



Submission to Senate Select Committee inquiring into the future of public interest journalism

This submission is put forward by journalists, editors and others who contribute to Croakey, a social journalism project for health.

Signatories to this submission are:

Melissa Sweet: Croakey founder and publisher. (Melissa is also a board member of the Public Interest Journalism Foundation and a signatory to its submission.)

Dr Ruth Armstrong, Croakey editor

Amy Coopes, Croakey editor and journalist

Jennifer Doggett, Croakey editor

Summer May Finlay, Croakey contributing editor

Marie McInerney, Croakey editor and journalist

Dr Lesley Russell, Croakey contributor

Dr Tim Senior, Croakey contributing editor

Mitchell Ward, Croakey creative director and web designer/developer

Dr Megan Williams, Croakey contributing editor.

Introduction

In this submission, we give an overview of Croakey.org, which is a platform for innovation in public interest journalism for health; we explain the importance of ensuring sustainable health journalism; and we make specific recommendations for the inquiry's consideration, with particular attention to the following terms of reference:

(a) the current state of public interest journalism in Australia and around the world, including the role of government in ensuring a viable, independent and diverse service;

(d) the future of public and community broadcasters in delivering public interest journalism, particularly in underserved markets like regional Australia, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities;

(f) any related matters.

About Croakey

Croakey.org is a social journalism project for health with a focus on issues that are poorly served by the mainstream media, such as the social determinants of health, health inequalities, the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, climate change and health, rural and remote health, and health policy more broadly. One of our journalistic roles is to publish articles, opeds and series examining current health concerns and providing evidence-informed contributions to public debates and policy development. A rotating group of editors publishes regular articles at the website - www.croakey.org. Croakey's YouTube channel has published around 200 video interviews and reports from health and medical conferences, with a focus on Indigenous health and public health. See: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIsJw7Qj_BNdSEsRabjfVhw/videos?view=0&shelf_id=0&sort=dd However, we do more than provide multimedia reportage in line with Croakey's evolution into a social journalism project.

Social journalism is an emerging field of journalism practice and governance. It is one response to the challenges and opportunities arising from the digital disruption of the professional roles and business models that have underpinned journalism in the past. The United States journalist, scholar and author Jeff Jarvis (<http://buzzmachine.com/2014/04/26/degree-social-journalism/>) envisages social journalism as listening to a community in order to work out how it can contribute to meeting their needs, and says this sometimes means doing more than the traditional roles of journalism in providing reporting and content. Jarvis states that social journalism:

...can also mean connecting the members of the community to each other to share information themselves. It can mean sharing data and tools rather than developing narratives. It can mean helping a community to organize itself to take action (yes, that's community organizing). It can be education. It must be collaborative. Social journalists will judge their success instead by whether the public they serve and its members accomplish their goals, meet their needs, improve their lots and their communities — and whether they connect with each other to better understand each other through discussion and information.

History

Croakey was born out of the Crikey Health and Medical Panel, which was established in 2007 to provide expert health and medical content to the daily Crikey e-bulletin (<https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2009/190/4/champ-novel-collaboration-between-public-health-and-media>). The CHAMP then evolved into the Croakey blog, which was hosted by Crikey but operated from October 2009 with financial and editorial independence from them. Croakey established its own platform in 2015 with a \$5,000 innovation grant from the Walkley Foundation. Currently Croakey runs without staff or organisational structure, operating through the ABN of Sweet Communication, but is immensely productive due to networks of committed contributors and supporters. Core funding of \$30,000 p.a. is provided through a consortium of public interest organisations, auspiced via the Public Health Association of Australia, with a Memorandum of Understanding on editorial independence. We are pleased to report that this Memorandum is respected and observed by all parties. This core funding is shared between the five editors, who commission and publish articles and opeds. We do not have a budget to pay for articles (unless they are part of special, funded projects). The day-to-day articles are mostly provided by academics, organisations and others who are not relying on journalism as a primary source of income. Croakey is committed to ensuring all content is freely available to ensure maximum reach in line with our public interest mission. However, subscriptions are available to a weekly bulletin and this revenue, together with donations, helps to support the website and operational costs.

Innovation

The Croakey Conference News Service was established in 2013 to provide a service to Croakey's readers and to test new models for the funding and production of journalism (<https://croakey.org/conference-reporting/>). Since then it has funded journalists and others to report on more than 45 health conferences. This service has brought a great depth and breadth of coverage to Croakey readers, especially around rural and remote health, Indigenous health, mental health, significant public health issues, and health policy.

Several projects have been funded through crowdfunding. These include:

- #JustJustice, a series of 90-plus articles by more than 70 contributors published at Croakey over an 18-month period, subsequently produced as a print and e-book, and profiling solutions to the overincarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- #WonkyHealth, a series of articles and an associated e-publication exploring health in all policies; and
- #CripCroakey, a series of articles exploring health issues and disability.

More details here: <https://croakey.org/croakey-publications/>

Another Croakey project is @WePublicHealth, a rotated curated Twitter account modelled on the successful @IndigenousX account. This project, which is conducted without funding, is billed as “citizen journalism meets public health”. Each week a different person tweets about public health issues, and an extensive archive is developing of the reportage provided by @WePublicHealth - see: <https://croakey.org/wepublichealth/>

Active engagement with Twitter has been critical to Croakey’s ongoing development. Three Twitter accounts associated with Croakey (@croakeyblog, @WePublicHealth, @CroakeyNews) have more than 33,000 followers – more than some regional newspapers. For example, *The Newcastle Herald* has 25,200 followers, and the *Illawarra Mercury* in Wollongong has 9,400 followers. From 1 January 2017 - 31 May this year, there were: approximately 60,000 new and returning visitors to the Croakey.org site; 107,520 page views; and 76,228 unique page views. These figures do not include our significant additional readership via AppleNews and Facebook.

As part of our commitment to transparency, our funding sources are detailed on the website, as well as the conflicts of interests of our editors.

This submission is informed by our collective experience in developing Croakey as a platform for innovation in public interest health journalism. We note the importance of public interest journalism to ensuring there is an informed citizenry, public debate and policy development regarding health matters, something that is of fundamental concern to citizens and governments, as well as the significant number of people employed in the health sector. Public interest journalism has played a critical role in many public health advances, from the introduction of effective tobacco control measures to the establishment of numerous inquiries on health-related concerns, such as asbestos and child sexual abuse. It also has a vital accountability role given the prominence of powerful professional and commercial interests in the health sector and other sectors affecting health. These include the Australian Medical Association, the Pharmacy Guild, private health insurance funds and pharmaceutical companies. These groups have the resources to dedicate to lobbying and media activities, which give them a disproportionate influence over government policy and funding decisions. Often the issues involved are complex and technical and mainstream journalists do not have the time to dedicate to look beyond the press releases put out by interest groups. In Australia there is no independent consumer organisation with as much power or influence as these other organisations. This means that public interest journalism, such as appears in Croakey, is often the only voice questioning health policy and funding decisions by governments and pointing out where they may not be in the best interests of consumers or populations.

We also note the emergence of new media forms, such as the IndigenousX media project, in providing transformative coverage of matters affecting the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is vital that policy innovation supports the ongoing development and sustainability of such initiatives, given the immense public service they provide.

Impact

Relative to its resourcing, Croakey makes a significant contribution to health debate and policy development at a time when the capacity of mainstream media to cover health matters in depth is diminishing as a result of job losses and related constraints. We also have contributed significantly to innovation in public interest journalism, notably through our mission to work with communities who are not currently well served by mainstream media and to privilege their voices. Our mission is not only to report on under-served areas, such as the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but to work towards giving primacy to the voices of Indigenous people and others who are not well served by policy. Public interest journalism provides a platform for minority groups to have a voice and share their lived experience of often multiple and compounding health issues and poor determinants of health, as well as strategies for survival. These unique insights are vital for informing healthy public policy, complementing other forms of evidence. Croakey explicitly works towards public good, through providing a platform for the exchange of ideas and experiences, discussion of evidence and policy, and the development of innovation through connective networks. Public interest journalism is key to research translation, creating an opportunity for complex data to be reported in a timely way with real-world meanings.

Comments on our testimonials page - <https://croakey.org/testimonials/> - give an indication of the impact of our work. A few of these are reproduced below.

John Flannery, Public Affairs Director, Australian Medical Association

Croakey is now well established as compulsory reading for influencers and observers in health and medicine in Australia and internationally – and rightly so. As a blog, it gives voice to people who support or oppose government health and social policy. It allows people to express their views and opinions openly, passionately, and freely – from all perspectives. More importantly, Croakey provides a forum for new ideas and new thinking – based on experiences at the frontline of health service delivery – which we can only hope find their way into future health policy to provide better health services to the Australian community.

Mark Metherell, health journalist, Consumers Health Forum

Croakey has pioneered an unprecedented role in providing an open forum for the revelation and exchange of thinking on health in Australia. Thanks to the indefatigable Croakey team, we have a place where players from all corners of health can share ideas, news and commentary.

The testimonials below relate to the Croakey Conference News Service.

The Medical Board of Australia and Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency

The Medical Board of Australia and AHPRA used the Croakey conference reporting service to take the ideas presented at the 2016 conference of the International

Association of Medical Regulatory Authorities to a wider audience. It meant international delegates who couldn't attend in person could access commentary and interviews. Croakey's news reports were fair, timely and balanced. The service also increased social media interest and activity by delegates, and helped make global regulatory challenges and directions more transparent.

Lowitja Institute

The Croakey Conference reporting team created a comprehensive, multi-platform record of the Lowitja Institute International Indigenous Health and Wellbeing 2016, including pre-event reporting. Their reportage captured the cultural, scientific and social program, our goals and values, and, importantly, a sense of the conference experience for delegates.

Please also note that a letter supporting our submission to this inquiry has been provided by Ms Janine Mohamed, CEO of the Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives (as attached).

Market failure

However, Croakey does not provide any of us with a living wage, and our ongoing financial sustainability is precarious. As well, we are all acutely conscious that we could much more to serve our readers, the community and policymaking processes with the benefit of proper funding to support journalistic investigations into important health and related accountability concerns.

We agree with the statement to this inquiry by independent journalist Michael West that: "There is as yet however no reliable business model to fund journalism and my personal experience is testament to this" (<https://www.michaelwest.com.au/opening-statement-to-senate-inquiry-into-journalism/>). We also agree with the Public Interest Journalism submission to this inquiry that the crisis in public interest journalism in Australia justifies a cohesive and vigorous public response, both in providing direct government support and also in taking measures to encourage private investment and philanthropic support.

Recommendations

We broadly support the submissions to this inquiry by Professor Mark Pearson, regarding the need for law reform to remove some of the legal impediments to public interest journalism, and also those by Michael West, Dr Bill Birnbauer and the Public Interest Journalism Foundation.

We do **NOT** support recommendations by Schwartz Media for a restrictive definition of public interest journalism that would limit support to media organisations with an annual

turnover of at least \$1 million in the previous year. This would actively exclude many independent and community media organisations from consideration, and also be an impediment to supporting innovation in public interest journalism such has occurred with Croakey, and is also envisaged in recommendation 2 below.

1. Incentives and mechanisms to increase private and public funding

In particular, we support the recommendations for Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status for donations supporting public interest journalism, and for the establishment of a production fund to support independent public interest journalism. Funding mechanisms could include tax offsets for investors, direct government support, incentives for philanthropists and a levy on Google, Facebook or other companies that profit from the advertising revenue that used to fund mainstream media, but pay little tax.

2. Support community-driven innovation in public interest journalism

In light of Croakey's experience of innovating through working collaboratively with community members and organisations, we recommend that measures to support the development and sustainability of public interest journalism should explore innovative governance models and engage widely across civil society. The disintermediation of journalism from large media organisations opens new possibilities for the embedding of public interest journalism within civil society while ensuring mechanisms are in place to preserve editorial independence. The wider community could be involved in the development and governance of new media models. Involving the wider community will also provide a foundation for robust evaluation of the effectiveness and integrity of any new models.

If there is to be a public interest journalism fund, applications should not be limited to journalists. For example, rural and regional communities or other communities currently under-served by public interest journalism could apply for grants to establish or support public interest journalism initiatives. Citizen's juries could be involved in decisions about topics for investigation. Given the changing nature of journalism and many other professional roles, the future of public interest journalism is too important to be left only to journalists or media organisations. This Senate inquiry represents an opportunity for innovation in policy to support innovation in public interest journalism.

In conclusion

Thank you for considering our submission, which has addressed the terms of reference:

(a) by indicating the financial challenges facing public interest health journalism, as well as the potential for innovation in policy and public interest journalism to better serve the needs of communities and policymaking.

(d) by indicating the potential for innovation in policy to support further innovation in public

interest health journalism to better serve the needs of underserved communities, like rural, remote and regional Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and populations at risk of poor health outcomes.

(f) by arguing that policy innovation should seek to support innovation in both the conduct and governance of public interest journalism, and not simply to support existing media organisations and models.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our recommendations with the Inquiry, and would also be happy to provide further written information upon request.

Dated: 15 June, 2017

Attachment: Letter of Support from Ms Janine Mohamed, CEO of Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives (over page)



**Letter supporting Croakey
Submission to Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest
Journalism**

Dear Senators

I am writing to support the submission made by the Croakey team to your inquiry.

As CATSINaM has outlined in our own submission to the inquiry, the practices of journalists and the media industry have enormous ramifications for the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, both good and bad.

This inquiry offers an important opportunity for policy innovation to support public interest journalism that can help to advance the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

As an organisation, we would like to ensure the Senate Select Committee is aware of our support for the work that Croakey does in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations.

At this link, you can see the extensive coverage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health matters at Croakey:

<https://croakey.org/category/indigenous-health/>

Thank you for considering the submissions of both CATSINaM and Croakey.

Kind regards



Janine Mohamed
CEO
CATSINaM

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Unity and Strength through Caring