The Future of Public Interest Journalism

IRCA Submission to the Select Committee of the Australian Senate

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1. Background

1.1 About the Indigenous Remote Communications Association

The Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) is the peak body for Indigenous media and communications. It was founded in 2001 as the peak body for remote Indigenous media and communications. In late 2016 it transitioned to the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander broadcasting, media and communications.

Up to 105 Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services (RIBS), 33 additional licensed retransmission sites across Australia, 8 Remote Indigenous Media Organisations (RIMOs) and 28 urban and regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander radio services are eligible for representation by IRCA.

1.2 About the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander broadcasting and media sector

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander broadcasters are not-for-profit community organisations providing a primary and essential service to their communities. They reach nearly 50% of the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, but are prevented from providing a primary radio service to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples due to a lack of funding.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander broadcasters and media producers also connect non-Indigenous communities with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture, developing greater understanding and building stronger relationships.

The sector:

- Comprises:
    - Radio services able to reach around 320,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons, including around 100,000 very hard to reach people in remote Indigenous communities, or approximately 47% of the Australian

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.

  - A regional satellite TV service reaching 240,000 remote households and a free to air national TV service.
  - Over 230 radio broadcast sites across Australia.

- Is a multimillion dollar industry with over 35 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community owned and managed not for profit media organisations.
- Holds the capacity to be a preferred supplier for all government messaging to our communities.
- Is the most relevant and appropriate service with the highest listenership, community engagement and local ownership of all media services.
- Is delivered in the first language of many remote peoples.
- In remote communities, is the most reliable and ubiquitous radio and media services.

2. Disclaimer

This submission is made by the Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) in its own right. It is expected that some radio services. RIBS and RIMOs will make individual submissions in which case the IRCA Submission should not be taken to displace those submissions.

In the media

Racism looks like: When different racial groups are shown in an unfair or negative way on news reports, when media commentators make wild or inaccurate statements about people from a particular racial background or when people from different racial backgrounds don't get included in TV shows.

Racism It Stops With Me. Australian Human Rights Commission. https://itstopswithme.humanrights.gov.au/resources/what-you-say-matters/where-does-racism-happen

3 Submission

3.1 Summary of IRCA position

This submission focuses on the Inquiry's community broadcasting Terms of Reference: "the future of public and community broadcasters in delivering public interest journalism, particularly in underserviced markets like regional Australia, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities."

The Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA) submits that **any consideration of "public interest journalism" must include the need, in a democratic society, for a diversity of media that provides a full range of news, comment and opinions from mainstream and minority groups**. The role of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community media sector (radio, TV and print) is a critical component of that diversity within the Australian media landscape.

Furthermore, the way in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues are represented in mainstream media is of vital "public interest" concern to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Their representation in mainstream media directly impacts on the development and implementation of government Indigenous policy[1]. It is often problematic, focusing on the "problem of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples" rather than

[1] Kerry McCallum (ed). 2012. The media and Indigenous policy: how news media reporting and mediatized practice impact on Indigenous policy. p4. Available at http://www.canberra.edu.au/about-uc/faculties/arts-design/attachments2/pdf/MIP-Report_Combined_Final.pdf

addressing the many successes as well as the structural inequalities arising from dispossession that underpin the so-called "problem". Where there is an impetus to report more effectively on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander matters, there can be barriers to mainstream media in reaching many communities, and if reached, in managing cultural and language differences in the short time frames of the modern media news cycle.

For such reasons, it is clearly in the public interest of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media continues to be supported by the Australian Government at levels that allow for its maintenance at the required operational levels, and its development into new and emerging technologies of production and distribution.

3.2 Public Interest Journalism and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media industry

The representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian media is a contested one with a long history of misrepresentation. The Australian Press Council, with regards to its Advisory Guideline on Reporting of Race, notes that "*The Australian Press Council often receives complaints about the reporting of the race, colour, ethnicity and nationality of individuals or groups, and these raise important questions about the responsibility of the press in our multicultural society. … In the Council's view, in general, the press needs to show more sensitivity in reporting issues when minority groups are perceived in the community to be more "different" or when they are the subject of particular public debate.*[2]"

IRCA fully agrees with the Press Council's statement on the need for more sensitivity in reporting on minority groups. A study of Indigenous policy development and its intersection with mainstream media reporting found that:

[2] http://www.presscouncil.org.au/document-search/guideline-reporting-of-race/?LocatorGroupID=662&LocatorFormID=677&FromSearch=1

- "Between 1988 and 2008, Australia's news media paid **very selective attention to Indigenous policy issues, unless they were the site of controversy or politically salient**.
- Indigenous broadcasting policy received virtually no public attention, while health and bilingual education received occasional intense media attention. Newspaper journalists told the story of Indigenous health policy **through a small number of routine and predictable news frames.[3]"**

The study also noted that "Reporting Indigenous affairs is a complex and difficult sub-field of journalism. Journalists faced a range of barriers that impeded their ability to report on the *full range of Indigenous voices and experiences*."

In this context IRCA draws attention to the vital role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander broadcasting in providing balanced and culturally specific media. IRCA asserts that public interest journalism must include the "full range of Indigenous media voices" in both mainstream as well as in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander radio, TV and print media.

Inclusion at the levels required can only be achieved through advancing an effective Indigenous broadcasting policy that addresses proper funding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media organisations as well as the training and employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media producers and journalists.

However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander broadcasters and media producers have been working in a policy environment that dates back to 1993. Despite numerous reviews the Australian Government has not worked with the sector to produce a policy that takes into account the many changes in technologies, platforms and community needs that have occurred over the last two decades. Funding has stood still, with no CPI increases to address rising costs of delivery or address capital and infrastructure refurbishment and replacement needs.

[3] Kerry McCallum (ed). 2012. The media and Indigenous policy: how news media reporting and mediatized practice impact on Indigenous policy. p.vii. Available at http://www.canberra.edu.au/about-uc/faculties/arts-design/attachments2/pdf/MIP-Report_Combined_Final.pdf

3.3 The role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media

McNair Ingenuity Research in partnership with IRCA conducted a survey in 2016[4] in very remote Indigenous communities about their media behaviours and preferences. That survey showed that remote Indigenous community radio was highly valued for its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and language role. It showed that remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media organisations operate as an important intermediary in the provision of news.

In contrast to the frequent poor representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in mainstream media, remote radio was highly valued for its positive representation as well as for it's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander focus.

Top 6 reasons for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander listenership of remote Indigenous radio	
1	For positive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories 77%
2	Hearing about own people and community 67%
3	For the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander focus in programs and news 56%
4	Hearing people talk in own language 56%
5	Supports local employment 51%
6	Feel proud when listening 51%

4. Conclusion

IRCA asserts that public interest journalism cannot be considered in general. The public interest of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples and communities has not historically been well served by sections of the mainstream media.

Public interest journalism must take into account the need for a diversity of news, views, comments and opinions. Effective policy and funding is needed to advance the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community broadcasters and print media as a vital part of the diversity of Australian media.

[4] 2016 Remote Indigenous Communications and Media Survey. Available from IRCA. E manager@irca.net.au

The public interest of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as well as that of non-Indigenous communities will be better served by a properly funded, robust and skilled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community media sector.

Daniel Featherstone
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