

Challenging hateful conspiracy theories and fake news:

A case study of the
Agent C Project Pilot

Contents

Like all of our work at All Together Now, this case study was imagined, conducted and written on unceded Aboriginal land. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia, and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We acknowledge their Elders past, present and emerging, and acknowledge that Australia was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

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The views expressed in this publication are those of All Together Now and do not necessarily reflect the views of Agent C project funders or partners.

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Executive summary

In 2021 All Together Now developed a pilot for its “Agent C” Project aimed at enhancing community resilience against hateful conspiracy theories and fake news.

Funded by Multicultural NSW, the Agent C Project Pilot developed an evidence-based and co-designed training program with and for young people (aged 14-21) in NSW. Supported by project partner Headspace Camperdown, All Together Now’s Agent C program aims to enhance the confidence and capacity of young people to unpack and critically engage with divisive, hateful, and possibly violent conspiracy theories and fake news and to have stimulating conversations with their peers encouraging critical thinking.

The 2021 Project Pilot successfully delivered a co-designed training package and facilitated 5 sets of the full training program, training 39 young people in total. The full program consists of three 1.5 hour online workshops and is delivered in small groups, allowing for maximum participant engagement and for more intimate, honest and open discussion on complex issues.

All Together Now partnered with independent evaluator Urbis to assess the impact of the Agent C Project Pilot. Through the design of a robust project logic and evaluation framework, Urbis identified four key outcomes for Agent C that were used as the basis for reporting on the impact of the pilot program. These outcomes included:

- Participants are equipped to reflect on their own identity, privilege and power
- Participants are equipped to engage more critically with media
- Participants are empowered to recognise and critically engage with fake news and conspiracy theories
- Participants have conversations within their social networks about fake news and conspiracy theories

Following an analysis of participant survey results, Urbis concluded its independent evaluation of the Agent C Project Pilot by stating that “Agent C has proven to be a highly impactful project” as it had “successfully achieved all four of its intended outcomes, through delivering highly topical and applied content to young people in an engaging way.”

With the majority of survey results consistently in the high 80% to 90% range, All Together Now was very pleased with the results of the Agent C Project Pilot evaluation. The project team was especially pleased that the evaluation strongly indicated that the training program had equipped young people with the skills and confidence to not only identify fake news and conspiracy theories but also to talk about their learnings with their friends and family. With almost 9 in 10 participants reporting that they had learned new skills for talking about fake news and conspiracy theories and that they had actually already talked to their friends and/or family about fake news and conspiracy theories since participating in the program, All Together Now is very confident that the Agent C program can create real social impact and enhance community resilience against hateful misinformation.

After the highly successful evaluation by Urbis, the Agent C Project was extended, receiving multi-year funding from Multicultural NSW under the COMPACT program. This funding will enable All Together Now and its project partners to scale up the project and roll out the Agent C training program to young people, schools and youth services throughout NSW until June 2024.

All Together now is currently also building on its “Agent C” work and creating brand-new resources for teachers, educators, parents and frontline workers in Australia aimed at building their skills to recognise and respond to young people who are engaging with hateful misinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories. These resources will be available throughout 2023.

Introduction

All Together Now and Agent C

All Together Now is a nationally-focused charity dedicated to preventing all forms of racism in Australia. Our mission is to “Educate Australians About Racism”. We do this by imagining and delivering innovative and evidence-based projects that promote racial equity. We are community driven, utilise partnered approaches, and our work is intersectional.

All Together Now has won numerous awards for its work in challenging racism, including the global Intercultural Innovation Award from the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC).

For many years we have been active in the space of promoting community resilience to far-right extremism, online hate, fake news and conspiracy theories, designing a number of government-supported preventive projects aimed at enhancing the skills of frontline workers to respond to this growing challenge.

In 2021 we developed a pilot for our “Agent C” program that received funding from NSW Government through Multicultural NSW. The objectives of the Agent C project are:

- To develop and deliver a specialised, evidence-based and co-designed training program with and for young people (aged 14-21) in NSW.
- To enhance the confidence and capacity of young people to unpack and critically engage with divisive, hateful, and possibly violent conspiracy theories and fake news and to have stimulating conversations with their peers encouraging critical thinking.

All Together Now believes this project is necessary as the COVID-19 pandemic and extended lockdowns caused a significant rise in online conspiracy theories and fake news and also created the ideal circumstances for racism and right-wing extremism to flourish. Working with our project partners Headspace Camperdown and Urbis, as well as a number of informal partners, including academics and co-design experts, the Agent C program aims to increase the agency, self-worth and critical thinking skills of young people who are increasingly being confronted with online misinformation and divisive content.

A co-designed and evidence-based approach

The Agent C training program consists of three 1.5 hour online workshops that are delivered via Zoom by two expert facilitators.

Each of the workshops has been co-designed and developed in a way that draws on the many different approaches outlined in the relevant literature. Research in this space continues to develop, and it's important to note that there is no single solution to the problem of conspiracy theories and fake news. Every young person's personal situation and engagement with this type of content is different; often there are a range of psycho-social factors at play that differ from person to person.

The Agent C program is designed around the so-called 'inoculation theory' approach.¹ This theory uses a biological metaphor to describe an intervention that builds resistance to misinformation and conspiracy theories – in the same way that the body can be protected against disease by pre-exposure to a weakened version of a pathogen. This approach can be applied to beliefs, attitudes and information. The most accessible way to implement such an intervention is through 'prebunking'. This preventive approach allows for low-level exposure to misinformation and conspiracy theories in the hope that the experience will provide a form of 'immunisation', allowing young people to spot and question misinformation better in the future. Inoculation theory is integrated into the Agent C program through numerous examples and activity-based learning.

In addition to the inoculation theory approach, Agent C uses a variety of other research-based approaches to tackle misinformation and conspiracy theories, including motivational interviewing techniques, fact-based correction, media literacy, decoding hateful elements, racial literacy, and reimagining intergroup relations.² These approaches and the content of each workshop are examined on the following page.

1. See, e.g.: Roozenbeek, J., van der Linden, S. & Nygren, T. (2020). Prebunking interventions based on 'inoculation' theory can reduce susceptibility to misinformation across cultures. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 1(2). doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-008; Lewandowsky, S. & van der Linden, S. (2021). Countering misinformation and fake news through inoculation and prebunking. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 32(2), 348–384. doi.org/10.1080/10463283.2021.1876983
2. See: Guan, T., Liu, T. & Yuan, R. (2021). Facing disinformation: Five methods to counter conspiracy theories amid the Covid-19 pandemic. *Comunicar*, 20(69), 67–78. doi.org/10.3916/C69-2021-06; 'Alternative facts' and hate: Regulating conspiracy theories that take the form of hateful falsity. *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal*, 29, 659–681; Lewandowsky, S., et al (2020). *The debunking handbook 2020*. Sceptical Science; Hay, S. (2019); Kreko, P. (2020). Countering conspiracy theories and misinformation. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories* (pp. 242–256). Routledge.

Workshop 1

“Making sense of the fake news world: What, Why and How?” (*Media Literacy; fact-based/science-focused correction*)

This introductory workshop is designed to familiarise young people with the fake news landscape. The session looks at the question ‘what is fake news?’ and examines the various forms it can take. It also considers the creators of fake news and conspiracy theories – what are their motivations? The workshop explores the various ways in which information can be manipulated, as well as how it can target certain groups. Through activity-based learning, young people are given the opportunity to experiment with various forms of non-hateful fake news aimed at empowering them against future exposure. The workshop concludes by providing young people with a practical toolkit that they can use to assess the validity of information, spot fake news, and enhance their media literacy.

Workshop 2

“Fake news and conspiracy theories: the connection to racism, power and privilege” (*Decoding hateful elements; reimagining intergroup relations; racial literacy*)

Workshop 2 goes further and begins to unpack the more hateful elements of certain conspiracy theories and fake news, while exploring the interconnected concepts of identity, power and privilege. The session takes a deeper dive into hateful misinformation and conspiracy theories that target specific groups in society, and aims to enhance the racial literacy of participants. Participants are encouraged to reflect on their own identity, world views, and possible biases and prejudices. Through activities that are aimed at decoding and breaking down the hateful and divisive elements of certain conspiracy theories and fake news, this workshop encourages participants to build empathy and awareness of other people’s experiences and to reimagine intergroup relations.

Workshop 3

“Fake news and conspiracy theories: what can we do about them?” (*Motivational interviewing techniques; Peer-to-peer learning*)

The final workshop is about exploring different responses to the issues of fake news and conspiracy theories, and allows participants to put into practice all the knowledge gained in the first two workshops. Via activities, participants are taken through a range of motivational interviewing techniques that they can use to have stimulating and constructive conversations with their peers. Motivational interviewing techniques originally come from counselling approaches designed to elicit behavioural change. This workshop builds the confidence of participants to have conversations with their networks (including family members and friends) in a safe manner and encourages peer-to-peer learning.

Reach of Agent C

Project outputs

Overall, the Agent C Project Pilot produced the following outputs:

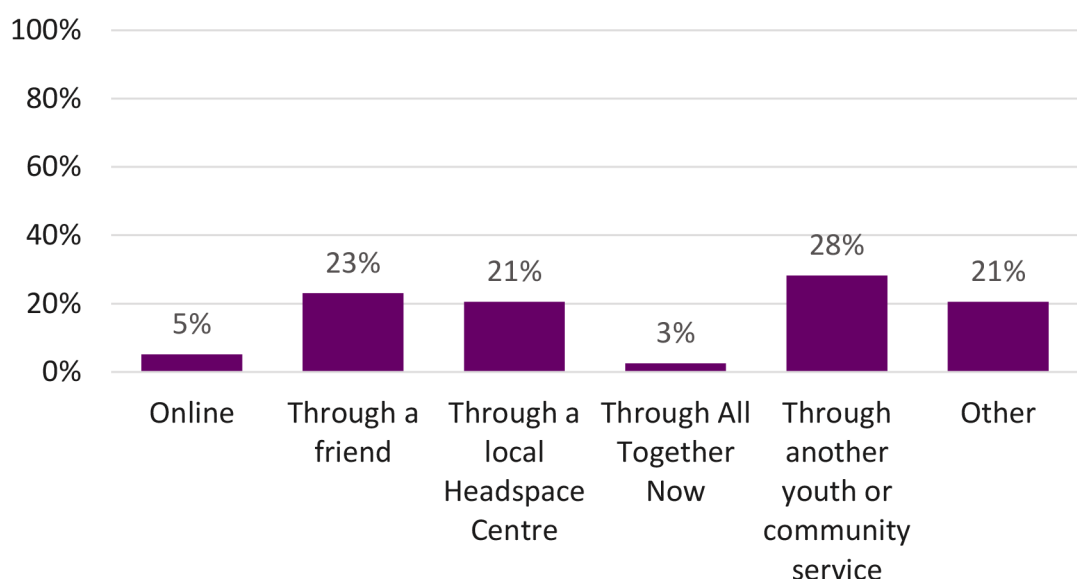
- Developed an evidence-based and co-designed training package with young people through a 3-hour co-design workshop held in May 2021.
- Delivered 5 sets of the full training program to young people in August-September 2021 (i.e. delivered 14 workshops in total, with two workshops merged). The program consists of three 1.5 hour online workshops and is delivered in small groups, allowing for maximum participant engagement and for more intimate, honest and open discussion on complex issues.
- Trained 39 young people in total, with 34 young people completing the full training program.

As the training was rolled out at the height of the lockdown in Greater Sydney and NSW in the second half of 2021, the Project Pilot experienced significant challenges in terms of recruitment of participants, due to the increased pressure the lockdowns placed on young people, their families and youth and community services in this period. Despite these substantial challenges, All Together Now succeeded in delivering the Project Pilot together with its project partner Headspace Camperdown.

Recruitment of participants

Of the 39 young people who participated in the Agent C Project Pilot, 34 attended all three workshops and 5 attended one or two workshops. As shown below (**Fig 1**), most participants found out about Agent C through a friend, headspace, or another youth or community service. The recruitment strategy for the Pilot involved Headspace

Fig 1



staff promoting the training to their existing clients and through other youth and community services organisations they work with. This is likely to have contributed to almost half of participants finding out about the training through either of these means (49%).

Profile of participants

The following data provides a more in-depth demographic profile of participants. Data has been taken from a survey conducted with all 39 participants. This profile broadly aligns with the target audience of young people aged 14-21 across urban and regional NSW.

Fig 2: Gender

Almost three quarters of participants were female. It is unclear what has driven the stronger female participation in the training, however it is noted that this is a common occurrence in training on social issues.

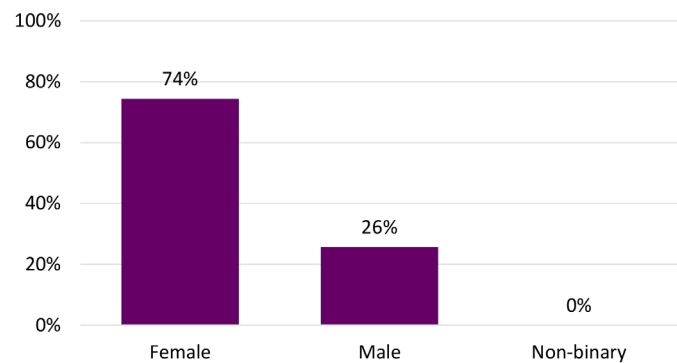


Fig 3: Age

Participants were aged between 14 and 21. More than half of all participants were aged under 18 (59%).

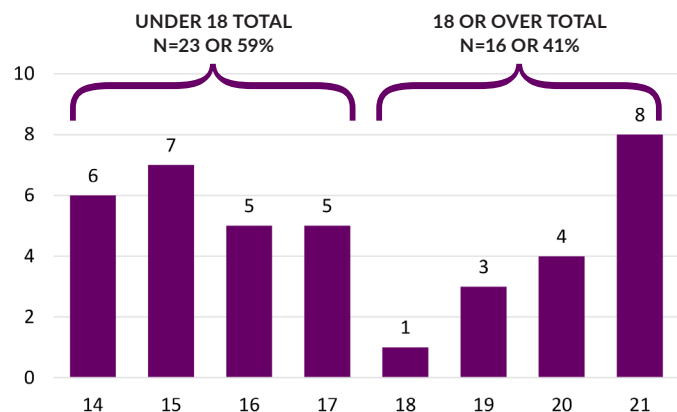


Fig 4: Location

Two thirds of participants joined from locations across Sydney (67%), and a third from locations across regional NSW (33%).

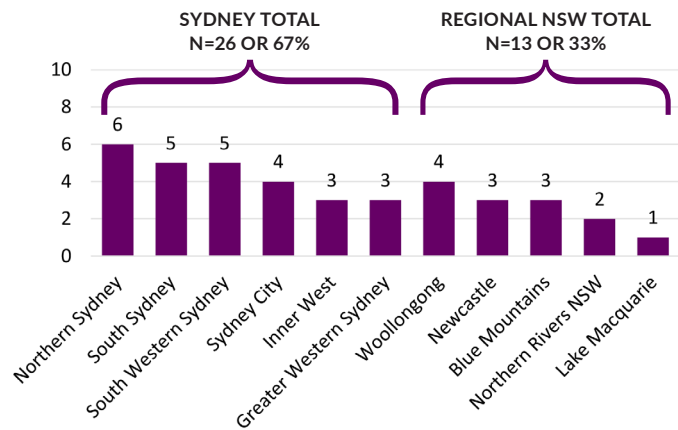


Fig 5: Cultural background

More than two in five participants spoke a language other than English at home.

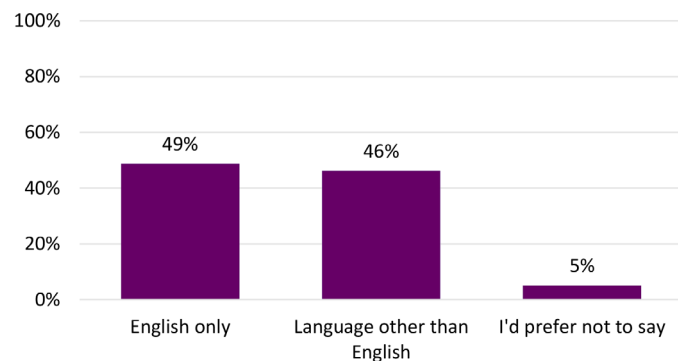
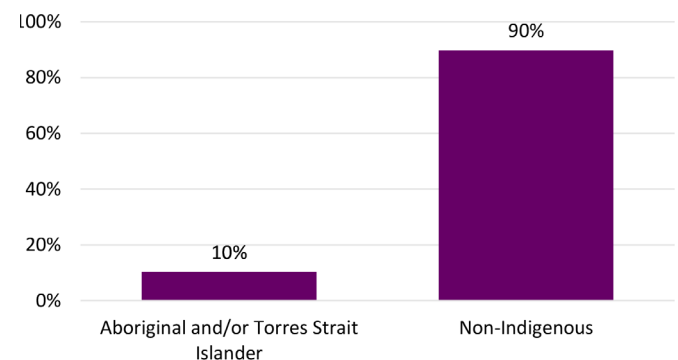


Fig 6: Indigenous status

One in ten participants identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.



Impact of Agent C – independent evaluation by Urbis

Methodology

As noted previously, All Together Now partnered with independent evaluator Urbis to assess the impact of the Agent C Project Pilot. The key steps involved in this process have included:

- Design of a Project Logic and Evaluation Framework to capture the intended outcomes of the Project Pilot and decide how these would be measured;
- Collection of participant registration information through a project data template;
- Development and distribution of a survey to all participants in the Project Pilot;
- Analysis and reporting of survey results.

The project logic outlined four key outcomes for Agent C, which have been used by Urbis as the basis for reporting on impact:

Outcome 1: Participants are equipped to reflect on their own identity, privilege and power

Outcome 2: Participants are equipped to engage more critically with media

Outcome 3: Participants are empowered to recognise and critically engage with fake news and conspiracy theories

Outcome 4: Participants have conversations within their social networks about fake news and conspiracy theories

On the following page are the results of the independent Urbis evaluation.

Please note that the survey results are based on feedback from the 34 participants who attended all three Agent C workshops. The five participants who attended one or two workshops have been excluded from the analysis for consistency.

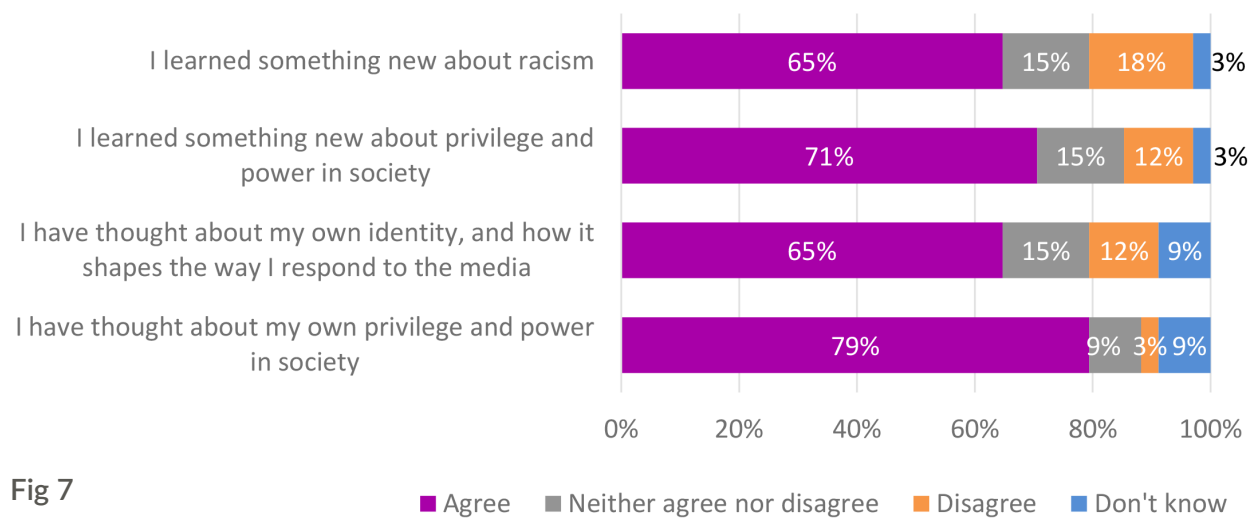
Outcome 1: Participants are equipped to reflect on their own identity, privilege and power

In line with its expertise as an anti-racism organisation, All Together Now incorporated content on identity, privilege and power within the Agent C syllabus. This content aimed to promote reflection from participants on their own identity, privilege and power.

Agent C has been successful in achieving this outcome, with 8 in 10 participants (79%) reporting they have thought about their privilege and power in society, either during or since taking part in the training. In addition, two thirds of participants have thought about their identity and how it shapes the way they respond to the media (65%).

The key learnings that have supported this reflective action have included learning something new about racism (65% of participants) and learning something new about privilege and power in society (71% of participants).

Qualitative feedback provided by participants suggests that, in addition to promoting self-reflection, Agent C has also been successful in helping some participants apply their learnings to generate a better understanding of other peoples' views and perspectives, using the framework of identity, privilege and power.



The biggest thing I learned was about how conspiracy theories negatively impact people. Especially relating to racism and social class.

I view the world now differently as I can first consider someone's life and experiences and how that influences their views on news and media.

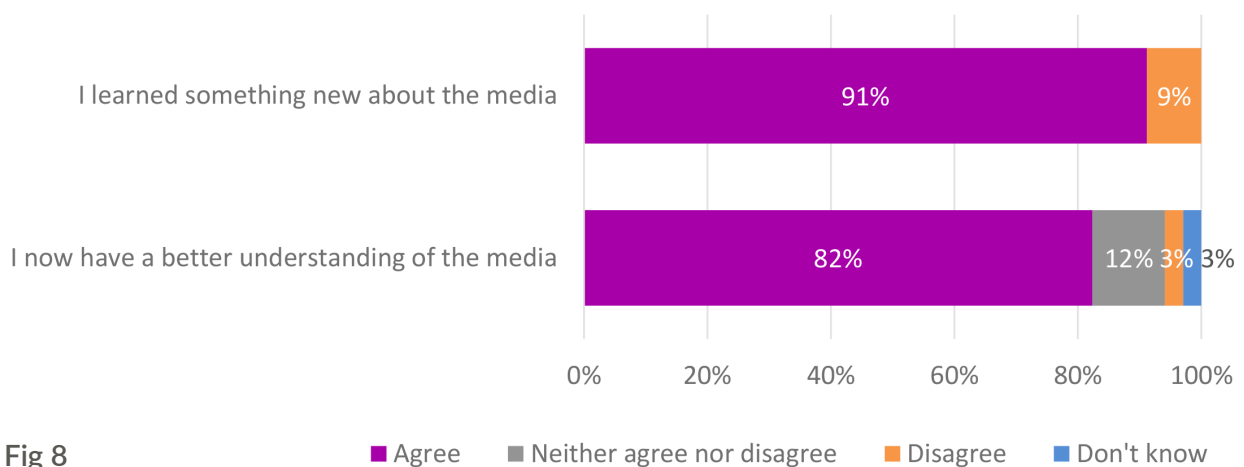
I have now a greater understanding of the minority and majority groups in society, allowing me to interpret and understand their point of views in a positive manner.

**Outcome 2:
Participants are equipped to engage
more critically with media**

Agent C was built around the concept of improving young peoples' understanding of the media, to ensure they would be able to engage more critically with the media.

Agent C has been successful in achieving this outcome, with 9 in 10 participants (91%) reporting they have learned something new about the media, and 8 in 10 participants (82%) reporting they now have a better understanding of the media.

Qualitative feedback provided by participants lends further weight to these findings, with some participants reporting they are now more aware of the content they are consuming, more able to identify content that is unreliable, and more able to protect themselves against unreliable content when engaging with media online.



I never really paid much attention to the websites I was using and gaining information from but now I find it so much easier.

I can now easily identify credible vs uncredible news stories and websites, something I wasn't comfortable doing before.

It made me feel safer with the internet and that I can better protect myself.

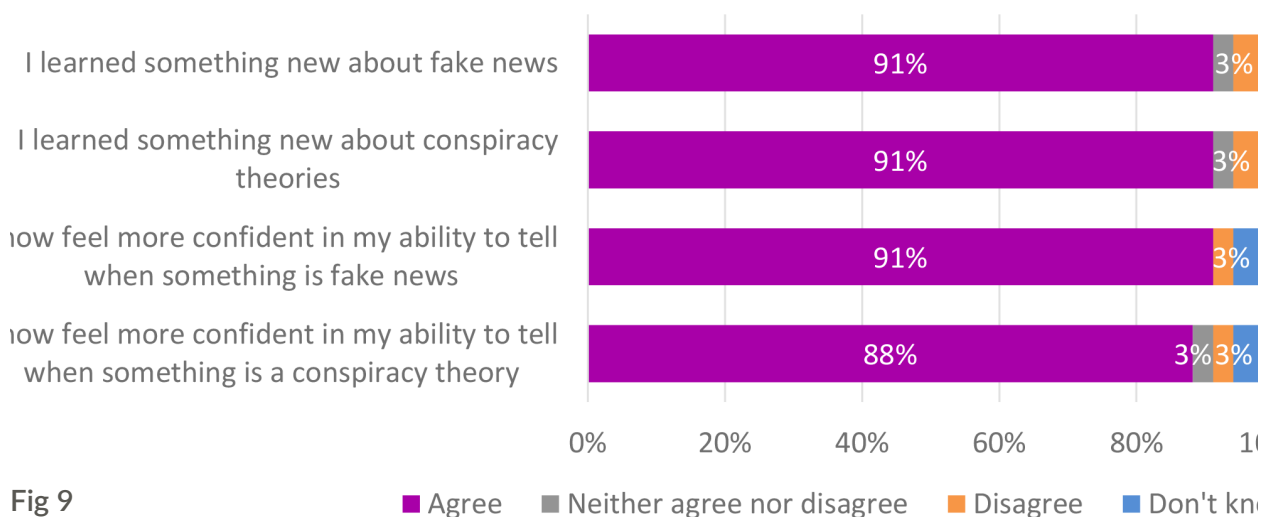
Outcome 3: Participants are empowered to recognise and critically engage with fake news and conspiracy theories

Further to improving general media engagement, Agent C aimed to, more specifically, empower young people to recognise fake news and conspiracy theories.

Agent C has been successful in achieving this outcome, with 9 in 10 participants (91%) reporting they now feel more confident in their ability to tell when something is fake news, and 8 in 10 participants (88%) reporting they now feel more confident in their ability to tell when something is a conspiracy theory.

It appears that this newfound confidence to recognise fake news and conspiracy theories has been achieved through sharing definitions and examples of these with participants. Most participants reported learning something new about both fake news (91%) and conspiracy theories (91%).

Qualitative feedback provided by participants confirms these findings, with some participants reporting they have learned specific skills to identify fake news and conspiracy theories, such as checking publishing details. The sense of empowerment felt by some participants is also evident in their reported sense of duty to educate others on the topic.



[I learned]...how to check whether something is fake news. Little things like checking the date, publisher and layout of the media. I was able to point out something was fake when a document was being circulated as an 'official government release' and point out the date it was published, grammar mistakes and looked up the title.

I feel that I have a responsibility to stop myself and others around me from being influenced negatively by this misinformation.

Outcome 4: Participants have conversations within their social networks about fake news and conspiracy theories

All Together Now wanted to increase the impact of Agent C by equipping young people with the skills and confidence to talk about their learnings with their friends and family.

Agent C has been successful in achieving this outcome, with 8 in 10 participants (88%) reporting they have learned new skills for talking about fake news and conspiracy theories, and 8 in 10 participants (85%) reporting they have already talked to friends and family about fake news and conspiracy theories.

Qualitative feedback provided by participants further highlights high levels of satisfaction with the content covering communication skills, thanks to the relevance and utility of these skills in their everyday lives. Combined with other learnings, some participants reported success in engaging with their friends and family on relevant topics such as vaccine hesitancy in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Much of the feedback focuses on a newfound ability to engage in a constructive way with empathy and respect.

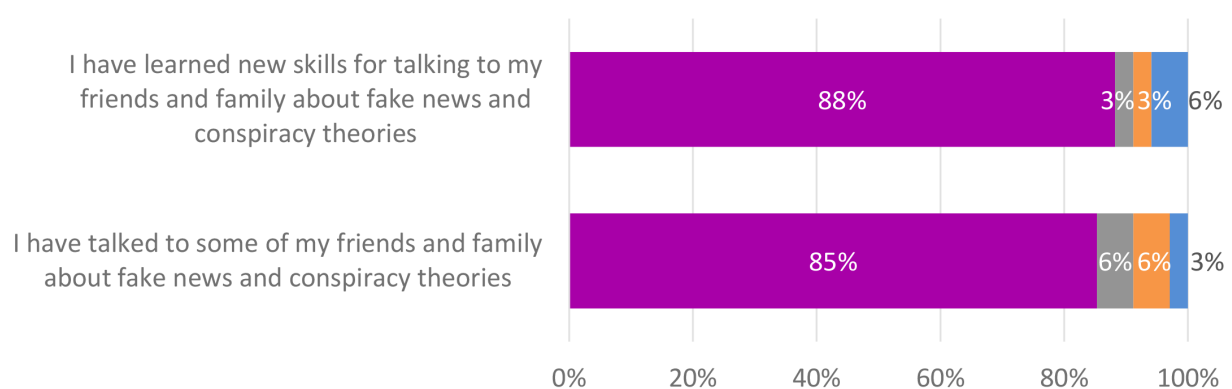


Fig 10

■ Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree ■ Don't know

I really found the practical skills useful, such as how to actually talk about conspiracy theories to people. It was really interesting learning about the different methods, and I have since been able to employ them when discussing vaccine hesitancy with my family.

Instead of letting conspiracy theories that reach my family slip, I've actually started productive conversations with my parents about it.

I've begun speaking with my friends and family who engage with internet rabbit holes to get a better insight into their perspective and question them in a respectful way.

Engagement

In addition to measuring the achievement of Agent C's four intended outcomes, the survey also measured participants' general engagement in the project.

Survey results demonstrated high levels of engagement, with 8 in 10 participants (88%) agreeing they were able to participate in discussions and 8 in 10 participants (88%) agreeing they met new people.

Qualitative feedback provided by participants highlighted some key success factors, such as the use of small group activities to promote discussion, the short length of the workshops being conducive to sustained engagement, and the structure of the syllabus allowing participants to progressively build their knowledge and skills.

Conclusion

In its independent evaluation report of the Agent C Project Pilot, Urbis concluded the following:

"Agent C has proven to be a highly impactful project. It has successfully achieved all four of its intended outcomes, through delivering highly topical and applied content to young people in an engaging way. In addition to its intended outcomes, it has helped some participants better understand other peoples' views and perspectives – a skill which they have been able to apply in their conversations with others about fake news and conspiracy theories."

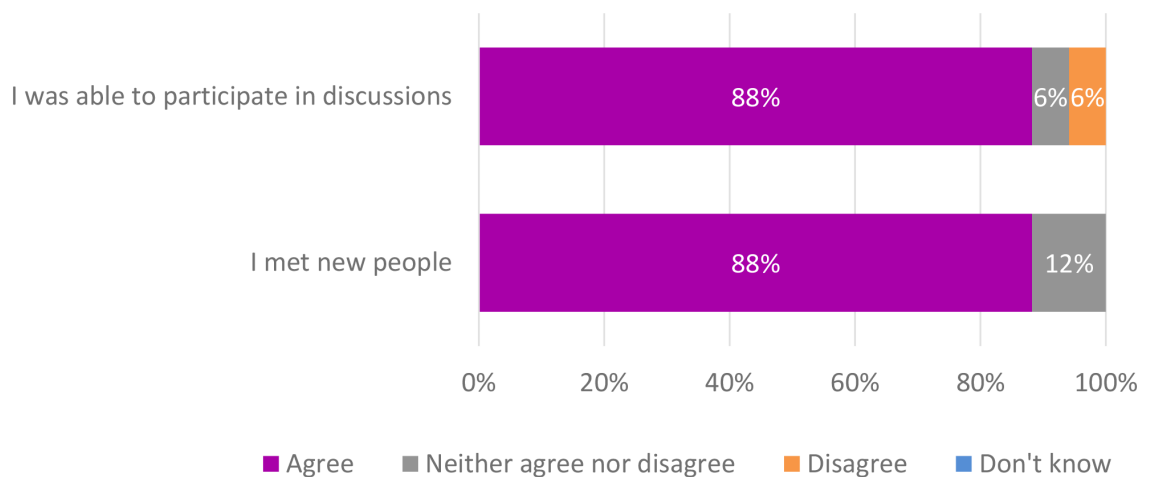


Fig 11

I think it was really good in how it was structured...the smaller groups made it easier to talk and communicate about things.

The workshops were not long, and were well suited to their time frame of one and a half hours. All information was relevant and was... suited to the progression of the program.

The future of Agent C

After the highly successful evaluation by Urbis, the Agent C Project was extended, receiving multi-year funding from Multicultural NSW under the COMPACT program. This funding will enable All Together Now and its project partners to scale up the project and roll out the Agent C training program to young people, schools and youth services throughout NSW until June 2024.

If you are a young person, school, or youth service and are interested in participating in the free Agent C program, please see our [Agent C webpage](#) for more information.

The Agent C Project is now more relevant than ever, as children and young people are increasingly vulnerable to engaging with the broad spectrum of online misinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories, including divisive and hateful forms. As we are rolling out the program throughout NSW, All Together Now is keeping the training package up to date with the latest developments, insights and examples regarding fake news and conspiracy theories. We are also continually improving the package based on direct feedback from participants.

All Together Now was very pleased with the results of the Agent C Project Pilot. The project team was especially pleased that the evaluation strongly indicated that the training program had equipped young people with the skills and confidence to not only identify fake news and conspiracy theories but also to talk about their learnings with their friends and family. With almost 9 in 10 participants reporting that they had learned new skills for talking about fake news and conspiracy theories and that they had actually already talked to their friends and/or family about fake news and conspiracy theories since participating in the program, All Together Now is very confident that the Agent C program can create real social impact and enhance community resilience against hateful misinformation.

All Together now is currently also building on its “Agent C” work and creating brand-new resources for teachers, educators, parents and frontline workers in Australia aimed at building their skills to recognise and respond to young people who are engaging with hateful misinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories. These resources will be available throughout 2023. If you want to be kept up to date about the new resources, please contact us via training@alltogethernow.org.au or subscribe to our [newsletter](#).

All Together Now is a racial equity organisation that seeks to educate Australians about racism. We are community driven, we utilise partnered approaches and our work is intersectional. For more information please see <https://alltogethernow.org.au>.