

Consolidated findings: Public attitudes to AI

Data Privacy, Data Centres
and Copyright

Prepared by Talbot Mills Research | July 2026



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Research sources

1. **August 2025** - focus groups – knowledge, use, pros/cons, regulation - four groups in metro Sydney & Melbourne (combined) and two groups in metro Perth.
2. **August 2025** – nationwide survey – usage, impact, concerns, regulation.
3. **January 2026** - nationwide survey – attitudes towards AI, trust, policy, regulation.
4. **May 2026** - focus groups – data centres and copyright - six online groups across outer-metro Sydney, Melbourne, and Perth.
5. **May 2026** – nationwide omnibus survey, n=1011 – attitudes toward data centres.
6. **June 2026** – focus groups – general attitudes, worker surveillance, copyright.

NB: Figures are rounded; totals are calculated before rounding.

58%

Reported using AI at either home or for work

63%

Felt that AI's pace was too high

51%

are positive about AI personally, but for society it's just

48%

Summary

Multiple phases of qualitative and quantitative research demonstrate that Australians are broadly cautious rather than hostile about AI.

They recognise its usefulness - and for some its potentially transformational impacts - but generally feel under-informed and short of control, with a clear majority seeking more regulation, with government as the default regulator.

On data sovereignty, support for keeping Australian data onshore and sovereign was consistently strong, driven mainly by preferences for data security and self-sufficiency - both heightened by the current geopolitical climate.

On infrastructure, building data centres in Australia drew broad support on the same security and sovereignty grounds, though people were more divided about having one in their own local area. Environmental concerns, mainly water and energy use, show early signs of hardening.

On copyright, there is majority support for a fair deal for Australian creators when their work is used to train AI, and a firm view that the companies profiting should pay, rather than taxpayers or users. Across focus groups, people were open to a fair and workable compromise rather than defending the current copyright system.

A common thread across all of these issues is government involvement in building trust. Government is expected to lead from the front and is considered most responsible for managing AI's risks – acting on harms through regulation, enforcing compliance, and overseeing data centres. Visible government action was itself seen to build trust in AI. While trust in government is not unqualified, industry was consistently seen as too conflicted to regulate itself, and there was support for independent expertise to inform the rules.

In many cases, awareness of these specific issues is still developing, but where the public does hold firm views, they tend to favour transparency, meaningful consent, and independent oversight.

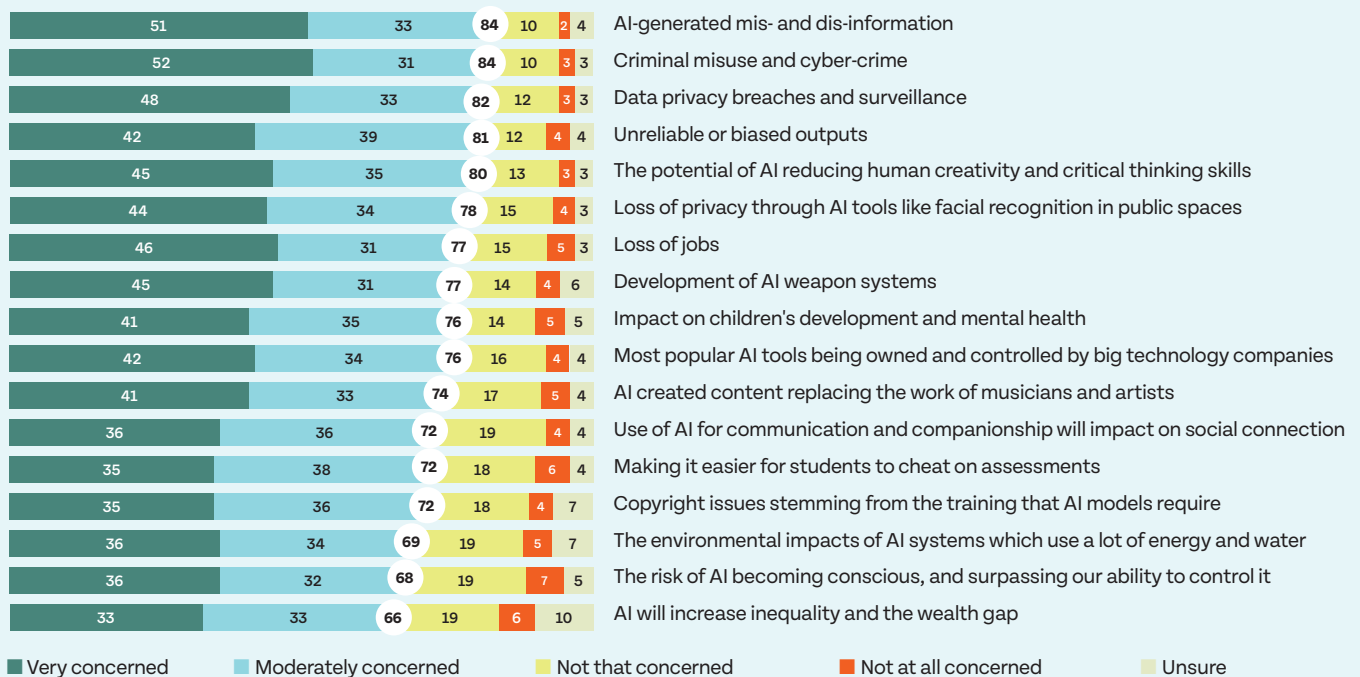
AI background

Australians recognise AI's potential but harbour considerable worries about the risks.

Fig.1 Concern about AI

How concerned are you about the following? (%)

Women and older respondents were more likely to express concern across the board.

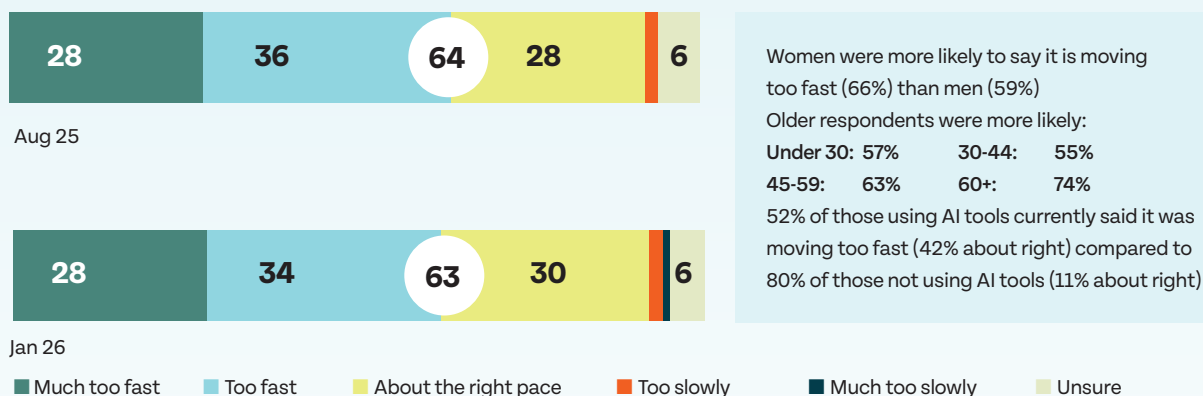


Base: Australian adults (n=2,010, Jan-26)

Relatedly, a clear majority express significant concern around the pace of change.

Fig.2 Pace of AI

Do you feel that the introduction of AI is moving too fast, too slow, or is going at about the right pace? (%)



Base: Australian adults (n=2,010, Jan-26)

Women were more likely to say it is moving too fast (66%) than men (59%)

Older respondents were more likely:

Under 30:	57%	30-44:	55%
45-59:	63%	60+:	74%

52% of those using AI tools currently said it was moving too fast (42% about right) compared to 80% of those not using AI tools (11% about right)

AI background

As a result, sentiment appears to be moving in the direction of a desire for stronger regulation.

In focus groups there are increasing calls for more urgency, and a view that Australia could be at risk of things getting away on it.

Awareness of particular challenges around AI transparency, consent, copyright, and data centres is still developing but this suite of issues is clearly in play.

In terms of high-level quantitative findings:

58% now report using AI at either home or for work, rising to 77% of under-30s.

46% said risks outweighed benefits, while 33% said benefits outweighed risks, while 21% are unsure.

A narrow majority (51%) had a positive personal view of AI and just under half (48%) a positive view of its societal impact.

63% felt AI's pace was too fast, compared to 30% who said about right.

On unprompted benefits and concerns people cite: efficiency, information access, and time saving up against job displacement, mis/dis-information, and privacy issues.

In focus groups the two additional risks that come up reliably are erosion of critical thinking skills, and risks to children - with the increasing acknowledgement of the harms of social media seemingly a factor driving this.

When asked to choose between minimal, balanced or strict rules governing AI, 53% now say balanced, down 8% on August 2025 - with the movement mostly towards "strict" rules (up from 28% to 36%).

When presented with a binary choice an increasing number support strict AI regulation, (now 69%, up 5% from August 2025).

Fig.3 Strict vs balanced vs minimal rules

Out of the following, which is your preferred approach for Australia to take to regulate AI?



Aug 25



Jan 26

■ Strict rules that limit risk, even if it slows innovation
 ■ A balanced approach – clear rules to protect people, but still allow innovation
■ Minimal rules – let the market decide and only regulate if issues arise
 ■ Unsure

Base: Australian adults (n=2,010, Jan-26)

Younger respondents were more likely to say balanced:
 Under 30: 56%
 30-44: 62%
 45-59: 50%
 60+: 47%
 As were those who use AI currently (66%).

In terms of who should be responsible, opinion is somewhat spread, but the dominant single entity is still the government.

9%

Awareness of the National AI Plan and AI Safety Institute is currently low

57%

Believe the AI Safety Institute will be effective

54%

Believe the National AI Plan will be effective

“I think it would have to be the government.

I mean, I know that there’s a lack of trust there, but ultimately, I think I would distrust individual corporations more.”

Female, Sydney

“Industry are going to push it as far as they can...

so I think the government sort of has to regulate it. Industry have vested interests, so they’ll lead it whichever way they want.”

Male, Perth

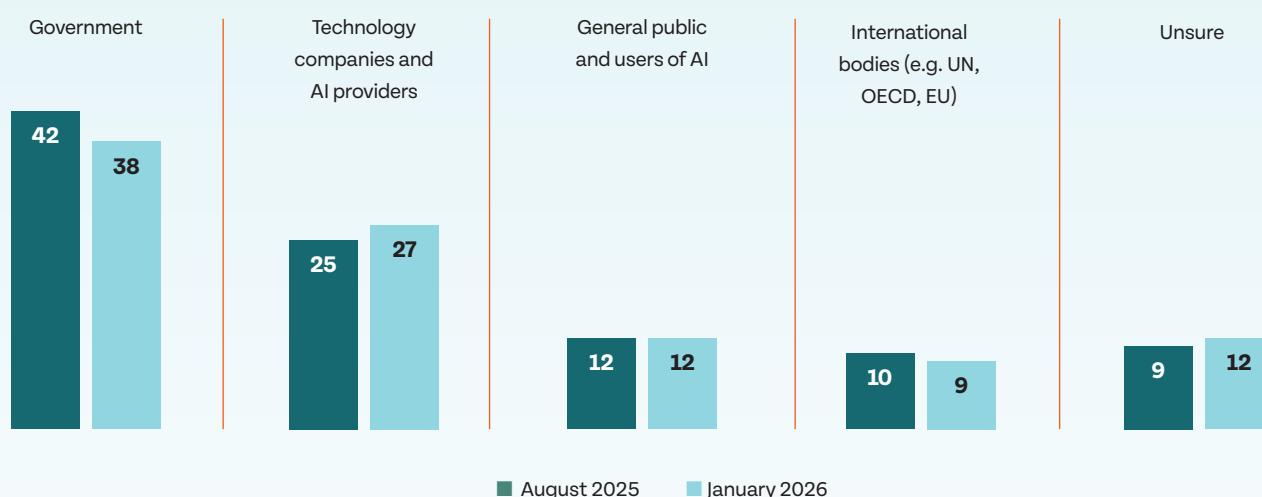
“I think the government might be too slow to be able to keep up

with the way that it’s changing. But I also agree, they probably are the only people that can manage it.”

Female, Perth

Fig.4 Responsibility for managing risks

Who should be most responsible for managing the risks of AI? (%)



Base: Australian adults (n=2,010, Jan-26)

Privacy, data-use, consent, transparency

Protection of personal data and misuse of data was the most universally chosen trust measure across every focus group in May 2026, though in discussion it's often evident that people are treating these issues as deeply connected.

People gave concrete fears (eg. medical data stolen and sold to insurers to affect premiums) and flagged that AI systems concentrate sensitive data, making them high-value cyber targets.

Some had clearly thought about this issue previously and could articulate concerns in considerable detail. For some the issue of data sovereignty arose unprompted and several flagged worries about where their data is stored.

The June 2026 qualitative work added further depth in workplace contexts specifically. There was generally high comfort with AI as a work tool, but this dropped precipitously when it was

connected to the monitoring of workers. In these situations consent was consistently seen as necessary but not sufficient to allay concerns.

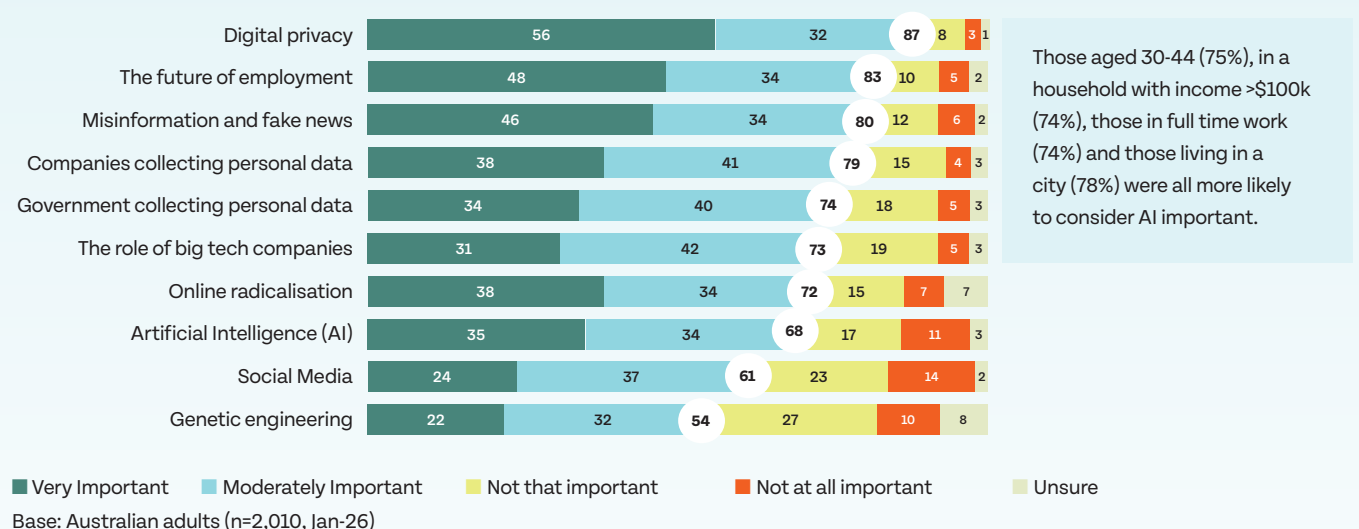
A dominant theme was what amounts to coerced consent. Many argued that agreeing to monitoring in order to keep an existing job is not a truly free choice, as the balance of power sits with the employer, and several drew a direct parallel with COVID vaccine mandates and people who had lost their jobs for non-compliance.

“There’s consent, and then there’s, you know, consent.”

Fig.5 Importance on issues

Initially tested separately from AI, “digital privacy” quickly attaches to it in qualitative discussions.

How important to you personally are the following issues? (%)



Concerns about unequal understanding and vulnerability were more prominent among female participants, who noted that age, language barriers, and job insecurity can deepen the power imbalance and disadvantage some workers, including recent migrants. Even where consent was freely given, there was broad agreement that some practices, such as in-home audio recording and always-on screen viewing, should remain off-limits regardless of what is formally agreed.

Across all of the discussions, risks to children were often the most emotionally charged of the territories covered. Concerns centred on children's exposure to inappropriate content, their susceptibility to manipulation, and the risk of substituting AI relationships for genuine human connection. Kids chatting to bots rather than real people was a recurring worry, as was bullying and grooming: "it's just another danger we've got to deal with".

On transparency, "transparency when AI is used in decision-making by businesses or government" was a top-tier trust measure, with people citing "Robodebt" and asserting "I don't necessarily mind if they use it, but I'd mind if they didn't tell me".

Clear labelling of AI-generated content also ranked highly, tied to misinformation and deepfake worries. Many chose this measure as a means of reducing misinformation. Participants wanted to know if what they were looking at especially on social media, in advertising, and in political contexts - was real. Several had noticed AI-generated content seeping into their feeds and found it unsettling that it was difficult to identify. Particular concern was expressed in relation to vulnerable communities like the elderly and children.

"I like the idea of having data centres in Australia so that our data's not going overseas..."

because overseas will have different privacy laws to Australia, so they have to abide by our privacy regulations."

Male, Sydney

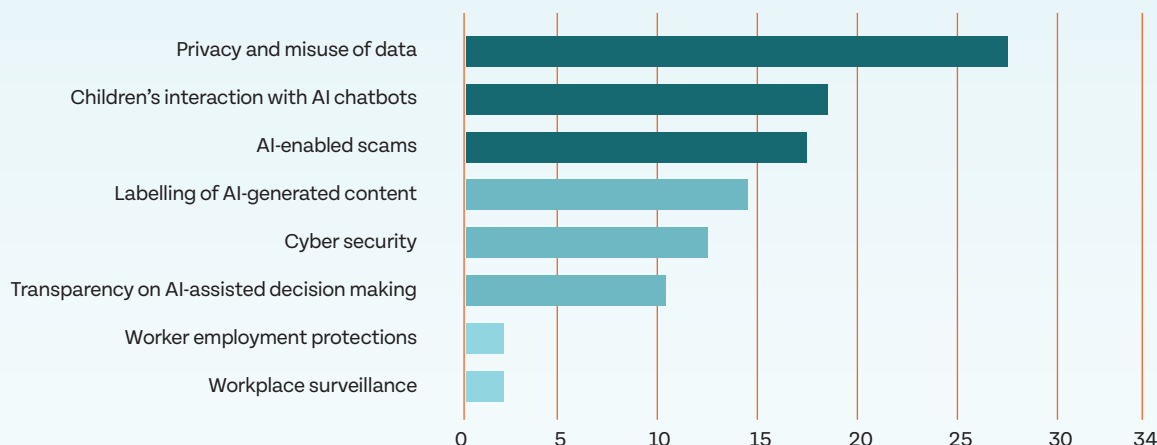
87%

Say digital privacy is important – the top-rated issue tested

Fig.6 Top three areas for practical action and safeguards

(count of respondents, n = 34)

Respondents were shown the following measures in May 2026 focus groups and asked to choose the top three areas where they felt action and safeguards would increase their trust in AI.



Data centres

Awareness and favourability

Quantitative results from May 2026 indicate that public awareness of “data centres” is modest. 55% said that they knew what they were. 35% said they didn’t, and 9% were unsure.

Opinion towards them was divided, and with high ‘unsures’, but leant positive.

40% declared having a favourable view (though only 8% said “very favourable”), and 33% an unfavourable view (13% “very unfavourable”). Over a quarter (27%) were unsure suggesting as an issue it’s fairly open.

This modest polarisation was also evident in the answers to questions on perceived importance and impact.

68% agreed that they’re important for big tech companies, but less for regular people, and 62% that they come with significant environmental downsides.

Nevertheless, majorities also agreed that they’re important for driving economic growth (53%) and are important to our daily lives (51%).

Continuing the trend, opinion was divided on whether they’d be favoured locally, with 37% supporting a data centre being built in their local area, and 40% in opposition. Again, those who said “unsure” was fairly high on 24%.

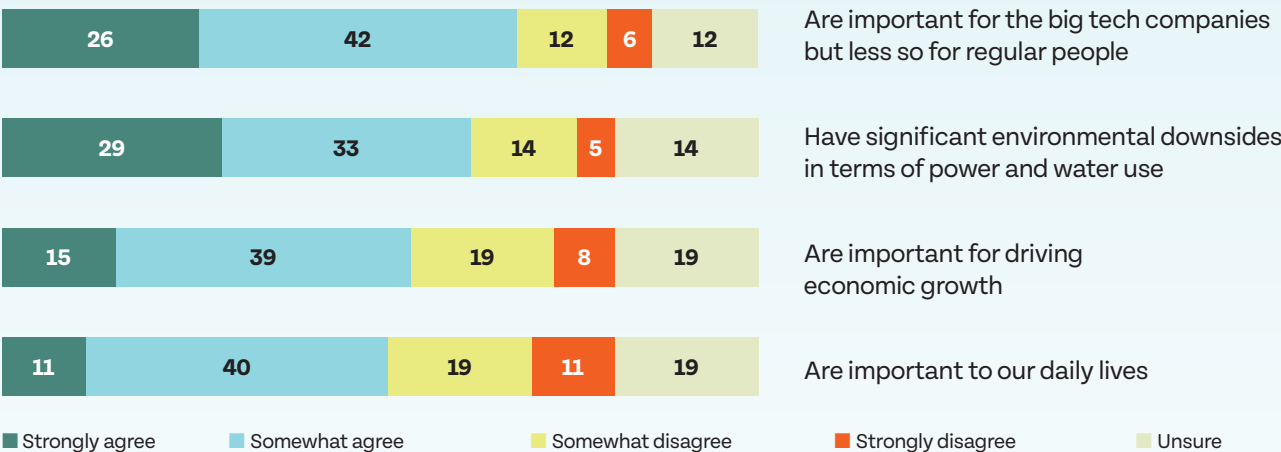
Support tended to decrease with age and distance from inner metro areas. Men were much more strongly supportive than women (48% vs 26%).

These quantitative findings were largely mirrored in May 2026 focus groups where knowledge of data centres was sketchy. Many confessed to being largely unaware of their scale or purpose across all six groups.

Again, consistent with the survey data, amongst those aware of data centres views were mixed.

Fig.7 Perceptions of data centre importance and impact

How strongly do you agree or disagree that data centres: (%)



Base: Australian adults (n=1,011, May-26)

Some were concerned about the scale and environmental impacts, while others appreciated the assumed economic benefits making the argument that data centres represent crucial infrastructure that supports our technology industry. There was also a bit of uncertainty about who the ultimate beneficiaries might be.

While environmental concerns were evident, they were relatively muted.

Younger respondents appeared to have more awareness of the potential environmental impacts of data centres, and there were scattered – but quite vocal – concerns raised. Many were hearing of environmental concerns for the first time.

These concerns mostly centred on water and power use, though a handful of more informed respondents cited overseas examples of data centres generating light pollution, noise, and smells that negatively impacted local residents.

Advocates didn't see these effects as confined to data centres though, and several thought issues could be largely mitigated by water recycling and a focus on renewable energy.

While not a flashpoint yet, there were indications that support could erode fairly quickly as environmental concerns become more tangible. In the June 2026 focus groups covering similar territory, though not in as much detail, environmental concerns arose spontaneously in opening discussion, which we hadn't seen before.

There was no awareness of existing rules governing construction and operation of data centres, but on prompting these were seen as prudent measures.

Without more detail though, not all would see such rules as having a positive environmental impact. Some assumed rules would relate more to planning and community impacts than environment.

53%

Believe data centres
are important for
economic growth

"I hope in 5 years' time it turns out that there's not three multi-billionaires who own all the data centres, making all the profit.

It'd be nice if the public got some benefit from the profits of them."

Male, Sydney

62%

Believe data centres
come with significant
environmental
downsides

"I didn't understand that there would be such environmental impacts.

I just didn't think about that."

Female, Metro Perth

40%

Oppose a data
centre being built in
their local area

Data centres, sovereignty and communities

When shown the following condition, most felt this was a reasonable start, but it was often criticised as ‘too vague’: *“Data centres and AI infrastructure operators to underwrite new renewable power supply, pay their full share of new grid connectivity so costs are not passed to consumers or businesses, and support Australia’s energy transition...”*

Despite some niggles, there was generally strong and consistent support across all groups for data centres to be built in Australia.

This was mainly on the basis of being able to keep our data secure and the ability to be self-sufficient/sovereign. The current global situation potentially heightens this concern with China and Russia both mentioned in discussion.

While not a widespread view a few felt that Australian-based data centres could also support Australian-specific AI innovation.

The security and sovereignty case resonated far more strongly than the argument that, without local data centres, Australia might miss out on the full benefits of AI or be left with inferior tools. That claim did not generally land. Limited knowledge was a barrier, and even when the mechanics were talked through, many remained sceptical.

Government involvement in regulation was broadly expected. While overall trust was fairly low, most felt the industry would be too biased. There was also support for an independent expert body.

Decisions around the location of data centres were seen as rightly involving all levels of government. The Federal government was thought to need to oversee an overall technology strategy, while the State and Local governments were key to ensure data centres were put in locations that were least detrimental to local communities.

“It sounds kind of infrastructure-y and something that doesn’t need to be left entirely in the hands of business.

It sounds like the kind of thing the government could get involved in.”

Male, Sydney

“If that data is stored offshore, say it’s in China somewhere, that data centre is regulated by the Chinese government, which means if our data is being held over there, our government basically has no real control over what’s happening with it.”

Male, Melbourne

Copyright issues and the creative industries

While it didn't top the list, there was significant concern expressed about threats to the creative industries posed by AI (Fig. 1, January 2026).

72% said they were concerned about copyright issues stemming from AI training, and 74% that AI-created content might replace the work of musicians and artists.

While close, both of these rated higher than environmental impacts (69%).

Focus groups conducted in May 2026 strongly supported a fair deal for artists and creators when their work trains AI. There was sympathy for local creatives specifically.

A majority backed AI companies paying licensing fees in Australia, reasoning that these are profit-making businesses using creators' work and should compensate them.

"They're definitely going to be profiting off of it,

one way or another, so it should be the same as me buying a book."

Male, Sydney

72%

Are concerned by copyright issues stemming from AI training

"I think copyright licences should be paid for,

because it's protecting intellectual property that's been developed by (Australian) individuals."

Female, Melbourne

A hypothetical proposal, modelled on radio, with a capped fee distributed to artists was the standout and seen across all six groups as a fair compromise that still keeps Australia attractive to investors while getting money to creators. On this, several participants cited Spotify as their own intuitive parallel.

"What would possess someone to want to go out and make their own music if it's just going to be copied?"

Male, Melbourne

74%

Are concerned that AI created content might replace artists' work

Copyright issues and the creative industries

On the potential loss of investment in Australia, a few were concerned but many felt that it wouldn't make a difference. In support of this view there were occasional references to 'business as usual' behaviour from Google around licensing news content.

"I'm unlikely to sympathise with a huge company saying:

'we're going to make a little bit less money, so we're going to throw the baby out with the bathwater' - They never do."

Male, Sydney

On prompting, there was no particular appetite to soften copyright laws or regulation to encourage investment.

The baseline sentiment around big AI/tech companies was somewhat negative with a general view they tend to attempt to evade regulation. A handful of (mostly male) respondents were more aggressively pro-investment, making the somewhat defeatist case that because tech companies would simply "get around" regulation it was best to favour investment incentives.

The "status quo" option discussed with respondents, where training is done offshore and Australian rights holders go uncompensated was the trickiest territory. Many found it abstract and struggled to engage with the distinction between where training occurs and who bears the cost.

Awareness of the issues surrounding copyright looks to be on the rise.

In the June 2026 focus groups awareness of AI being trained on creative work without permission or payment was moderate, with at least half of each group having heard of it. Opinion also tended to be expressed a bit more sharply:

"These poor creative people who've spent years on their work ... just to get ripped off by AI... it's not fair whatsoever".

When asked who participants thought should pay creators, again, the clear answer was the companies that profit, not taxpayers or users directly, though some people accepted that costs might flow through to subscribers. The Spotify model and the news-media bargaining code came up unprompted as proof that payment systems can be built.

Much of the tension appeared to be around the mechanism and enforcement procedures including how to calculate a fair payment when any one creator's work is a tiny part of the training, how to define and police training versus creating, and how to enforce anything against companies that operate offshore.

"Who monitors that? Who's the arbitrator? Most of these companies are offshore".

"An AI model uses probably ... hundreds of thousands of sources ... would these creators get, like, one cent?"

These concerns weren't fatal. People landed on the need for compensation, but needed more detail and reassurance as to what might be workable.



Consolidated findings: Public attitudes to AI



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