday to curb the spread of disinformation online, following pressure from the government.

The lobbying group DIGI—representing Facebook, Google, Twitter, Microsoft, TikTok and Redbubble—committed under the code to a range of actions including labelling false content on their platforms, demoting fake content and prioritising credible sources of information.

They also agreed to suspend or disable offending and fake accounts, including "bots" that automatically disseminate information across their platforms.

The measures—which largely codify existing practices—are said to target paid and political advertising as well as content shared by users.

"All signatories commit to safeguards to protect Australians against harm from online disinformation and [misinformation](#), and adopting a range of scalable measures that reduce its spread and visibility," the group said in releasing the 29-page code.

The voluntary code was developed in response to an Australian government inquiry into the role of online platforms in the [spread of misinformation](#) and disinformation.

The problem became particularly acute during historic bushfires that swept the country in late 2019 and 2020 and during the coronavirus pandemic, when [social media platforms](#) were flooded with [false information](#) on the origins of the disease and efforts to curb its spread.

The government's Communication and Media Authority (ACMA), which will oversee the code's implementation, said Monday that in 2020 more than two-thirds of Australians expressed concern over the extent of online misinformation.

"False and misleading news and information online—like that spread through the 2020 bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic—has the

potential to cause serious harm to individuals, communities and society," it said in a statement.

ACMA chair Nerida O'Loughlin welcomed the code as a "flexible and proportionate approach" to the risk of harm posed by misinformation.

Signatories agreed to report to the government on initial compliance with the [code](#) by the end of June, and then issue annual reports after that.

Communications Minister Paul Fletcher warned the tech firms Monday that the government would be "watching carefully" to ensure they follow through on the measures.

The conservative government's pressure for online companies to act against misinformation coincided with a more controversial campaign to force the biggest of them—Facebook and Google—to pay for news content they show on their platforms.

Legislation governing those payments is expected to pass parliament this week.

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