

Senate Inquiry into the state of media diversity, independence and reliability in Australia

Speaking up for Journalism

Submission from Monica Attard, Eric Beecher, Peter Fray, Bruce Guthrie, Wendy Harmer, Andrew Jaspan and Alan Kohler

Media ownership in Australia resides in too few hands. We all understand this is unhealthy for any civilised democracy: the research and data are irrefutable.

To make matters worse, more than 5,000 journalism jobs have been lost in Australia over the past 10 years. Large parts of the country are no longer reported, or are under-reported, resulting in little or no scrutiny and the loss of the critical watchdog role of the media in a functional, accountable democracy.

For those reasons, we respectfully suggest that this Senate Inquiry doesn't need more hefty submissions, academic theories, data, surveys or hand-wringing on the subject.

There's no point looking back and trying to undo the consequences – intended or otherwise – of past changes to media laws.

Instead, if the objective is a more diverse Australian media, there is an imperative to tangibly support independent producers of public interest journalism – existing and new entrants – to help them succeed in the marketplace.

In our view, this Inquiry should have just one clear focus: to create and advocate for a pragmatic, realistic, politically achievable public policy solution that encourages and sustains existing players and new entrants.

It should be a bi-partisan solution in the interests of protecting the strength of our democracy and civil society. An insurance policy against media ownership concentration and abuse of power.

Who are we?

- We have been editors, publishers or senior journalists in Australia's dominant media organisations. We know how big media companies work from the inside.
- We left those big company roles to launch a range of independent media start-ups. We know how excruciatingly hard it is to compete with the dominant omnivores of the Australian media jungle.
- As a result, we believe we have a unique practical perspective on the parlous state of media diversity in Australia, and the impact this has on public interest journalism and democracy.

It is widely acknowledged that the ownership of Australian commercial public interest journalism is highly concentrated (primarily in the hands of News Corporation and Nine Entertainment).

We accept that the Government already supports journalism through the ABC, but we don't think this is enough. True diversity requires a range of media owners, not a few very large organisations, one of which is owned by the Government.

The core question for this Inquiry then is: how can this distortion be redressed?

Essentially, there are two ways to solve the problem:

Government-mandated reduction: limit the scale of media ownership by voluntary or forced divestment of some media assets by big players to an agreed, satisfactory threshold;

Government-assisted expansion: establish a legislative or regulatory mechanism that actively supports and funds the growth of existing independent media and the creation of new journalism start-ups

As the first option is politically implausible and legally questionable, we believe the Inquiry should instead focus its energy on developing a realistic and sensibly-funded legislative solution.

It should support the viability and growth of public interest media ventures on a scale that aims to redress the imbalance created by the power and dominance of the major media companies and the economic collapse of quality journalism in Australia.

This could require a single initiative or a range of measures to strengthen existing independent publications and encourage would-be publishers to enter a space that is currently loaded against new entrants and incumbent independents because of the market power of the big players.

We acknowledge a certain unease here: journalists like to be at arm's length from governments because they must, ultimately, hold them accountable; for their part, many politicians undoubtedly feel that fewer journalists and less scrutiny of administrations is a good, not a bad, thing.

But the state of Australian media diversity is so dire that we believe it demands a collaboration to energise what is, frankly, a dying sector.

A straightforward policy approach by government to increase diversified media ownership would be to establish a fund, operated at arm's length from the government of the day, to provide financial support for independent journalism publishers and start-ups.

There could be agreed criteria aimed at fostering and nurturing quality editorial diversity and vitality.

It could also seek to address areas of particular market failure (and watchdog journalism) through the establishment of independent grants for journalism.

Funding and grant powers could be overseen by a board drawn from the wider community to include those with relevant specialist knowledge and practice from industry, media, and other NGO and public focused entities.

Grants could be provided to hire journalists to provide coverage of town halls, courts and police rounds, regional Australia and specialist reporting in a range of areas now sadly neglected.

In addition, or alternatively, there are measures that could be taken by government to contribute to the same outcome. These could include, but not be limited to:

- Giving Australians a tax deduction for any money spent on subscriptions to designated news sites.
- Mandating a designated percentage of government ad spending, both state and federal, to credentialed news organisations.
- Giving businesses extra tax deductions for marketing dollars spent directly with designated news sites.
- Making donations to designated news sites tax deductible.
- Actively encouraging and incentivizing philanthropic investments in media.
- Fostering small micro media start-ups, particularly in regional markets.

Finally, we want to place our suggestions in the context of the News Media and Digital Platforms Bargaining Code legislation.

Although it is too early to know whether that legislation will result in financial support from Google and Facebook for Australian publishers, and on what basis, it is likely to be heavily skewed towards remunerating larger media companies, relative to smaller ones.

If this happens, the imbalance we have outlined will only get worse and the need for supporting diverse independent media will only be greater.

The ongoing concentration of media ownership in this country needs to be reversed – for the good of journalism, civil society and, ultimately, democracy.

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