

SUBMISSION:

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Media Reforms Package

By Jim Parker  
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I make this brief submission as both a private citizen and a public critic of the media.

A journalist for 26 years, I run a popular blog called [The Failed Estate](#), which looks at many of the issues that arose as part of the federal government's media inquiries.

These include the rapid convergence of print, television, radio and online media, the crisis in the business model affecting traditional media and the consequent pressures this puts on journalists to squeeze more content out of less.

Let me say I fully agree with statements from media proprietors about the importance of a vigorous, free press in a democracy. But I and many other observers strongly feel that accountability is lacking in the present system.

Specifically, those wronged by the press – by being misquoted, misrepresented, and bullied or having their privacy invaded – have little recourse. The Press Council is a toothless tiger and ordinary people often cannot afford legal counsel.

Governments also have to share some blame. Too often, media policy is made not with a view to the public interest but to the interests of media themselves.

Those arguing against media reform point to the multiplicity of voices now available on the internet. But the simple fact is that blogs like mine, with 2,000 page impressions a day at best, are no match for the muscle of the major companies.

Yes, we are better able to access international media organisations. But any journalist will tell you that all news is local. With further concentration, as seems likely, the chances of people being misinformed about issues of important public interest will only increase.

The recent wilfully misrepresentative and hysterical coverage of the subject of this committee's work in some News Ltd newspapers only proves that point.

The first rule any journalist is taught is the importance of fair, accurate and balanced reporting. Telling the public the truth is the imperative. Without truth, there can be no trust, and without trust, newspapers become just another commercial business trading in information as if it were a commodity.

Some of the media proprietors appearing before you have suggested the market is the best arbiter of this. But that argument overlooks the fact that a free press has a utility to democracy beyond its market value. And it overlooks that parliament, as the voice of the people, has a role in its scrutiny.

The impossibility of a rational debate about these issues has merely been underlined by the irresponsible and unbalanced reporting we have seen. Ultimately, if the media rank themselves so highly, they need to ask why they are among the least trusted institutions in our community.

It is right that we have a debate. It is proper that it be a passionate one. But the media's first responsibility is to tell the truth. Without that, its claim to the privileges allowed it in a democracy must be in question.

Jim Parker

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