

Democracy in our feeds

**How creators are
reshaping political
attention, trust and
participation in
Australia**

Lead Author

Dr Susan Grantham

Griffith University

In collaboration with

Sentiment Agency



Foreword

Democracy can fray long before an institution collapses. It happens when people can no longer find themselves within it; when politics feels staged somewhere else, by someone else, and the places shaping what people understand are built to capture attention rather than earn trust.

Young Australians haven't completely checked out. Many are paying close attention. They're informed, alert to injustice and often overwhelmed by the volume of politics and news arriving through the small screens in their hands.

Politics reaches them differently now – through creators, podcasts, memes, commentary, digital communities and algorithmic feeds where news sits beside entertainment, identity and emotion. Trust has changed too. For many of us, it starts with people we know and figures we're familiar with, not established institutions.

At Sentiment, we don't see this as a passing communications trend or another round of panic about social media. It is an enduring shift in how people encounter politics, interpret power and understand their role in society. Young people don't experience culture, politics and civic participation as separate parts of their lives, and our institutions can no longer treat them that way. For many, social media and creators now form a central public square – where political ideas are stated directly, absorbed almost unconsciously, contested in real time and woven into what people believe is happening, what matters and what they can do about it.

Creators can make politics accessible. They can translate complexity, lower the barrier to entry and give people a way to grapple with issues that might otherwise feel remote or impenetrable. They can reach people institutions have slowly lost touch with.

Creators also operate inside systems that reward speed, conflict and emotional heat. Many are acting as civic educators without access to the democratic knowledge, ethical guidance or institutional backing that journalists and political actors have traditionally had. Their reach has outgrown the structures around it.

Our ambition is to build the social and cultural engine of democracy and civic literacy for Gen Z and millennials. That won't come from another institutional campaign telling young people to care more, engage more or read more. It will come from working with the voices, formats and communities already shaping how they understand the world, and giving the people within them better tools to carry that responsibility.

This White Paper begins that work. It maps what's changed, what audiences ask of the people they follow, and what those now carrying political ideas into millions of everyday lives need around them.

The media ecosystem has already changed. Democratic practice has to catch up.

Introduction

In 2025, Australia's federal election was marked by the significance of social media platforms and the growing political impact of influencer culture operating alongside, rather than within, formal campaign structures. While the major parties, including the Australian Labor Party, the Liberal Party of Australia, and the Australian Greens, continued to run official digital advertising and party-controlled accounts, a parallel layer of political communication unfolded through creators who remained formally unaffiliated yet highly visible in shaping political commentary online. Influencers circulated campaign narratives, interviewed leaders, critiqued leaders, reframed policy debates, and mobilised audiences through emotion, humour, and platform-native storytelling. Positioned on the periphery of party organisations but embedded within everyday digital cultures, these influencers functioned as powerful informal intermediaries between campaigns and voters, signalling a shift toward more decentralised, networked, and culturally mediated forms of electoral influence.

The 2026 Digital News Report (Park et al., 2026) makes a strong case that influencers are now part of the democratic information system, not just entertainment culture. In Australia, 43% of news consumers get their news from creators or influencers, rising to around 70% among 18–24-year-olds and 72% among 25–34-year-olds. The report also shows that many young people see influencer-led news as more entertaining, relatable and easier to understand than traditional news. This is vital in the context of democracy because influencers are shaping how people encounter, interpret and discuss political information. The report suggests audiences are seeking news that feels authentic, conversational and values-driven. This highlights the potential for influencers to become trusted political intermediaries.

The following White Paper presents a preliminary study exploring this shift and aims to provide recommendations on moving forward with influencers as a new integral part of democracy.

Overview of current literature

To begin, we provide an overview on the current research environment. Research increasingly argues that contemporary elections are shaped by the logics of influencer culture, in which political actors and third-party creators alike draw on platform vernaculars, intimacy cues, and metrics-driven visibility strategies (Abidin, 2021; Cotter, 2018; Cervi et al., 2023). Campaigning on social media platforms shows how trends, memes, behind-the-scenes footage and vlog-style posts are used to cultivate relatability and authenticity, blurring distinctions between political communication and creator economies (Grantham, 2024; Grantham et al., 2025; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). This “influencerisation” of campaigning is evident both where candidates themselves adopt micro-celebrity practices and where campaigns collaborate with lifestyle or issue-based creators to reach segmented publics, including younger and politically ambivalent voters (Cervi et al., 2023).

The literature also distinguishes between influencers who serve as paid advertising vehicles and those who are more diffuse advocates embedded within digital subcultures. These environments complicate regulatory frameworks and measurement models, as influence often operates through peer-to-peer recommendation, humour, or issue advocacy rather than explicit vote appeals. Political influencers are broadcast amplifiers and cultural intermediaries who translate campaign narratives into platform-native forms, raising ongoing questions about persuasion, transparency, and the democratic consequences of creator-led political communication. Riedl et al. (2023) summed this up by defining “political influencers as content creators that endorse a political position, social cause, or candidate through media that they produce and/or share on a given social media platform”. Central to this definition is politics, platforms, and influence (Riedl et al., 2023).

Political influencers and democratic life

Political influencers are a distinctive class of political intermediaries whose authority derives less from institutional affiliation than from platform-native visibility, relational credibility, and algorithmic amplification (Dubois & Dommett, 2025; Uwalaka et al., 2024). They are a distinct class of political communicators whose influence is rooted in parasocial relationships, affective engagement, and platform-native storytelling (Rothut, 2025). Rather than being confined to formal party campaigning, influencers are positioned within broader transformations of the hybrid media system, in which personalised storytelling, entertainment-inflected genres, and creator economies reorganise how citizens encounter political information (Dubois & Dommett, 2025). Typological approaches emphasise the differences among these actors, distinguishing between commentators who are consistently political, episodic lifestyle advocates, and issue-focused creators whose proximity to political institutions varies considerably (von Sikorski et al., 2025). Such distinctions matter for democratic analysis because the political effects of influencer activity are likely contingent on communicative style, topical density, and network embeddedness rather than reducible to a single “influencer effect”.

A central concern across this literature is whether the rise of political influencers contributes to democratic renewal through mobilisation and accessibility, or whether it intensifies polarisation, distrust, and fragmentation. Empirical studies paint a mixed picture. Gibson et al. (2023) examined exposure to online political influencers during the 2020 US election and found associations with greater ideological extremity and conspiratorial beliefs, but not with declining electoral participation or general rejection of democratic processes (Gibson et al., 2023). These findings suggest that influencer politics can increase political engagement while also contributing to polarisation and competing interpretations of political issues (Gibson et al., 2023). Political influencers can stimulate participation while simultaneously deepening fragmentation by reinforcing identity-based publics and partisan interpretive frames (Dubois & Dommett, 2025; Basinillo et al., 2024).

Scholars have also examined the communicative mechanisms through which influencers shape democratic reasoning. A recurring theme is simplification. Influencers frequently translate complex political issues into digestible narratives embedded within personal testimony

or everyday vernacular. Research with youth audiences suggests that such practices can lower entry barriers to engagement and increase political interest, particularly among those otherwise disengaged from institutional politics (Schmuck et al., 2022). This form of mediated simplification has been linked to heightened political cynicism under certain conditions, especially where parasocial bonds and credibility substitute for institutional trust (Schmuck et al., 2022). Influencer communication may make politics more accessible and engaging, while also encouraging audiences to understand issues through emotion and storytelling rather than detailed political debate (von Sikorski et al., 2025). There is however, a risk that this content could amplify polarisation, extremism, and epistemic fragmentation by operating outside traditional journalistic and campaign accountability structures (Rothut, 2025). Studies mapping political discussion on large platforms show that influential accounts often function as hubs within ideologically aligned clusters, structuring attention flows and accelerating the circulation of partisan frames (Garimella et al., 2018).

Another strand of research places political influencers within contemporary influence-operation and advocacy ecosystems. Work on coordinated persuasion highlights the strategic value of micro- and nano-influencers, whose integration into everyday social relationships allows political narratives to circulate in culturally embedded and less overtly political forms (Uwalaka et al., 2024). Policy researchers argue that influencer politics can create challenges for transparency, especially when paid political content is not clearly identified and political messages are woven into everyday entertainment content (Basinillo et al., 2024). While these studies vary in their methods, they consistently point to regulatory challenges created by the growing overlap between marketing and political communication. These concerns are reinforced by social media algorithms, which tend to amplify emotional and attention-grabbing content (Dubois & Dommett, 2025; Basinillo et al., 2024).

Global approaches to regulating and protecting influencer markets

Governments around the world are still grappling with how to regulate influencers. As political communication increasingly merges with creator culture, regulators continue to face challenges in defining who qualifies as an influencer, when content constitutes advertising or political advocacy, and who should be held responsible when harm occurs (Abidin et al., 2020; González-Díaz, 2024). Despite differences between countries, three common regulatory priorities have emerged.

The first is transparency through disclosure, which remains the most commonly used approach (González-Díaz, 2024). Across Europe, regulators have strengthened rules requiring creators to clearly identify sponsored content and commercial relationships, while France has introduced dedicated legislation to increase transparency around commercial influence and paid promotions (González-Díaz, 2024). The goal is to help audiences distinguish between independent opinion, advertising, and political advocacy.

The second is accountability through licensing, certification, or professional standards (Annabell et al., 2025; Mahy et al., 2022). Countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia

require permits for some forms of influencer advertising, while Spain has introduced additional obligations for high-reach creators. In some jurisdictions, particularly in finance and health, certification schemes have also emerged to ensure creators have appropriate expertise before promoting sensitive topics (Mahy et al., 2022). These approaches seek to professionalise influencer activity and make creators more accountable for the content they produce.

The third is harm prevention. This has included efforts to regulate influencer marketing aimed at children, strengthen protections against misleading health and financial advice, and limit the promotion of potentially harmful products (Shomai, 2024; Silver et al., 2023). Rather than focusing solely on disclosure, these measures aim to reduce the social harms that can arise from highly influential creator content.

Researchers also increasingly recognise the role of platforms in shaping influencer influence. Social media algorithms often amplify content that is emotional, controversial, or highly engaging, rewarding the communication styles that many creators employ (Liao et al., 2024). As a result, questions of transparency, accountability, and harm prevention extend beyond creators themselves to the platforms that distribute and monetise their content.

Influencer and media content

Data collection

This study commenced by examining political content produced by social media influencers, traditional news media, and entertainment-based media in the lead-up to the 2025 Australian Federal Election. For the influencer sample, all social media posts published by a purposely selected group of influencer accounts were collected from 1 January 2025 until Election Day on 3 May 2025. The final influencer sample comprised eight accounts ($n = 8$), selected to represent a balance of political orientations across the ideological spectrum (progressive to conservative).

All political content posted by these influencers across the platforms they actively used was included in the dataset. Most content was published on TikTok and Instagram, with one influencer account also using YouTube. No platform-based exclusions were applied. All posts that contained political commentary or messaging during the study period were captured.

This process resulted in a total dataset of 564 social media posts from influencer accounts.

Comparative media samples

To enable comparison across media types, the same data collection and analytical approach was applied to two additional samples: traditional media outlets and entertainment-based media outlets. Eight traditional media outlets ($n=8$) were selected, and all relevant political articles published during the same study period were collected, resulting in a total of 128 articles. These articles were taken from ABC, SBS, SMH, The Age, The Australian, Sky News, The Guardian and The Daily Telegraph.

Similarly, eight entertainment-based media sources (n=8) were identified, and all political outputs published within the same timeframe were collected, yielding a total of 128 items for analysis. These samples were designed to provide a comparative framework for examining differences in content style, framing, and emotional positioning across media types. The eight outlets in the dataset were SBS The Feed, Q&A, Hack (triple j), The Project, Insiders, Insight, Paul Murray Live, and A Current Affair.

Coding and analysis

All three samples were subjected to systematic qualitative content analysis. Each item was coded across multiple dimensions, including Topic, Tone, Visual style, Narrative frame, and Emotional positioning. In addition, all content was coded to distinguish between personal statements (content centred on the individual's personal views, experiences, or identity) and commentary (content primarily focused on external political events, actors, or issues). Aligned with this was also whether the post was aiming to add to existing commentary or convert the audience.

Coding was applied consistently across influencer, traditional media, and entertainment media datasets to ensure comparability. The resulting coded dataset enabled cross-platform and cross-sector analysis of how political content was framed, stylised, and emotionally positioned in the lead-up to the 2025 Australian Federal Election.

Content analysis findings

The overarching findings show that creators are not operating at the periphery of political communication but have developed distinct communicative repertoires, blending political education, emotional mobilisation, and media-legitimacy contestation, that function in ways different from both traditional journalism and formal party campaigning. Across the three data sets, cost of living and housing sit at the top of the agenda, climate is the most polarising policy area, and democracy/voting/civics is a persistent education need. This is unsurprising as these were key election campaign objectives for the major parties. That thematic overlap means the three media output styles are contributing to the same information ecosystem. However, the findings also show clear differences between the three.

Influencer findings

This dataset provides a detailed empirical snapshot of how Australian political influencers communicated during the 2025 election period, revealing an ecosystem that is ideologically plural, affect-driven, and increasingly central to the circulation of civic information.

Influencers engage in a notable form of meta-political communication, in which they explicitly defend the legitimacy of their own role as political communicators. Posts tagged under 'Pro-New Media'/'Media Disruption' frequently rebut claims that influencers are unqualified, partisan,

or illegitimate actors. These creators, therefore, intervene not only in policy debates but also in debates about who gets to speak, challenging the authority of legacy media and positioning themselves as valid civic educators, making ongoing efforts to assert the legitimacy of influencer journalism.

Across the coded posts, the most common communicative register is ‘Serious/Informational’, suggesting a substantial investment in political literacy work, including explanations of voting processes, preference flows, and policy mechanisms. However, emotional positioning is dominated by affectively charged tones such as ‘Anger’, ‘Sarcastic’ and ‘Humour’, which function primarily as mobilisation and counter-narrative tools. Tones associated with ‘Humour’, ‘Anger’, and other high-arousal affect are strongly associated with higher engagement rates (Figure 1), outperforming more informational or serious posts. This pattern holds even more clearly when disaggregated by the creator. Each influencer demonstrates a distinct “tone signature” that reliably delivers higher engagement. For instance, creators such as Hannah Ferguson and Friendly Jordies perform best when using sarcastic or humorous tones, while Abbie Chatfield’s engagement peaks around anger and excitement. This indicates that affect is not just used for partisan agitation, it also makes complex democratic processes intelligible and shareable in fast-moving feeds by creating content that works the algorithms and uses the platforms’ vernacular.

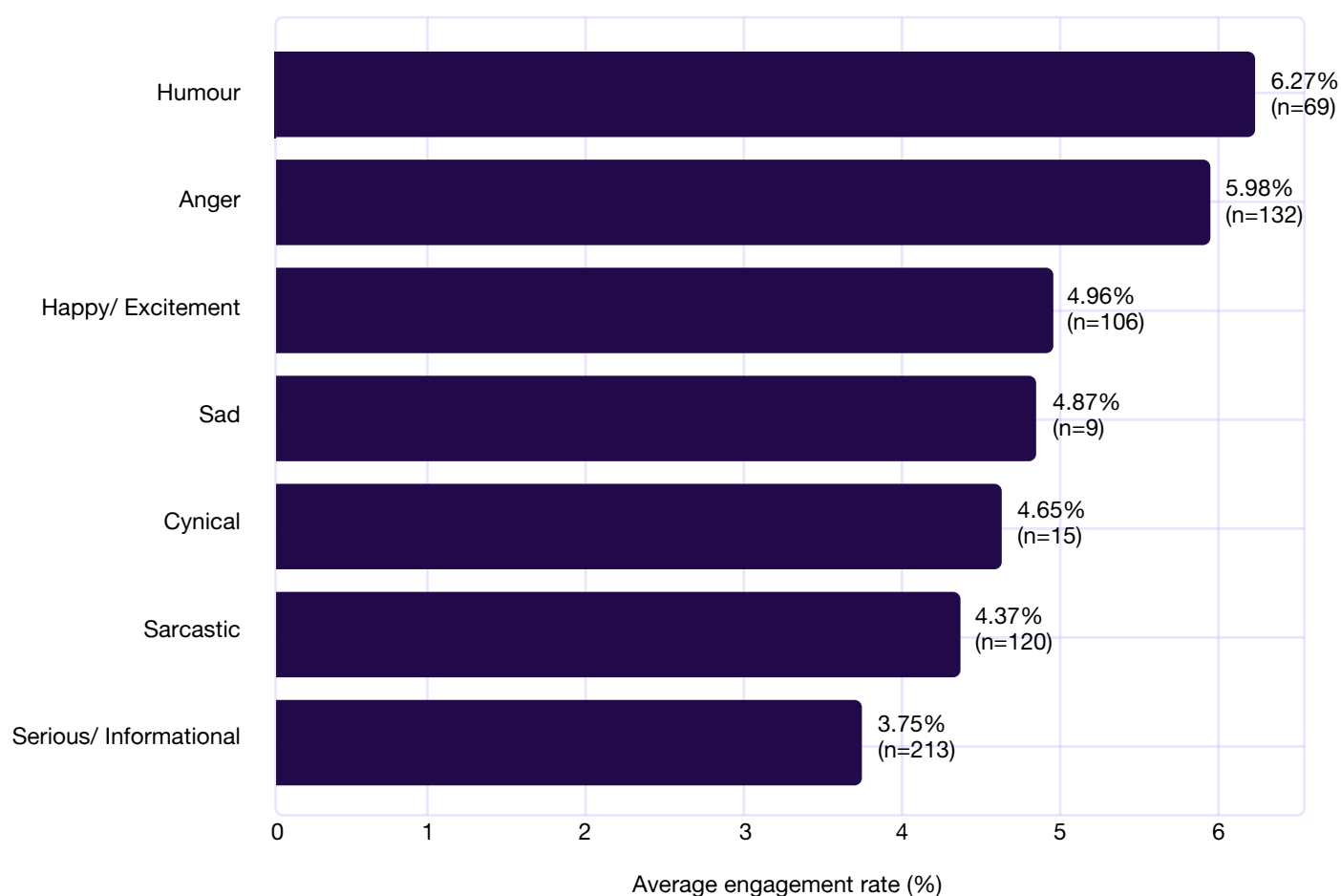


Figure 1 – Average engagement rate by tone

Although most posts are labelled as targeting ‘echo-chamber’ audiences, posts coded as ‘conversion’ consistently generate higher engagement rates. This suggests that influencers believe they are mostly energising their existing base, but the platform dynamics reward outreach content, presenting a strategic mismatch between creators’ intentions and actual audience responsiveness. This gap is meaningful for future research into political persuasion and micro-targeting in influencer ecosystems.

There is also a dominance of parasocial communication formats such as ‘selfie videos’ (n=168), ‘green-screen’ explainers (n=124), ‘skit’ (n=46), and ‘podcast’ clips (n=67). These formats foreground the creator as both messenger and mediator, embedding political information within highly personalised modes of communication. Unlike traditional news formats, where authority is typically derived from institutions, creator-led content relies heavily on perceived authenticity, relatability, and ongoing audience relationships, which is a similar approach to that of politicians using social media (Grantham et al., 2025). Political information is therefore experienced through the creator’s persona and the trust audiences place in them. This reflects a broader shift within hybrid media systems, where political engagement is increasingly organised around individuals rather than institutions, and where creator authority becomes an important pathway through which audiences access, interpret, and engage with public issues.

Clear partisan signalling was common across the sampled accounts. Among progressive influencers, content coded as ‘Pro-Greens/Teals/Labor’ or ‘anti-Liberal’ was dominant. Among conservative influencers, ‘pro-Liberal’ and ‘anti-Labor/Greens’ content was dominant, often expressed through critiques of immigration and social policy. Across the full dataset, negative partisan positioning appeared more frequently than positive endorsement. The most common codes were ‘anti-Labor’ (n=156), ‘anti-Liberal’ (n=123), ‘anti-Greens’ (n=100) and ‘anti-Dutton’ (n=98), followed by ‘pro-Labor’ (n=54) and ‘pro-Greens’ (n=51). These codes were not mutually exclusive.

Overall, the dataset depicts an influencer political sphere organised around parasocial authority, affective framing, and explanatory labour, where tone and target audience strategies shape engagement more strongly than simple ideological alignment. Influencer politics has matured into a distinct, hybrid mode of political communication that is simultaneously educational and emotional, partisan and cross-cutting, deeply personalised yet structurally powerful. It is reshaping how electoral information is produced, legitimised, and circulated, and is now a critical component of contemporary democratic communication.

Traditional media findings

The dataset shows that during the 2025 federal election period, traditional media served primarily as civic educators and policy interpreters, with a strong emphasis on helping the public understand issues rather than provoking outrage or amplifying conflict. Across the 128 items, coverage displayed remarkable consistency in topic selection. ‘Cost of living’, ‘housing’, ‘climate’, ‘democracy’, ‘voting processes’ and ‘leadership’ stories all appeared 16 times each, while ‘immigration’ and ‘general election wrap-ups’ appeared 8 times each. This uniformity

suggests that traditional media collectively reinforced a coherent national agenda, presenting the same core issues to audiences regardless of outlet. The effect is a highly aligned media environment, one that foregrounds shared public concerns and frames the election through a common set of policy and civic lenses.

Across outlets, most content was coded as ‘non-partisan’ or ‘neutral’ (n=90), compared to ‘left-leaning’ (n=28) and ‘right-leaning’ (n=10) items as shown in Figure 2. The dominant frames used by journalists were ‘issue-based’ or ‘policy-focused’ (n=46) and ‘democracy education/empowerment’ (n=32).

The emotional tone of coverage further reflects the system’s stabilising role. The most common emotional signals were ‘informed’ (n=44) and ‘wary/cautious’ (n=39), followed by smaller clusters as shown in Figure 2. These numbers suggest that traditional media avoided adopting a heightened or sensational emotional register. They framed the election environment as one that requires attentiveness and understanding, not panic. This emotional restraint is consistent with their investment in policy explanation and democratic education in the sample data analysed. This supports the idea that traditional media continue to attempt to occupy a trust-building rather than polarisation-building role. However, this must be coupled with the latest Digital News Report for Australia in 2026 that suggests younger audiences, particularly those under 35, are more likely to engage with digital-native and non-traditional providers on social media platforms. When it comes to short form content, their attention shifts further toward influencers and online personalities, who are increasingly central to how news content is encountered and interpreted (Park et al., 2026).

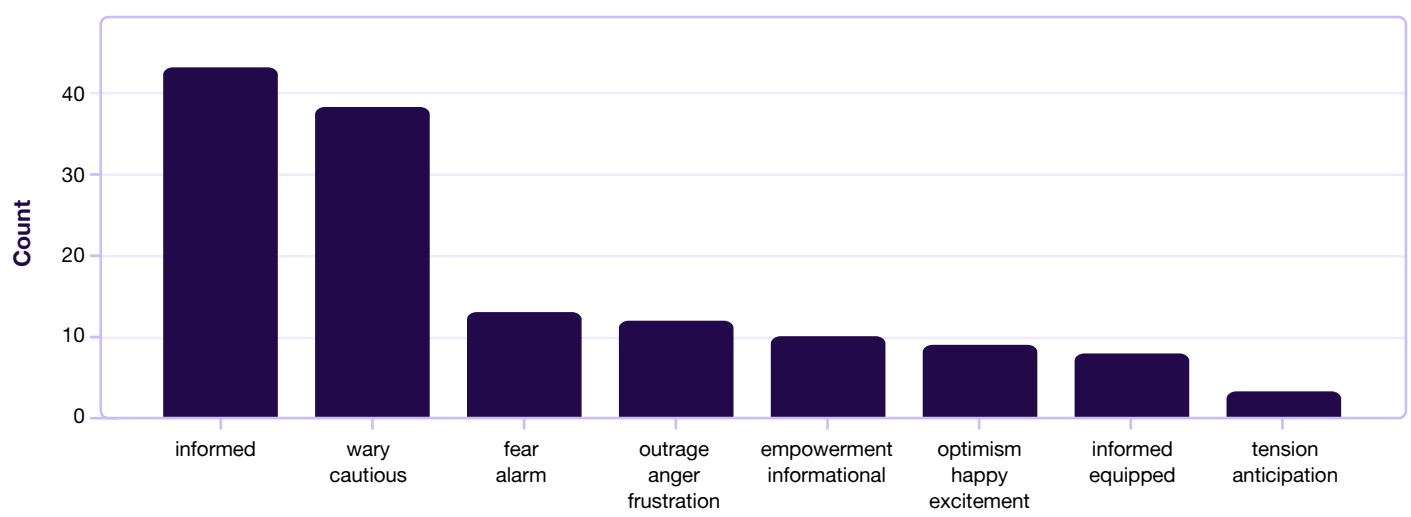


Figure 2 – Traditional media emotional positioning

These findings suggest that traditional media continue to play a foundational role during elections, serving as civic infrastructure. Across all eight outlets, the data portrays an ecosystem committed to maintaining an informed, unified public sphere.

Entertainment media findings

Entertainment media played a largely explanatory and issue-focused role, reflecting a consistent pattern of translating complex political issues into accessible public narratives. Most content was coded as ‘non-partisan’ (n=99). This aligns with the overwhelming dominance of ‘issue-based’ and ‘policy-focused’ storytelling (n=57) as seen in Figure 3. Throughout these posts, the most common topics were the ‘housing crisis’, ‘cost-of-living’ pressures, and ‘climate’-related concerns, which cut across outlets with surprising uniformity and framed politics in terms of everyday material stressors rather than campaign drama.

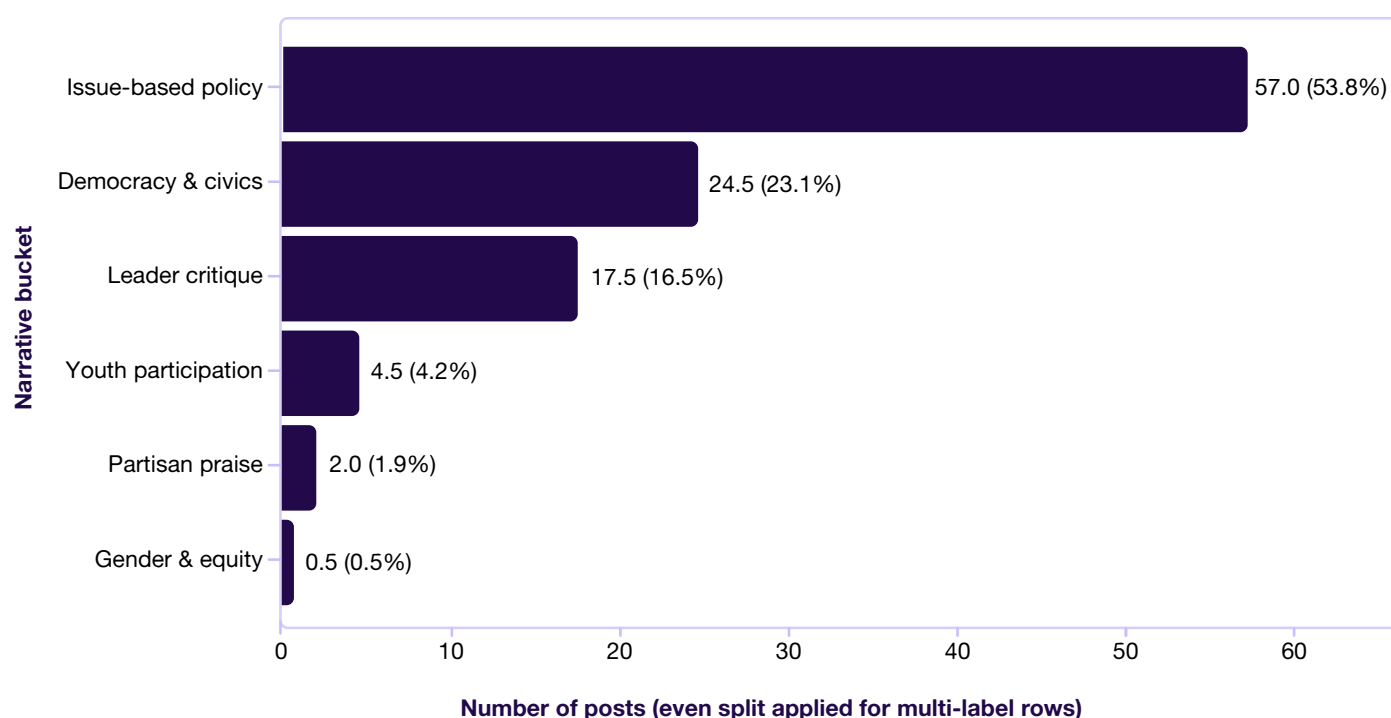


Figure 3 – Entertainment media core narratives.

Base: 106 items. Twenty-two items were excluded from this part of the analysis because source links were unavailable.

Emotionally, the content leaned heavily towards an ‘informed’, measured tone (n=36) and “empowerment/informational” (n=15), while anger, outrage and fear were present but typically in combination with explanatory messaging rather than as standalone emotional appeals. This suggests that entertainment programs used emotion strategically to attract attention to issues without veering into polarisation. Political actors were usually referenced within the segment itself rather than through captions or tags (n=64). This indicates that political meaning-making occurred inside narrative storytelling rather than through overt signalling.

Civic education also emerged as a consistent secondary role. Democratic education themes appeared 23 times, including explanations of push polling, enrolment processes, political donations, youth voting awareness, and the integrity of the electoral system. These tended to appear in outlets such as SBS The Feed, Hack, Q&A and The Project, further positioning entertainment media as providers of accessible civic knowledge for audiences who may not

engage with traditional political journalism. Entertainment media operated as translators, mediators and educators, helping audiences make sense of the election through relatable issues, human-centred storytelling, moderated emotional cues and highly accessible video formats.

Comparative analysis

When comparing the three datasets, the clearest pattern is that creators dominate leadership and election-focused content, far outpacing both entertainment and traditional sources. The topic counts show 174 ‘leadership/election’ posts from creators, compared with only 27 in entertainment and 44 in traditional media.

This reflects a structural truth about social-led media. Creators can publish quickly, reactively and personally, producing commentary within minutes of a political moment occurring. Their formats, face-to-camera, stitched responses, and short podcast clips are naturally suited to leader-driven narratives, which are often personality-centred and emotionally charged. These characteristics align perfectly with the emotional tones creators used most, which were ‘anger’ (n=132), ‘sarcasm’ (n=120) and ‘happy/excitement’ (n=106). This means creators function as the “ignition layer” for leadership narratives, sparking first-wave attention long before longer-form or professionally produced outlets can respond.

A second major pattern in the data is the division of labour between emotional mobilisation and informational explanation. Entertainment and traditional outlets favour serious, explanatory tones, while creators produce both a large informational base and a significant emotional approach. This is evident in Figure 4, where the creator bars contain visible slices for anger, sarcasm and excitement that are nearly absent in the other data.

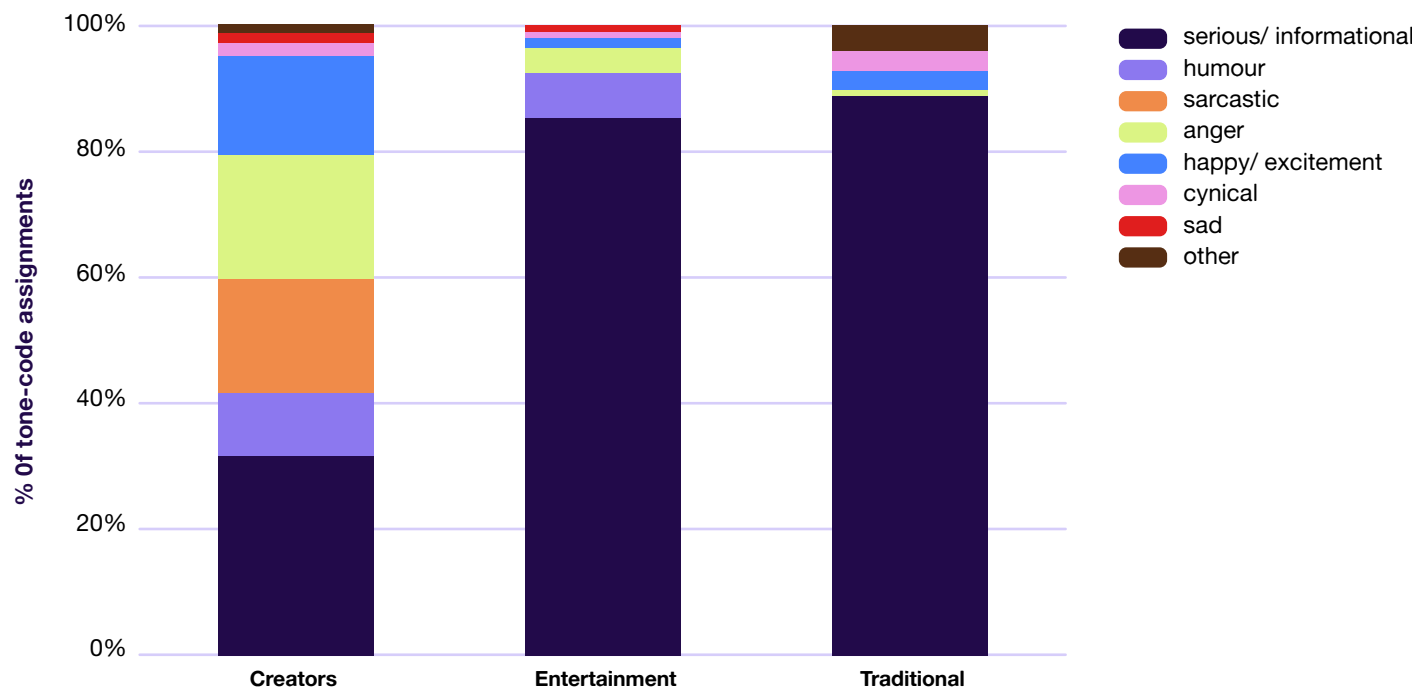


Figure 4 – Tone distribution across datasets

Posts could receive more than one tone code; percentages represent tone-code assignments rather than unique posts.

This means creators provide the energy that drives issues into the public sphere, while other media outputs play a stabilising role, offering context, verification, and interpretive clarity. Together, these systems form a pathway for public communication. Creators generate salience and emotional engagement, and traditional information sources consolidate and translate that engagement into understanding, reinforcing that all three work together in a modern democracy.

The comparison of the three datasets reveals a three-layered ecosystem of modern democratic communication. Creators ignite attention and emotion, entertainment media broaden reach with accessible, mixed-audience content, and traditional media anchors the system with stable, institutional coverage. The value of the comparison is in showing that these roles are not accidental, they are measurable, predictable and structurally embedded across political communication in Australia. However, this must be considered against the 2026 Digital News Report which states that 43% of news consumers get their news from creators or influencers, rising to around 70% among 18–24-year-olds and 72% among 25–34-year-olds.

Targeted survey and focus groups

The second part of this study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining a survey and focus groups to examine how Australians engage with political content produced by creators, influencers, traditional media organisations, and entertainment media. The survey was used to identify patterns in audience responses, while the focus groups provided deeper insight into how participants understood and experienced political content, trust, and influence.

Survey data collection

To test our hypothesis regarding the role of influencers during the 2025 Federal Election, we targeted a small sample (N=21) of Australian citizens with a detailed survey. Participants were aged between 18 years and 41+ years and recruited through purposive sampling and snowball sampling. The survey contained 49 questions examining media consumption patterns and responses to examples of political content drawn from creators, traditional news organisations, and entertainment media.

Participants were asked to evaluate content in terms of emotional response, perceived tone, trust, reliability, political influence, behavioural intentions, and accountability. The survey also included broader questions relating to creator influence, political engagement, and ethical standards for political content creators.

Survey data analysis

Survey responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. Given the exploratory nature and the relatively small sample

size, the analysis focused on identifying patterns and trends rather than producing statistically generalisable findings. Responses were grouped and later organised into broader themes for comparison with the focus group findings.

Focus groups data collection

Two online focus groups were conducted with a total of 26 participants, aged 21 to 38, and recruited through the same purposive and snowball sampling approach. Discussions explored participants' experiences of consuming political content online, perceptions of trust and credibility, political engagement, creator influence, accountability, and the role of creators in contemporary democratic communication. The focus groups followed a semi-structured format, allowing participants to discuss shared questions while also reflecting on their own experiences and media habits.

Focus groups data analysis

Focus group recordings were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Initial coding identified recurring ideas, attitudes, and experiences across participants, which were then refined into broader themes relating to accessibility, trust, influence, engagement, accountability, and democratic risk. The qualitative themes were compared with the survey findings to identify areas of convergence and divergence. This integrated analysis enabled the study to examine not only what participants thought about political creators, but also how and why those perceptions were formed.

Survey and focus group findings

The results are presented through an integrated analysis of the survey and focus group data. This approach enables the identification of both broad audience patterns and the underlying mechanisms that help explain them. Throughout this section, survey findings are used to establish the prevalence of particular attitudes and responses, while qualitative evidence provides insight into how participants interpret, negotiate, and make sense of creator influence in their everyday lives. Organising the findings around shared themes reveals a high degree of convergence between the two datasets, with the focus groups largely reinforcing and elaborating the patterns observed in the survey.

Participants reported high levels of political interest (mean = 7.93), alongside frequent exposure to political content via social media (92.9%) and online news (85.7%). Social media platforms were the dominant point of access for political information (76.9%), far exceeding traditional news or broadcast formats.

Theme 1: Creator influence operates through accessibility rather than persuasion

The strongest evidence suggests that political creators show influence by making political

information understandable, relatable, and worthy of attention. Creators appear to function as interpreters who translate complex political issues into accessible forms that audiences can engage with and discuss.

Survey participants identified creator content as the most influential form of political communication encountered. Nearly two-thirds (63.6%) nominated creator or influencer content as the content type that influenced them most, compared with just 9.1% who selected traditional news media. However, very few respondents reported that exposure to any content significantly changed their views. The dominant response was that the content had simply reinforced existing beliefs. This pattern suggests that influencers are not primarily operating through political conversion but through other mechanisms. Rather than convincing audiences to adopt new positions, creator content appears to shape what issues receive attention and how those issues are approached.

The focus groups provide a clear explanation for this finding. Participants described creators as valuable because they simplify complex political and policy issues, translate institutional language into everyday experience, and present information in formats that feel engaging and understandable. One participant, reflecting on political creator Konrad Benjamin (Punters Politics), explained:

“I just think the way he kind of really simplifies it and humanises the issue brings people in.”

This was echoed throughout both groups. Participants valued creators who could explain budgets, taxation, housing affordability, environmental policy, gendered violence, and cost-of-living pressures using humour, visuals, storytelling, and relatable examples. The participants do not suggest that creators are replacing journalism, but creators were frequently described as helping audiences understand why political issues matter in their everyday lives. In this sense, creators were performing a civic translation function, bridging the gap between institutional politics and lived experience. Participants often resisted the suggestion that creators directly changed their political opinions. Instead, they described influence as operating through shifts in attention, interpretation, and understanding. One participant captured this distinction succinctly:

“Changing the lens is like giving people information so they can make their own decision.”

This distinction between changing minds and changing lenses helps explain why the survey data revealed strong perceptions of influence alongside very limited evidence of attitude change. The findings suggest that creator influence is better understood through concepts such as agenda-setting and framing than through traditional models of persuasion. Participants described creators as an entry point into broader political engagement. Many noted that creator content encouraged them to investigate issues further, consult additional sources, or discuss topics with others. Focus group participants referred to creators as gateways rather

than destinations within their information environment. This interpretation aligns closely with survey findings showing that many content items increased respondents' likelihood of seeking further information or discussing an issue while rarely producing substantial movement in underlying political beliefs.

The survey data also suggest that accessibility may be more important than credibility in explaining creator influence. Although traditional media was rated as the most trustworthy source by 60% of respondents, creators remained the most influential. This apparent paradox becomes easier to understand when considered alongside participants' descriptions of how creator content functions. Influence was not necessarily tied to formal expertise or institutional authority. Instead, it stemmed from a creator's capacity to make politics understandable, relevant, and engaging within contemporary digital environments. Several participants also highlighted the broader cultural role of creators in shaping public attention. As one participant observed:

“Creators are literally the culture front lines I would say... they almost dictate what’s at the front of people’s minds.”

This statement reinforces a recurring finding across both datasets, that creators are increasingly functioning as agenda-setters within platform-based information environments.

Theme 2: Trust is conditional and actively evaluated

Participants demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of trust in political content. Rather than expressing blind loyalty toward creators, respondents described trust as something that is earned, continually assessed, and dependent on visible signals of authenticity, transparency, and integrity. While creators were frequently perceived as influential, trust was not automatically granted and could be quickly withdrawn when audiences suspected undisclosed interests, misleading information, or performative behaviour. The survey findings reveal a complex relationship between influence and trust. Although 63% identified creator content as the most influential content type encountered during the study, 60% identified traditional media as the most trustworthy source. Only three respondents selected creators as the most trustworthy source, with one selecting “none.” This divergence suggests that audiences distinguish between content they find influential and content they regard as credible. Creators may be effective at attracting attention and stimulating engagement, but trust within our sample remains subject to additional evaluation.

The strongest survey evidence for this evaluative approach to trust can be seen in participants' attitudes towards transparency and accountability, with 90% of the respondents believing that creators should always disclose when they are paid or supported by a political party, advocacy group, or brand, while the remaining respondents supported disclosure depending on the level of support received. Similarly, 80% believed that creators themselves should be held responsible when they share false or misleading political information. Support for stronger ethical standards

was particularly pronounced. When asked whether they would support the introduction of a publicly recognised code of ethics for Australian creators producing political or civic content, 70% selected 10/10, producing an overall mean score of 8.9. The focus groups help explain why accountability emerged so strongly. Participants described trust as conditional rather than automatic. One participant captured this sentiment succinctly:

“Trust isn’t loyalty.”

Rather than trusting creators simply because they liked them, participants described a process of ongoing evaluation based on the creator’s behaviour, values, and approach to evidence. Across both focus groups, trust was repeatedly linked to authenticity, consistency, transparency, and source attribution. Participants valued creators who openly acknowledged where information came from, provided evidence to support their claims, and were transparent about their political perspectives and affiliations. As one participant explained:

“The majority of people, they just want a creator that says where they got the information from.”

Independence emerged as another important trust signal. Participants frequently distinguished between creators they perceived as acting independently and those they believed were influenced by political, commercial, or ideological interests. One participant explained:

“I think their independence, I think that really matters to how I perceive whether I’m going to trust the content creator or trust the facts they’re pushing.”

This concern with independence helps explain why sponsorship disclosure was regarded as so important. Participants were generally willing to engage with opinionated content, but they wanted clear visibility of relationships that might influence how information was presented. Trust was therefore understood as a function of transparency rather than neutrality.

The survey data also suggest that audiences assess trust differently across different styles of political communication. Content that respondents characterised as calm and factual generally attracted more positive trust responses than content perceived as alarmist or emotionally charged. For example, 70% of those who viewed ABC News content described the tone as calm and factual, while two respondents reported feeling slightly more trusting of the political system after viewing the content. By contrast, content associated with highly alarmist framing frequently produced frustration, anger, or reduced trust in political institutions. This pattern was reflected in the focus groups, where participants described aggressive tones, rage bait, manipulation, and overt attempts at engagement maximisation as important signals of distrust.

Participants also demonstrated awareness that trust and influence do not always operate

together. Several acknowledged that creators can shape public attention even when audiences remain sceptical of particular claims or perspectives. This distinction reinforces one of the central findings emerging across the project: audiences are not passive consumers of creator content. Instead, they actively negotiate questions of credibility, weighing evidence, motivations, and transparency while still engaging with creator-led political communication.

Theme 3: Influence shapes attention, not just opinion

Across both the survey and focus groups, participants consistently described political creators as influencing what they pay attention to, how they interpret political issues, and whether they engage further with public affairs. Rather than directly changing political opinions, creator content appears to shape issue salience, frame public debates, and encourage political engagement. This pattern suggests that creators function primarily as agenda-setters and interpreters within contemporary digital media environments.

The survey findings indicate that creator influence is more closely associated with attention and engagement than with persuasion. Across almost all content examples, the most common response was that content reinforced existing beliefs rather than changed them. For example, 80% of respondents who viewed Hannah Ferguson's content said it reinforced what they already believed, while only 10% said it made them question their views and none reported changing their views. Similarly, 73% of respondents who viewed Hack/Triple J content reported that it reinforced existing beliefs, while only 9% reported changing their views. Across the broader dataset, instances of self-reported attitude change were rare, suggesting that political content primarily operates within existing belief structures rather than transforming them. The survey shows that content could influence participants' willingness to engage with politics. Hannah Ferguson's content produced one of the strongest mobilisation effects, with 40% of respondents reporting that they were more likely to take political action after viewing the content. Similarly, 45% of respondents who viewed Hack/Triple J content reported feeling more likely to take political action, while 38% of respondents exposed to Punters Politics reported being more likely to discuss the issue with others. The focus group participants repeatedly distinguished between changing opinions and changing perspectives. One participant explained:

“Changing the lens is like giving people information so they can make their own decision.”

This distinction emerged across both groups. Participants frequently described creators as helping them understand issues from new angles, highlighting issues they were previously unaware of, or encouraging them to investigate political topics further. Rather than seeing creators as directly persuading audiences, participants viewed them as influencing the frames through which political information is understood.

Many participants described creators as gateways into broader information environments.

Political content often served as a starting point for further research rather than an endpoint. This interpretation is consistent with survey findings showing increased information-seeking behaviour following exposure to creator content. For example, 36% of respondents who viewed Abbie Chatfield's content reported being more likely to seek further information about the issue, while 30% of respondents who viewed Millie Rose Bannister's content reported the same. Participants frequently described moving between creators, journalists, podcasts, and other information sources as part of a broader process of political learning. The findings also suggest that creators play an important role in shaping public attention during elections and major political debates. Focus group participants reported that creators influenced whether they paid attention to political issues, looked up policy information, or discussed politics with others. One participant described creators as:

“Creators are literally the culture front lines I would say... they almost dictate what’s at the front of people’s minds.”

Greater political engagement did not always correspond with greater trust. Both datasets suggest that creator content can simultaneously increase political attention and political scepticism. Some survey respondents reported becoming more interested in political participation after viewing content while also reporting lower levels of trust in political institutions. Focus group participants similarly described instances where creator content exposed lobbying, political hypocrisy, corporate influence, or institutional failures, leading to increased engagement alongside increased cynicism. This suggests that creator influence can operate in multiple directions simultaneously, fostering participation while also encouraging critical scrutiny of political systems.

Theme 4: A tension between accessibility and democratic risk

Across both the survey and focus groups, participants viewed creator-led political communication as a double-edged phenomenon. On one hand, creators were seen as making politics more accessible, engaging, and relevant to audiences who may otherwise pay little attention to public affairs. On the other hand, participants expressed concerns about misinformation, algorithmic amplification, ideological echo chambers, and the potential for emotionally driven content to undermine trust and informed democratic participation. Together, the findings suggest that the democratic significance of creators lies not only in their ability to engage audiences, but also in the new risks that accompany their growing influence.

The survey data reveal evidence for both opportunities and risks. Several creator and entertainment-based content examples generated relatively high levels of political engagement. For example, 40% of respondents who viewed Hannah Ferguson's content reported feeling motivated to take action, while 45% of respondents who viewed Hack/Triple J content reported being more likely to engage in political action such as voting, signing a petition, or participating in civic activities. Similarly, creator content frequently encouraged audiences to seek additional information or discuss public issues with others. These findings suggest that creator-led communication can successfully stimulate civic curiosity and engagement, particularly among

younger audiences who consume political information through digital platforms. Many content examples generated negative emotional responses and, in some cases, reduced trust in political institutions. Content perceived as strongly ideological or highly alarmist was particularly likely to evoke frustration, anger, and anxiety. For example, 85% of respondents who viewed Freya Leach's content reported feeling frustrated, while 83% described the tone as alarmist. Similarly, 64% of respondents who viewed Paul Murray Live characterised the content as frustration-inducing, while 82% described its tone as alarmist. Across multiple examples associated with highly partisan or emotionally charged commentary, respondents frequently reported feeling less trusting of the political system after exposure. These patterns suggest that some forms of creator and commentary-driven political communication can contribute to disengagement or cynicism even while attracting attention.

The focus groups provide important context for understanding these findings. Participants broadly agreed that creators have made political information easier to access and understand, but they were also highly aware of the vulnerabilities within creator-driven information environments. One participant summarised this tension directly:

“I think creators make politics more accessible, but they also make it more important that people think critically.”

Participants described creators as valuable democratic actors because they lower barriers to participation, explain complex issues, and encourage discussion. However, they also recognised that the same qualities that make creators effective communicators – personality, emotional connection, algorithmic visibility, and speed – can make them powerful vehicles for misinformation, oversimplification, and partisan amplification.

Concerns about algorithmic influence emerged. Participants repeatedly raised issues relating to echo chambers, ideological clustering, rage bait, and the amplification of emotionally charged content. Many expressed concern that social media algorithms reward outrage and conflict, making it more difficult for audiences to encounter diverse perspectives. Several participants reported being conscious of their own information bubbles and recognised that creator-driven content often reaches audiences through recommendation systems rather than deliberate information seeking.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Both the survey and focus groups relied on purposive and snowball sampling, resulting in relatively small, self-selecting samples that are not representative of the broader Australian population. Participants were also generally more politically engaged than the average citizen, which may influence the findings. Consequently, the results should not be interpreted as population estimates. Rather, the study provides exploratory evidence of audience perceptions, experiences, and mechanisms of influence that warrant further investigation in larger-scale research.

Solutions and recommendations

The clearest lesson from this research is that creators already shape how Australians encounter democracy. The live question is what happens as more civic influence sits with creators and platforms whose reach has outgrown the norms, training and accountability around them. Creators help people understand issues, notice political moments, interpret leaders, discuss the issues affecting their lives and decide what deserves attention. They shape what enters the feed, what cuts through, what gets repeated and what people investigate for themselves.

This is democratic influence, but it works differently from formal political communication or traditional news. It's faster, more personal, more emotional and often more culturally persuasive. It also operates inside systems shaped by volatile algorithms, commercial incentives, uneven standards and few shared accountability mechanisms.

Critique and regulation have a role, but neither will build the civic capacity this environment lacks. Nor can the response rely on nostalgia for a traditional media order with its own failures of trust, access and representation. The work ahead is to build structures that reflect how political understanding is actually being formed, helping creators handle political and civic content responsibly while giving audiences stronger grounds on which to judge what they see.

That begins with recognising creators and new media actors as part of the democratic information system. A **Cultural Strategy for Democracy** would map how political ideas now travel through tone, identity, storytelling, humour, aesthetics and trust. It would help institutions understand who is carrying those ideas, how audiences encounter them and what makes people pay attention.

Creators also need access to the knowledge their growing civic role requires. A **Civic Literacy Fellowship** would give creators and culture shapers practical grounding in democratic systems, media law and ethics, public responsibility and the consequences of influence.

The audience research points to a parallel need for clearer standards. Participants did not ask creators to abandon opinion or perform neutrality. They wanted sources, disclosure, independence and a visible distinction between evidence, advocacy and commercial influence. A creator-led **Code of Ethics** could turn those expectations into practical standards for political content without importing a model designed for traditional journalism.

The media environment changes too quickly for this research to be a one-off. A Creator Content Lab would test which messages and formats help people understand political issues, how audiences respond, where trust is gained or lost, and how changes to platforms shape what people encounter. It would turn audience research, cultural analysis and platform intelligence into useful guidance for creators, communicators and institutions.

These four elements are designed to work as one system. The cultural strategy maps the terrain and the fellowship builds capability, while the code sets shared expectations and the lab tests what works, feeding new evidence back into the model.

Together, they form the social and cultural engine of democracy and civic literacy for Gen Z and millennials. With creator influence already embedded in how younger Australians encounter politics, the task now is to build the civic knowledge, shared standards and public-interest infrastructure needed to guide it, rather than leaving its direction to commercial platforms and political incentives.

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