

SUBMISSION TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON FUTURE OF PUBLIC INTEREST JOURNALISM

From the Civic Impact of Journalism Project

Centre for Advancing Journalism, University of Melbourne

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Introduction

The Civic Impact of Journalism research project has since 2015 been studying the issue of the impact of journalism on civil society, and how this is changing.

The team, which is detailed on the cover sheet to this submission, welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Select Committee. We feel our research should assist the committee in addressing its terms of reference, particularly 1 (a), (c) and (f).

Work is still underway. Not all of our results have been published, with papers still in preparation. A book is also being written.

To assist the committee, we provide here a brief background to the project, a summary of our findings, and include as attachments work published so far, which include more detailed explanations of our methodology, an article of our findings written for *The Guardian in Australia*, and scholarly papers and other publications detailing particulars of our case studies and other work.

About the Civic Impact of Journalism Project

Journalism faces an existential threat as a result of the digital revolution. In Australia, nearly 3000 jobs in journalism have been lost from traditional news media organisations as the advertising revenue that supports journalism flows away to online platforms.

At the same time, online news platforms have neither the resources nor expertise to take up the work that the traditional media are relied upon to do. What is at stake for democratic societies in this state of affairs?

An essential step in answering that question is to assess the impact of journalism on civic life. What is it that journalism brings to civic life? What is at risk?

The functions journalism is expected to perform in democratic societies have been established and recognised for at least 70 years:

- to keep the public up to date with what is going on in the world
- to provide the public with reliable information on which they may base choices as participants in political, economic and social life
- to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and opinions, to be a watchdog on those in power
- to help societies understand themselves
- to provide the material upon which members of a society can base a common conversation
- These functions all contribute to the working of capitalist democracies.

In the light of the fragmentation of public discourse brought about by the well-documented echo-chamber effect of social media, which is now a major source of news for many people, a further function can be added: to provide the information and forum for a common conversation among members of the community.

It is one thing to list these functions, however, and another to test whether and how journalism discharges them. Only by doing that will it be possible to assess what really is at stake for society if journalism becomes attenuated.

Over the two years 2015-16, a team of researchers assembled under the aegis of the Centre for Advancing Journalism at The University of Melbourne designed and carried out research under a project called the Civic Impact of Journalism.

Journalism is really a number of different kinds of activity, and it is nearly always operating in a complex web of causation. It's not often that a clear line can be drawn between a particular news report and a social outcome. There are always other factors to consider.

Attempts to measure impact, largely conducted by journalists and media outlets, have foundered on these difficulties.

It is possible to measure how many people saw a piece of news content, but a moment's thought tells us that this is not all we mean by impact. If the item is a piece of light entertainment, quickly forgotten, then the fact that it was seen by many hardly matters.

On the other hand, a long form piece of investigative journalism might be read by very few people, but if they have the power to make decisions and changes, then the impact may be very great – for example, a Royal Commission.

Our project defined three different kinds of impact.

- Relational – how other institutions such as governments, NGOs and businesses respond to journalism.
- Engagement – action taken by individuals as a result of journalism – assessed on a sliding scale from sharing or discussing with others through to protest, letter writing and campaigning
- Reach – both raw audience numbers, and the different groups within the audience, from general public through to leaders and the powerful.

With this in mind, we examined five different kinds of journalistic activity: investigative; campaigning; journalism that reports on public institutions such as courts and parliaments and local councils; reportage and commentary and opinion. These are further explained and defined in our paper in *Journalism Studies*, which is attached.

Finally, we chose sites and types of journalistic activity for study.

The research was empirical, designed to find out what the real impact of journalism is. It was based on case studies, some of which were based on the functions of journalism mentioned earlier, and some based on how journalism worked in three diverse community settings.

The investigative study tells how Joanne McCarthy of *The Newcastle Morning Herald* - and the newspaper itself - revealed the cover-up of child sexual abuse by the Catholic Church in the Hunter Valley. It shows the direct connection between that work and the establishment of the royal commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse

The campaigning case studies tells first of the War on 1034 road-safety campaign by the Melbourne *Herald*, which created the political climate in which the Victorian Government was able to implement a series of crucial law reforms, specifically the compulsory wearing of seat belts and the use of random breath tests to counter drink-driving.

Another study focusses on the *Herald Sun's* Take a Stand Campaign, which was part of the context for the establishment of a Royal Commission on Domestic Violence in Victoria.

The civic-forum reportage case study examines the decline in reportage of the County and Supreme Courts in Victoria and the effect on the workings of the courts and the operation of open justice.

The three place-based case studies were carried out in Moree, Byron Bay and Broadmeadows, each of which has a civic history or social characteristics that enabled the researchers see with reasonable clarity the role journalism plays in the civic life of those places.

We also examined use of new media by Indigenous Australians as an example of the efficacy of new media in bringing new voices to light.

These case studies lead to some important conclusions about what journalism brings to civic society. They also identify emerging deficits that are likely to weaken Australian democracy if neglected.

Summary of Findings

Journalism matters in different ways and in different contexts. It matters both because of the long-term cumulative effect of the activity – the presence of reporters in court and local government for example – and because of particular acts of campaigning and investigative revelation.

So far at least, our research suggests it is not investigative journalism that is most at risk. Rather, it is what was once called the “journal of record” functions – the continuous work of covering parliaments, courts and local governments – that has suffered most, and particularly in rural and regional areas.

Journal of Record – Court Reporting

A reduction in the numbers and experience levels of court reporters in Melbourne has led to a perception among the judiciary that courts are less thoroughly and accurately reported. This has resulted in:

- More suppression orders being issued,
- A near total lack of reporting in suburban magistrate’s courts
- A great reduction in the reporting of civil cases
- Increasing investment by the courts in information officers and infrastructure devoted to providing information to the public and to journalists, in an attempt to address emerging areas of information deficit and their impact on open justice.

Local Journalism

Local media has been denuded of staff, and are no longer able to carry out “shoe leather” reporting of police, courts and local government, depending instead on media releases and the public relations officers. Local reporters have become news takers rather than news makers.

In suburban and edge of urban areas, community groups, local governments and local police are using social media to fill gaps, and some of these activities and outlets have become valuable parts of local news ecologies. This can empower individuals and community organisations, but does not fill all the gaps that have resulted from the exodus in local media.

In rural and remote Australia, on the other hand, traditional local media still plays a vital role in community life. New media has made little or no impact on its role. Court reporting, reporting of local government and community activities is greatly reduced.

Campaigning Journalism and Social Change

Campaigning journalism is an important part of how society makes changes. It is usually provoked and informed by longer term work by social activists, politicians and others. It acts to amplify issues and concerns, and is often a crucial determinant in changing policy priorities and in stimulating action by legislatures.

New Media and Under-Represented Groups.

Under-represented groups are making constructive use of new media to be heard. In particular, our research identified 150 Indigenous-controlled news sources including legacy print and broadcast media but also including a flourishing network of new and social media outlets. Some of these serve particular communities; others are issues or personality based. Together, they are breaking news and distributing original content. One of the best known, IndigenousX, has partnered with Guardian Australia. This increase in voice for a neglected segment of Australian society is a shift in the ecology of news media in Australia.

Conclusion

The research team would welcome an opportunity to further discuss our project if the committee feels this would be helpful.

[Attachments](#)

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