

# Big Tech Power Report

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*How Australians feel about the power of Big Tech and its impacts on Australian society*

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# Summary

The Centre for Responsible Technology's inaugural 'Big Tech Power' report polled a nationally representative sample of Australians and asked about their perceptions of and attitudes towards the most popular online platforms.

As we live more of our lives online, many issues have come to light, and there are diverse concerns around privacy, personal data, surveillance and how technology impacts our loved ones.

Key findings demonstrate that:

- **Big Tech's social license is breaking**, with an overwhelming majority of Australians concerned about its effects, and wanting better accountability and responsibility placed on platforms for the social issues they've caused, including paying more tax.
- **There is bipartisan support for regulation**, with Australians from all sides of politics calling for more and tighter regulation on platforms.
- **Australians trust the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) most**, despite using online platforms more.
- **Australians are very worried about privacy, disinformation and cyber security**, among a range of online issues.
- **Australians want a handle on workplace surveillance** with overwhelming majority support for better control and shared value of data generated by workers.
- **Generational and political divide in tech and media consumption is evident** but does not impact concerns with online platforms and desire for accountability for which there is broad support.

# Methodology

The Australia Institute conducted a national survey of 1,434 people between 9 and 22 February 2021, online through Dynata with nationally representative samples by gender, age and state and territory.

The margin of error (95% confidence level) for the national results is 2.6%.

Voting crosstabs show voting intentions for the House of Representatives. Those who were undecided were asked which way they were leaning; these leanings are included in voting intention crosstabs. “Coalition” includes separate responses for Liberal and National. “Other” includes Centre Alliance, Jacqui Lambie Network and Independent/Other.

# Our media and online platform habits

Australians have historically been early adopters of technology, eagerly purchasing the latest gadget or smart device, despite lack of evidence on actual benefits.<sup>1</sup> The average Australian household is predicted to have 18 internet-connected devices by 2023.<sup>2</sup>

Online, Google is the platform of choice, with 47% of Australians reporting to use it several times a day, and 31% using it daily. Facebook comes in second with 37% of Australians using it several times a day and 25% using it daily. TikTok was used least with 80% of Australians having never used the new app.

Usage	Facebook	Google	TikTok	Twitter	Instagram	Youtube
Several times a day	37%	47%	4%	6%	17%	20%
Daily	25%	31%	5%	8%	13%	20%
Two/three times a week	8%	11%	3%	6%	7%	20%
Weekly	6%	4%	3%	4%	5%	13%
Rarely	5%	2%	5%	9%	7%	15%
Never	19%	4%	80%	67%	51%	13%

‘Traditional media’ channels were still in the daily media mix, with free to air television showing 42% of Australians using it daily. In contrast, streaming services like Netflix and Stan were used least, with only a quarter of respondents using it daily, and a third not using it at all.

<sup>1</sup> Chester (2016), *Australians cement ‘early adopter’ reputation with take up of wearable technology*, <https://www.news.com.au/technology/australians-cement-early-adopter-reputation-with-take-up-of-wearable-technology/news-story/f3210f60cef1240aa93bd77abce778be>

<sup>2</sup> Statista (2021), *Active internet users as percentage of the total population in Australia from 2015 to 2021*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/680142/australia-internet-penetration/>

Usage	News websites	Radio	Streaming service (e.g. Netflix/Stan)	Television
Several times a day	18%	16%	13%	25%
Daily	28%	26%	25%	42%
Two/three times a week	15%	19%	19%	11%
Weekly	9%	10%	6%	6%
Rarely	12%	13%	7%	8%
Never	18%	16%	29%	8%

There are some generational differences in platform usage. When adding frequent daily usage, it shows that:

- The youngest group (18-24) favoured Google, with 86% frequent usage, and least favoured radio at 14%. This group was also the biggest users of new app TikTok
- Those aged 54 years and younger used Google the most
- TikTok was least used by most age groups, except for the youngest bracket
- Television is the channel preferred by those aged 55 and older.

Frequent + Daily usage	FB	GOOG	TT	TWT	INSTA	YT	News sites	Radio	Stream	TV
18-24	73%	86%	38%	26%	71%	67%	20%	14%	51%	36%
25-34	71%	81%	16%	22%	54%	54%	41%	31%	54%	47%
35-44	69%	84%	12%	22%	33%	54%	50%	39%	45%	62%
45-54	62%	82%	4%	10%	25%	40%	55%	52%	36%	69%
55-64	53%	71%	0%	7%	9%	22%	49%	49%	22%	83%
65+	47%	66%	1%	2%	4%	14%	45%	51%	26%	86%

On average, Australians now use online platforms more frequently than traditional media channels. While there are variations in usage with different age brackets, the ubiquity of online platforms means that it is imperative we ensure they are safe, fair and contribute positively to our information ecosystem.

It is also clear that Google and Facebook dominate our online usage, particular when considering that Youtube is owned by Google and Instagram is owned by Facebook. This market dominance and concentrated landscape needs to be addressed.

# We trust the media (particularly the ABC) over online platforms

Gaining the public’s trust is critical for any platform’s success. Online platforms have been challenging the public’s trust in recent years, with regular reports of privacy breaches<sup>3</sup>, data leaks<sup>4</sup> and questionable practices frequently occurring.

Overall, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation was trusted most across online platforms and news media organisations.

News organisations in general, were trusted more than online platforms, except for Google, which was second only to the ABC.

TikTok, the newest and least familiar of all platforms, was trusted least by Australians.

Despite many recent scandals that gained wide coverage, including recent reports of a data breach involving over half a million people<sup>5</sup>, Facebook was trusted more than TikTok and Twitter.

Trust levels	Facebook	Google	TikTok	Twitter	NewsCorp	ABC	Other news
Trust	17%	43%	8%	11%	30%	61%	31%
Neutral	25%	33%	10%	19%	30%	20%	39%
Do not trust	53%	20%	65%	54%	36%	14%	22%
Don't know	4%	3%	16%	15%	5%	4%	8%

<sup>3</sup> Zhou (2021), *Google ‘partially’ misled consumers over collecting location data, Australian court finds*, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/apr/16/google-partially-misled-consumers-over-collecting-location-data-australian-court-finds>

<sup>4</sup> BBC News (2021), *Facebook downplays data breach in internal email*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-56815478>

<sup>5</sup> Wang (2021), *Facebook data leak: Details of 533 million users found on site for hackers*, <https://www.news.com.au/technology/online/hacking/facebook-data-leak-details-of-533-million-users-found-on-site-for-hackers/news-story/c2dd41f93d291ed1fa4187d43d27b15b>



The ABC was trusted most by all Australians bar One Nation voters.

TikTok was universally least trusted – the new platform scored lowest across all voting intentions.

If we removed TikTok as an outlier, this near-universal distrust was mirrored closely by Twitter, being the second least trusted platform by all voters except for One Nation voters who scored Facebook as their second least trusted platform.

Trust levels by voting intention	Facebook	Google	TikTok	Twitter	NewsCorp	ABC	Other news
Coalition	22%	49%	10%	15%	46%	60%	38%
Labor	16%	45%	7%	10%	31%	68%	29%
Greens	16%	38%	12%	15%	28%	78%	27%
One Nation	5%	22%	4%	6%	28%	25%	18%
Other	12%	30%	5%	7%	20%	53%	18%

Although online platforms have replaced mainstream media as the most used channels of choice, the trust levels placed on mainstream media remains strong among Australians.

The ABC dominates trust levels leading by approximately 20% on average ahead of Google. NewsCorp and other news outlets follow and the rest of the online platforms feature last.

## Trust on specific issues

How technology platforms handle specific issues are important for overall perceptions of trust and public confidence.

We asked Australians how trustworthy they felt each technology platform was, across issues including:

- handling of personal data

- protecting user privacy
- taking care of the rights of content creators
- taking care of the rights of users
- taking care of the rights of advertisers

There is a strong sense from respondents that technology platforms primarily take care of the rights of advertisers. This is in correlation with the perception that platforms can not be trusted with handling individuals' personal data.

Google was considered most trustworthy across the board, with TikTok once again, perceived of as least trustworthy.

If we consider TikTok as an outlier, Twitter consistently replaces it as the least trustworthy online platform across these issues.

Trust on issues	Facebook	Google	TikTok	Twitter	Instagram	Youtube
Taking care of the rights of advertisers	55%	64%	42%	51%	53%	62%
Taking care of the rights of users	49%	60%	39%	47%	49%	58%
Protecting user privacy	48%	60%	37%	46%	49%	57%
Handling personal data	47%	59%	38%	46%	48%	57%

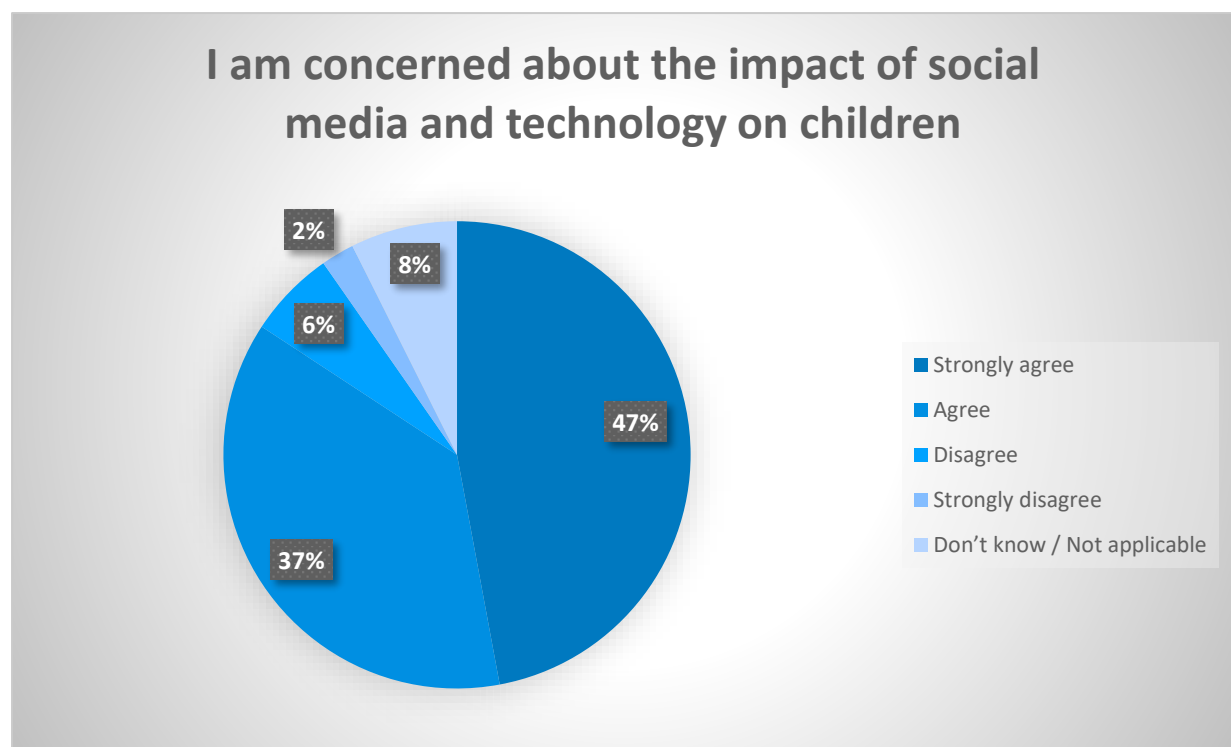
# The impact on children is top of mind

How social media affects us is of concern for many Australians. Australians worry about how technological issues will affect them personally, including loved ones like family and friends.

Australians were mostly concerned about how social media was impacting on children at 84%, followed by impact on friends at 52%, themselves at 44%, and on their partners at 36%.

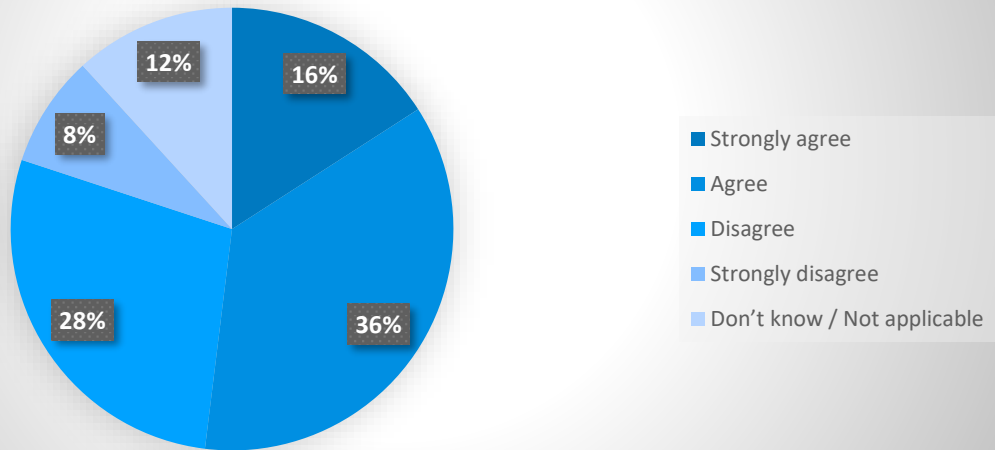
Child safety is top of mind for Australians, and government initiatives like the eSafety Office reflect this which focuses largely on protecting children from online harms.

Online platforms directed towards children including YouTube Kids and the newly announced Instagram for kids<sup>6</sup> should be closely scrutinised given the public's high levels of concern. Newer apps like TikTok also primarily attract a younger audience.

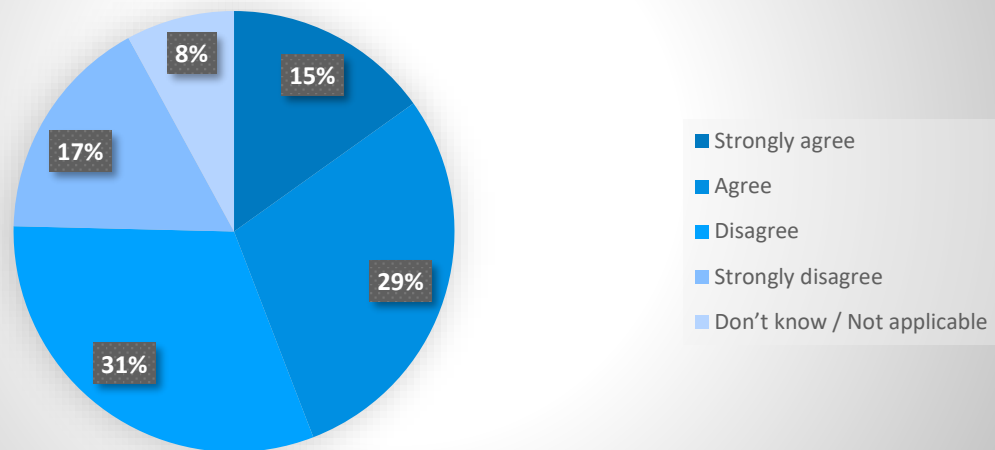


<sup>6</sup> Guardian Pass Notes (2021), *Instagram for kids – the social media site no one asked for*, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/shortcuts/2021/may/11/instagram-for-kids-the-social-media-site-no-one-asked-for>

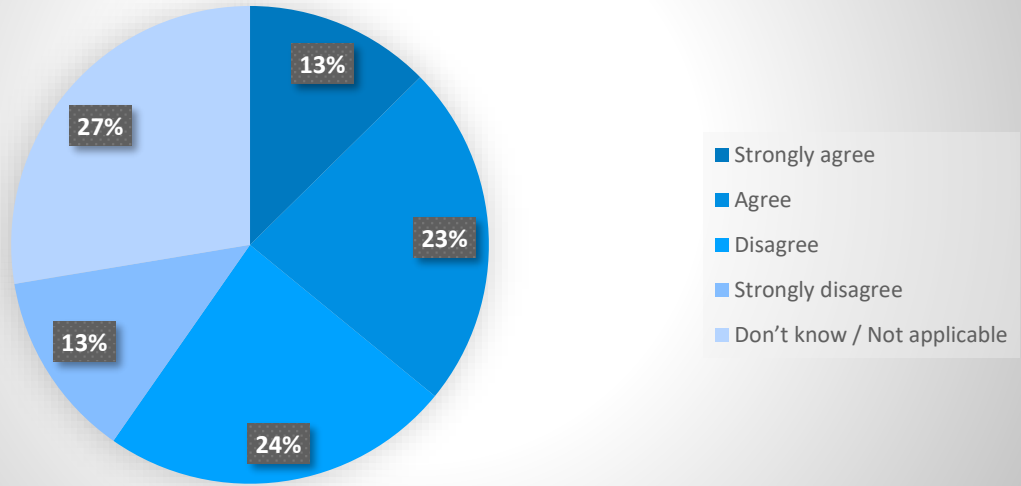
## I am concerned about the impact of social media and technology on my friends



## I am concerned about the impact of social media and technology on me personally



## I am concerned about the impact of social media and technology on my partner



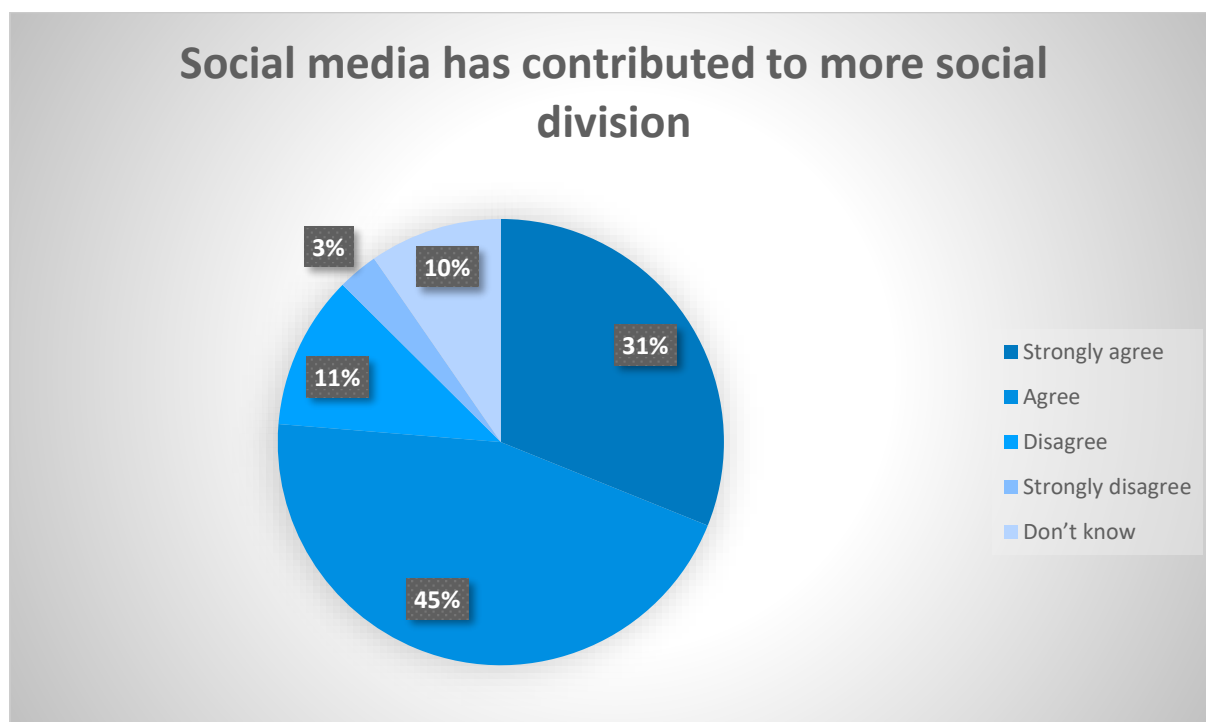
# Big Tech social license is breaking

Social license, similar to trust, is part of the unsaid agreement between the platforms and the public on acceptable behaviour. As our society becomes more software mediated and as online platforms scale to saturation point with the population, there are specific issues that have begun to capture the attention of the Australian public.

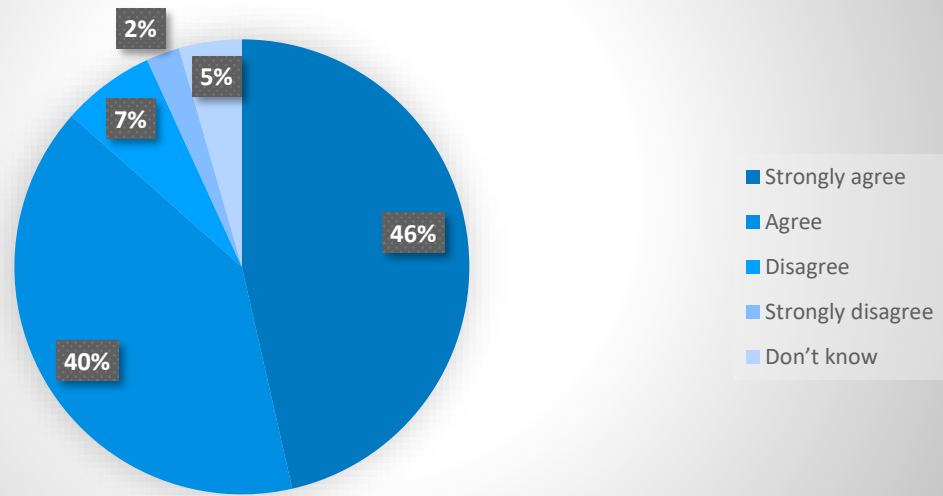
A strong majority of Australians (76%) believe that social media has contributed to more social division, consistently across all age ranges and voting intentions.

Australians also overwhelmingly believe (86%) that social media companies should take more responsibility for the content on their platforms, particularly those ages 55+, where 94% agreed to this sentiment.

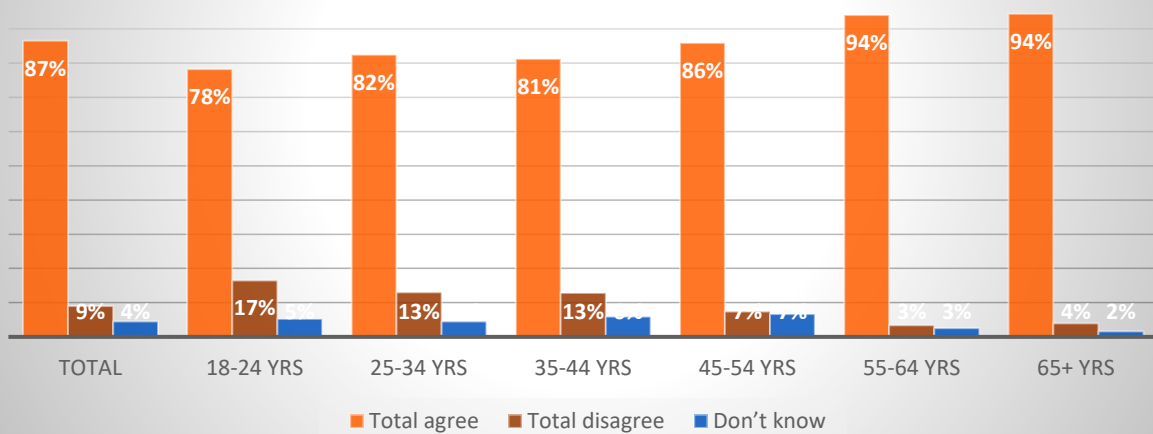
Social media companies should also be legally liable for the content in their platforms, believed by three-quarters of Australians. This was supported broadly but -more by major party voters.



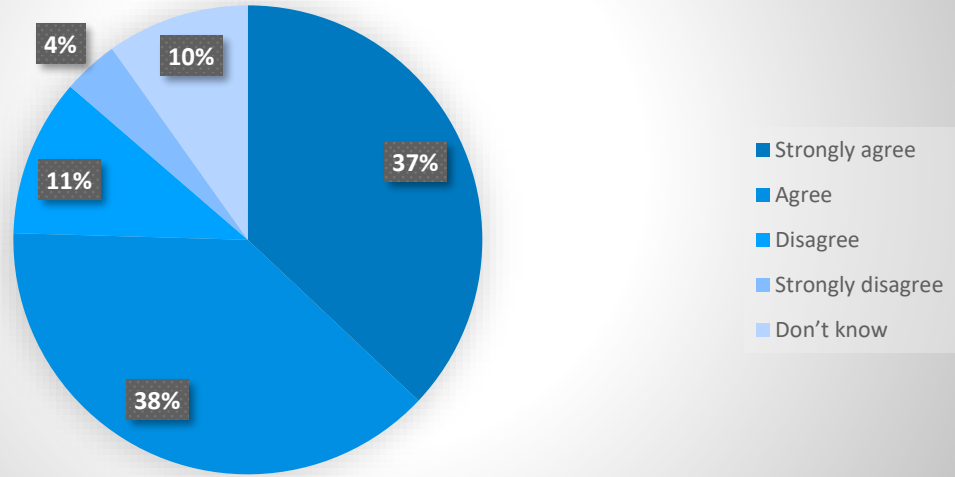
## Social media companies should take more responsibility for the content on their platforms



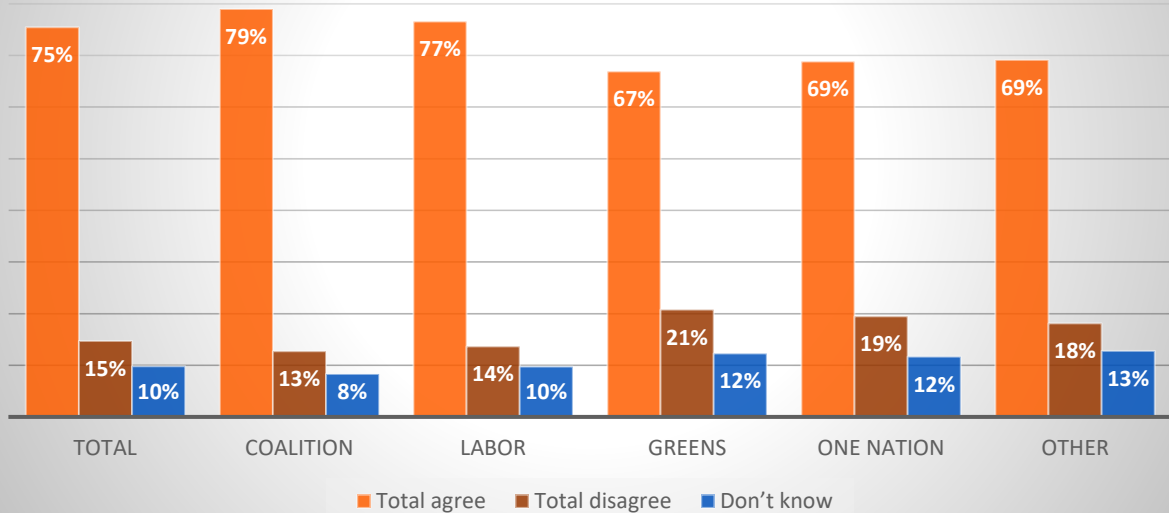
## Social media companies should take more responsibility for the content on their platforms



## Social media companies should be legally liable for the content on their platforms



## Social media companies should be legally liable for the content on their platforms





Across a number of issues, respondents showed an overwhelming concern about privacy and cyber security, followed closely by cyber bullying, abuse and disinformation.

The overwhelming majority of Australians (about three-quarters) are all concerned about these issues.

“Free speech” was the least concerning topic, but still being a factor for almost half of respondents.

Concern levels	Privacy	Cyber bullying	Cyber Security	Abuse	Free Speech	Addiction	Disinformation
Concerned	75%	74%	75%	73%	48%	57%	72%
Neither	19%	18%	19%	17%	32%	25%	21%
Not Concerned	6%	8%	6%	9%	20%	18%	7%

Big Tech’s social license is at breaking point with Australians, who believe these platforms have contributed towards societal issues and are calling for more accountability and responsibility.

Australians are extremely worried about a diverse set of issues facilitated by and hosted through Big Tech platforms, like privacy, security and disinformation.

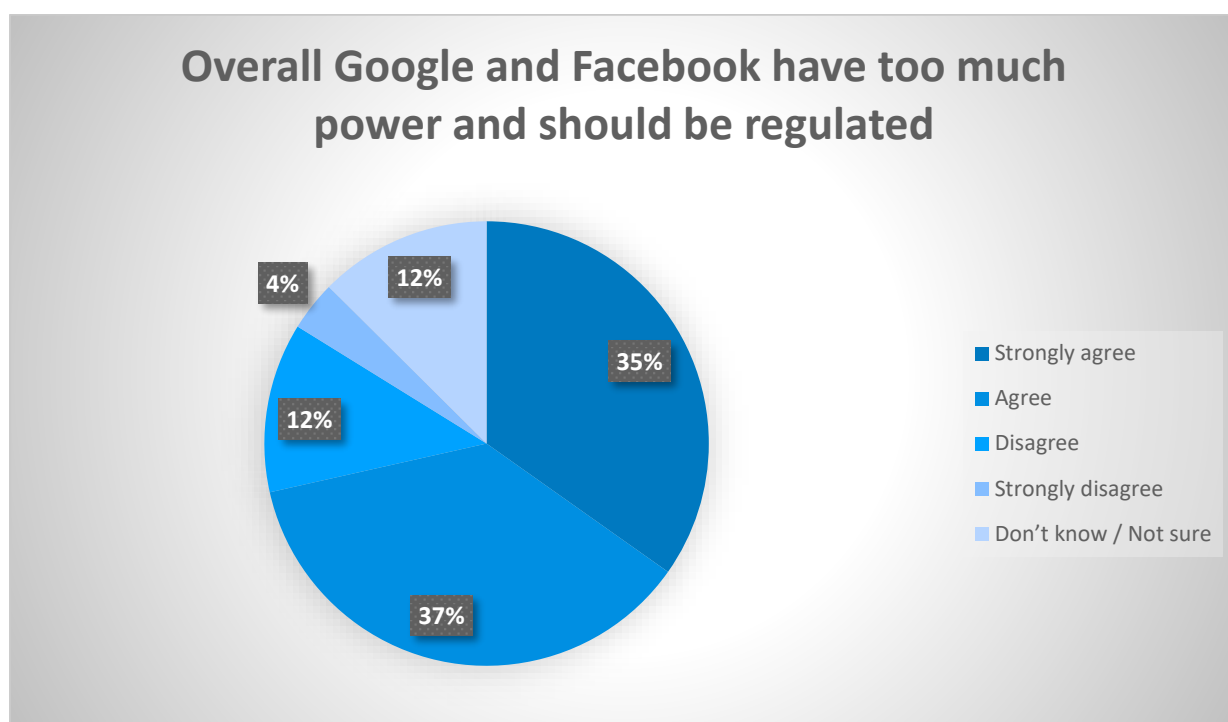
# Regulation and Accountability, now!

Regulating digital platforms is on the global agenda as well, with many governments around the world at various stages of legislative and regulatory interventions.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission has developed some world-leading regulatory initiatives as part of its comprehensive Digital Platform Inquiry.<sup>7</sup> The European Union is also spearheading some progressive frameworks following the pioneering General Data Protection Regulation.<sup>8</sup> The United States, home to the most well-known technology companies, is also in the middle of several state and federal level antitrust investigations.<sup>9</sup>

Australians have sent a crystal-clear message that they want more regulation and accountability to hold Big Tech in check.

71% of respondents believe Google and Facebook have too much power and should be regulated.



<sup>7</sup> ACCC (2019), *Digital platforms inquiry – final report*, <https://www.accc.gov.au/publications/digital-platforms-inquiry-final-report>

<sup>8</sup> Kelion (2020), *EU reveals plan to regulate Big Tech*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-55318225>

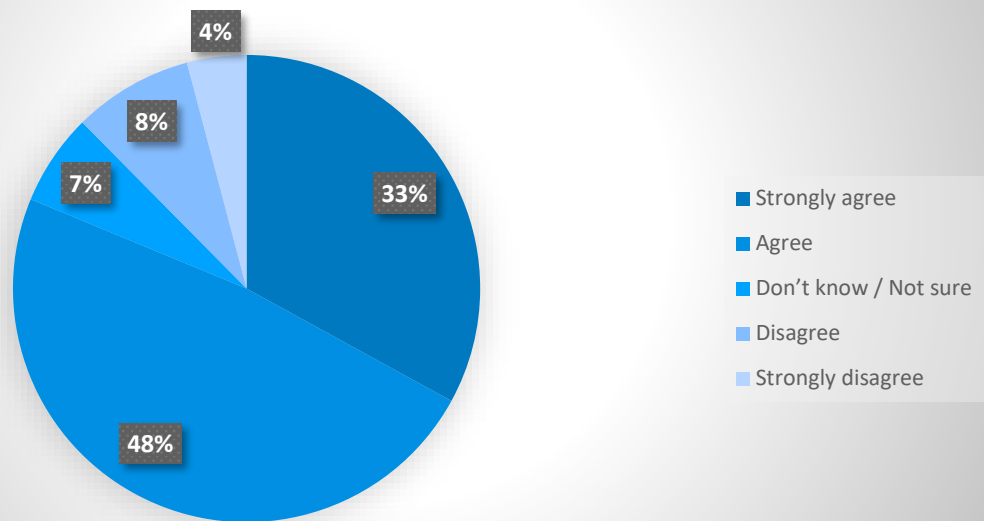
<sup>9</sup> Paul (2020), *'This is big': US lawmakers take aim at once-untouchable big tech*,

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/dec/18/google-facebook-antitrust-lawsuits-big-tech>

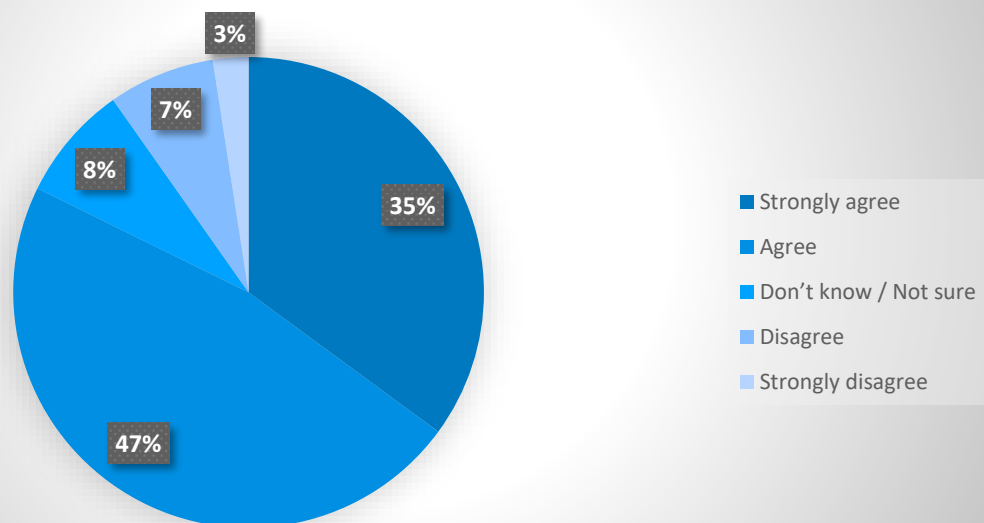
Consequence-free posting online is no longer acceptable, with 81% of Australians wanting more rules on content.

82% of Australians also want online platforms to take more responsibility for content it hosts.

### There needs to be rules about what people can post online

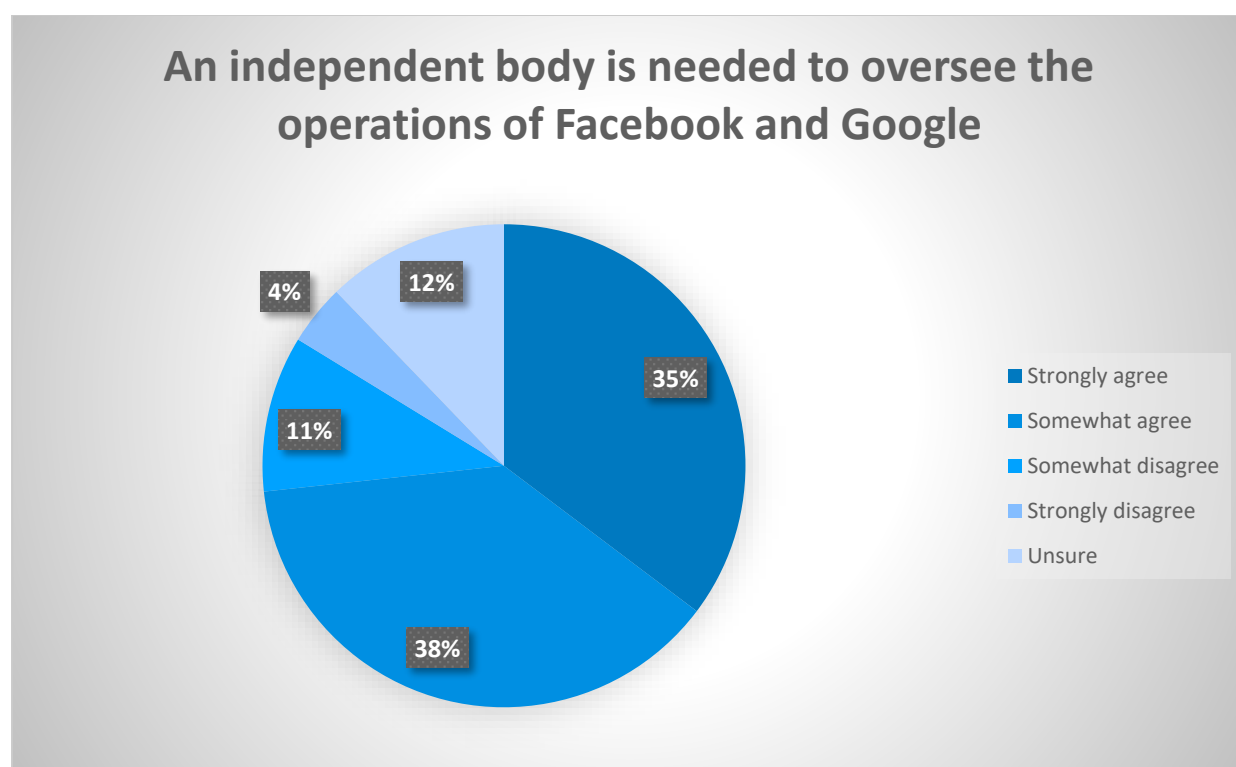


### Social media sites should be responsible for the material that is posted on their platforms

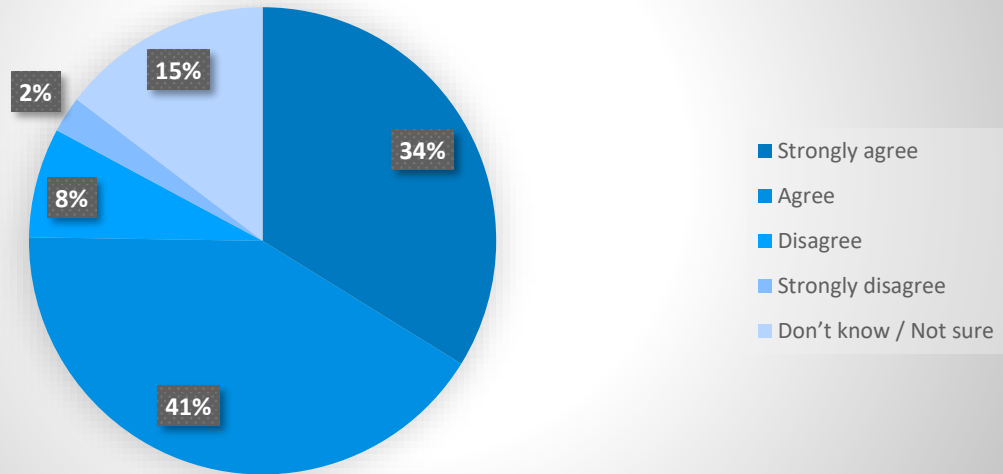


Self-regulation efforts by the online platforms have largely failed, and Australians are calling for more oversight and accountability to be placed on Big Tech.

73% of Australians want an independent body to oversee Google and Facebook, and 75% want to better understand how they lobby governments and sponsor activities to gain favour.



## I would like better transparency on Google and Facebook's lobbying and sponsorship activities



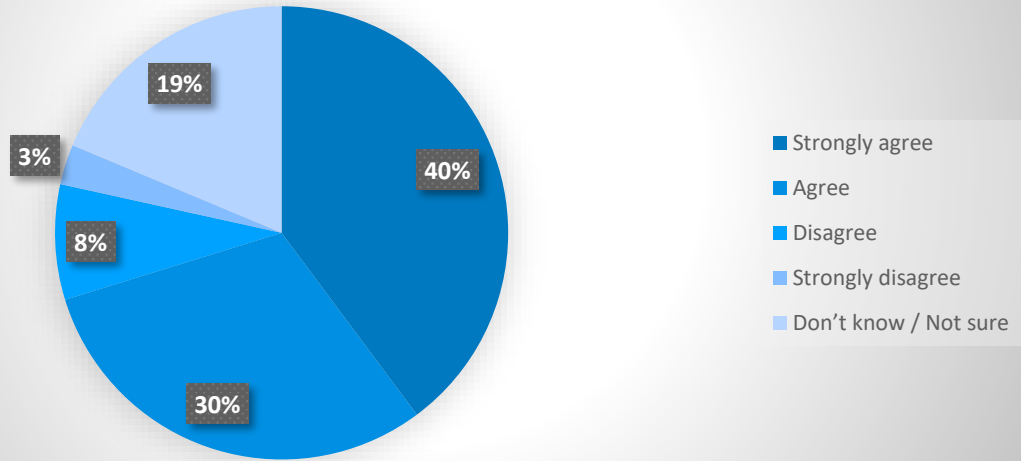
The public also believe Google and Facebook should be forced to pay more tax locally. The tech giants regularly employ tax breaks and loopholes to minimise their tax responsibilities in Australia.<sup>1011</sup>

Ultimately, Australians want a more competitive landscape online, and want to see better alternatives to the current dominant platforms.

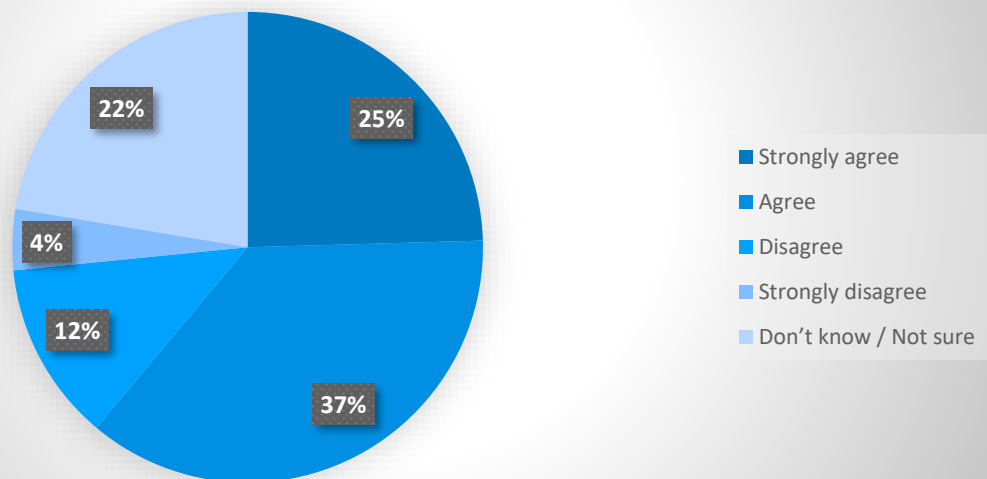
<sup>10</sup> Mason (2020), *Facebook pays less than \$17m in Australia*, <https://www.afr.com/companies/media-and-marketing/facebook-pays-less-than-17m-in-tax-in-australia-20200531-p54y1z>

<sup>11</sup> Khadem (2020), *Google Australia pays more tax, but still makes billions on local sales counted in Singapore*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-18/google-pays-more-tax-but-still-makes-billions-in-singapore/12254448>

## Google and Facebook should be forced to pay more tax on the income they make in Australia



## I would like to see better alternatives to online platforms like Facebook



To date, Google and Facebook have been pushing a self-regulation narrative, and developing ineffectual governance activities like the Facebook Oversight Board.<sup>12</sup>

They have also been abdicating responsibility of the content posted on their platforms back onto the public, insisting that they are merely facilitators of content rather than publishers.<sup>13</sup>

These sentiments have been clearly rejected by the Australian public.

Australians not only want more regulation, they specifically want to see independent oversight on Google and Facebook, want the companies to be directly responsible for the content on their platforms, and even want greater transparency in their lobbying efforts.

It is no longer acceptable to the Australian public that these enormously powerful companies are left to their own devices.

Australians overwhelmingly want regulation and accountability of Big Tech platforms.

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<sup>12</sup> Purtill (2020), *Why almost no-one is happy with the Facebook oversight board's ruling on Donald Trump's ban*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2021-05-06/facebook-oversight-board-donald-trump-ban-ruling/100119958>

<sup>13</sup> Dwoskin (2021), *Facebook's Sandberg deflected blame for Capital riot, but new evidence shows how platform played role*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/13/facebook-role-in-capitol-protest/>

# Workers want workplace surveillance under control

In our increasingly digitised workplaces, issues around data collection and storage are becoming commonplace.

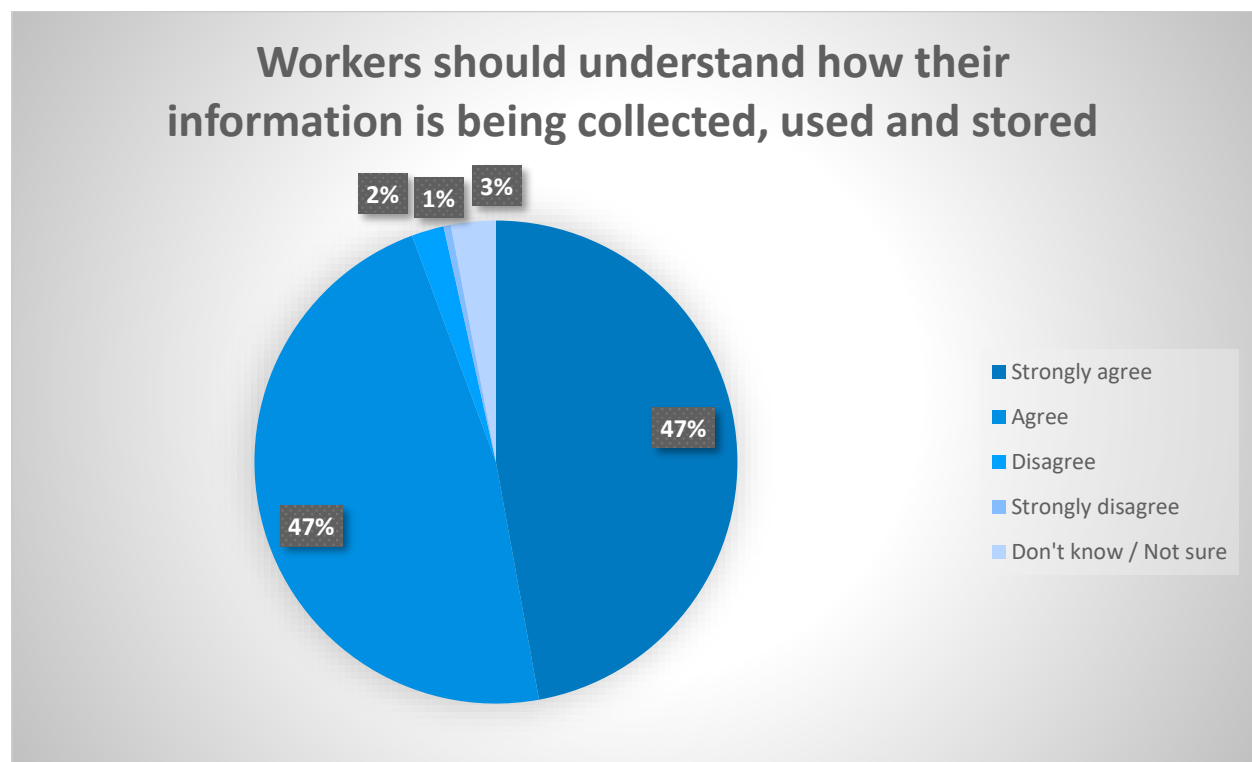
The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in a remote working revolution that would have been difficult to imagine only the year before.

This has Australians thinking more about data issues in the workplace.

The vast majority of Australians wanted to understand how their personal information is being collected, used and stored in their workplaces (94%), consistent across age ranges and voting intentions.

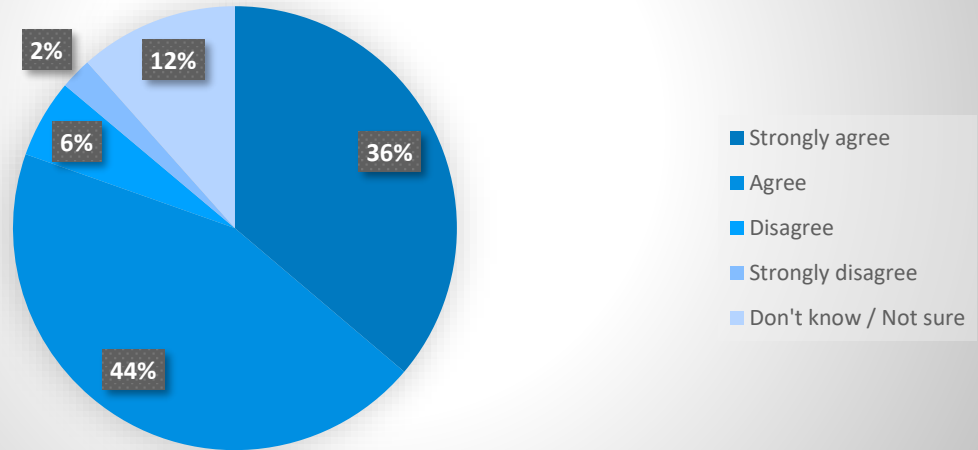
Four-fifths of Australians also wanted any value from the information that is collected, used and stored at work to be shared with the workers who produced it.

This strong sentiment continues with 83% wanting control over how their personal information is collected, used and stored.

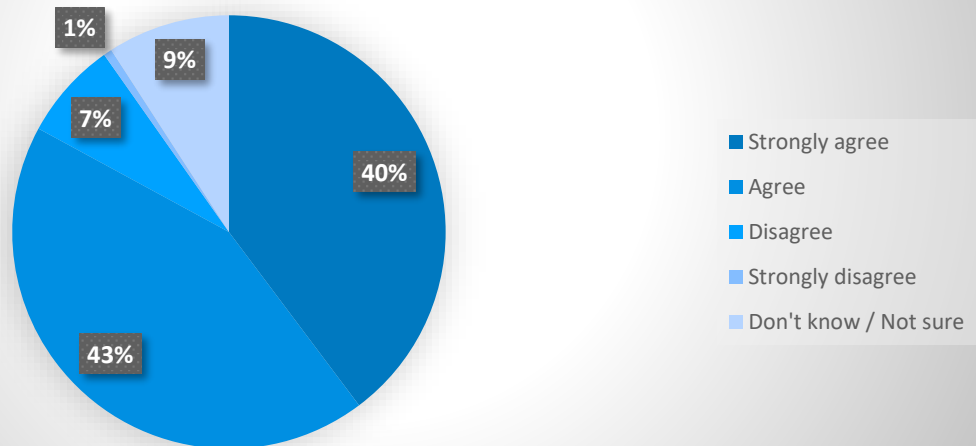




**Any value from information that is collected, used and stored at work should be shared with the workers who produce it**



**Workers should have control over the information that is collected, used and stored at work**



Australians increasingly understand the value of their data, and want to better understand and get a handle on how workplaces are putting them under surveillance.

# Age and politics matter, but only a little bit

The stereotypes of younger people being more accepting and forgiving of technology rings true in many areas with younger people happy to use newer platforms like TikTok, and older groups maintaining traditional media usage with television and radio.

This is also true with trust levels, with a strong correlation of younger age groups being more trusting of online platforms, and the public progressively being less trusting the older they get.

However, most issues of concern were shared by a majority of Australians across all age groups, including concerns about addiction and free speech.

There is very strong consistency on views about the need to regulate and curb Big Tech's power, with majority interest for tighter regulations and more transparency.

Workers of all ages are also extremely concerned about the data being collected, stored and processed in their workplaces, with strong majority support for sharing of value generated, and more control over data management.

When it comes to trust, most voters trusted the ABC above all else, and only One Nation voters differing by trusting NewsCorp most.

One Nation voters index as the least trustful of online platforms. They were also most concerned with issues such as hate speech and abuse, free speech and surveillance online.

Greens voters were not as concerned about privacy, internet addiction and child protection as voters for other parties.

Aside from these specific differences, most issues and sentiments had broad consensus across all sides of politics.

The majority of Australians supported more regulation, believe social media has contributed to a number of issues and must be held accountable for them, and is very concerned with workplace surveillance.

# Conclusion

Australians are being impacted by online technology in significant ways, so much that there is broad agreement across many diverse issues.

While there are some differences in attitudes and habits between younger and older groups, and some differences in concerns for specific issues between voters, the majority of Australians feel like online platforms require more regulation, have a declining social license, and that workplace surveillance is a major issue.

These concerns validate the increasing regulatory and legislative interventions on Big Tech that's being planned by governments and public bodies.

Decision makers in industry and technology companies need to consider what their responsibilities are in this environment, and ensure that they address the public's concerns, if they are to continue operating successfully in Australia.