

Submission to Senate Select Committee on Future of Public Interest Journalism

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My name is Rodney Tiffen. I am an Emeritus Professor in Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney. I have researched and written about issues of journalism and political communication over more than four decades.

I share the concern behind the formation of this committee, and of many of the submissions to it. Most particularly, I endorse the submission of the Civil Impact of Journalism project team, of which I am a member, submitted by Associate Professor Margaret Simons.

The digital revolution and changes in media consumption have greatly weakened the traditional business models of the news media. The result so far has been the loss of thousands of jobs in journalism, with more losses still on the horizon. This affects not only the livelihoods of those employed, not only the commercial fortunes of their employers, but threatens the loss of the contribution journalism makes to the quality of Australian democracy.

Nor is it clear that any emerging enterprises will fill the democratic gap left by the decline of traditional models of journalism. It is not only plausible but likely that left to normal commercial forces, there will be market failure, in the sense that a necessary or desirable public good will not be supplied by the market. There is then a strong case for public intervention or subsidy to address the problem.

Some have proposed a 'Google Tax' or some such mechanism to fund journalism in the public interest. My concern today is less where the money comes from, but rather how it should be spent, which is more difficult than may at first appear. One of many reasons it is tricky is that the major press players in the field are adamantly opposed to it. They would rather be the biggest fish in an ever-shrinking pool than having tougher competition in a more vibrant environment.

The key public policy principle is to subsidise journalism in a way that is politically independent and commercially neutral. In other words, it should not be a matter of the government playing favourites, and deciding which news organisations they think are worthy of public patronage. Good journalism is often embarrassing to governments and other vested interests, so it is important to construct funding mechanisms that do not interfere with editorial independence.

My proposal is that the government should fund a news agency, a wholesaler of news, which will provide to all subscribers a product they can reproduce and build upon as they wish.

In the internet age, distribution is easy. There is a flowering of diverse opinions, which is broadly good for democracy. There is not however the institutional solidity to support large scale reporting. The labour intensive tasks of reporting on events and institutions already shows considerable decline, and while we may expect several journalistic-type start-ups in the future, it is unlikely any of them will fill this gap.

It should be stressed that what is in mind here is not that the news agency will do spectacular or investigative reporting, but rather that it will perform fairly pedestrian and routine journalism, a service of basic disclosure that aids accountability, and provides a baseline of information on which others can build. The reporting task of the agency will be to cover institutional proceedings, and to cover the debates within and around them.

The digital impact of news is often pictured as if it is all of a piece, but in fact it will affect different institutions and types of reporting differently. It is likely that there will always be considerable journalistic scrutiny of Federal government and parliament, and probably also in at least major areas of business. It is less likely that state governments will be subjected to the same scrutiny, and much less likely that local governments will. It is likely that the most spectacular court cases will be reported by the media, but less likely that more mundane ones will.

It is proposed that this agency will sell its product to any buyer at a very subsidized rate (eg \$5000 per annum), but that most of its funding will come from public funds.

Public subsidy of a news agency is particularly appropriate because it is commercially neutral, and will help all those seeking to provide a journalistic service. It will provide the labour intensive but commercially unrewarding task of providing the basic reporting on which others can build more elaborate and ambitious endeavours.