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Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Media Diversity in Australia - M Rowland Ex BBC World Service

This paper uses a) MM for Murdoch Media and b) PIJ to denote public interest journalism throughout.

Introduction:

A favourite adage of John Tusa, a celebrated ex-director of the BBC World Service, was that “**access to free and untainted information is a basic human right**”. Without that right people are denied the ability to make informed decisions about their lives. As such it is a cornerstone of liberal democracy. There were stark reminders of this in 2020 with bushfires and the pandemic, when accurate information from government and broadcasters supported our very survival. In watching tragic events unfold in America there was another reminder of how important truth and trust in PIJ was in its support of the legitimacy of political institutions and shared beliefs.

CV: (CV precis is at end of the submission)

My credentials: after years in TV/radio production in the UK and travelling my newly adopted country compiling the bicentennial BBC History of Australia (1986-88), I spent 31 years from 1988 as the Sydney based BBC World Service Business Development Manager for Pacific and SE Asia. From then until 2019 I dealt with countless media organisations in Australia and government agencies, broadcasters, and media and technology/satellite operators within 24 countries in Asia Pacific, researching media environments to negotiate partnerships and set up direct transmission and satellite services.

BBC was often able to bring together technical experts and our broadcast partners. Over 200 BBC partners were in Australia, the most important being ABC/SBS and commercial newsrooms, but many were tiny community stations in isolated areas, wanting PIJ. True to John’s adage when we were asked to help, we did. We assisted the CBAA to gain satellite distribution and, with AAP’s help, a national community news service. I concentrate on Rural issues in this paper due to familiarity with many of the problems and knowledge of some possible solutions - distance communication is a World Service speciality.

SUMMARY

Good PIJ is a bulwark against some new concerning developments, particularly on social media, that threaten Australia. My major recommendation is the establishment of a protective measure - a World Class Australian Fact Checking facility outside of all major media and located in each state at journalist training institutions (its output would be made available to media outlets and the public).

Pages 3 RECOMMENDATION: FACT CHECK AUSTRALIA

My other major recommendations concern rural/urban imbalances from experience in the field as well as knowledge of new technologies for distance communication as I continue to keep some ex-partners in Asia/PNG/Pacific in touch. I have the following recommendations to address Rural/Urban disparities:

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-SCOPE PLACEMENT OF JOURNALISTS AT COMMUNITY RADIO - A PILOT PROJECT IN SELECTED COUNTRY LOCATIONS SECURING ACCESS TO WIRE SERVICE AAP

- INCREASE FUNDING TO ABC REGIONAL - PLJ AND IMPROVE TRANSMISSION

- EXAMINE EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES FOR 24/7 MOBILE COMS WHICH ADDRESS RURAL/URBAN DISPARTIES - DRM AND THE POTENTIAL OF AMAZON’S PROJECT KUIPER

Michelle Rowland Dec 2020

The state of media diversity, independence and reliability in Australia and the impact that this has on public interest journalism and democracy, including: a/b the current state of public interest journalism in Australia and any barriers to Australian voters' ability to access reliable, accurate and independent news and the effect of media concentration on democracy:

MEDIA CONCENTRATION DOESN'T ASSIST DEMOCRACY OR ASSURE PIJ

Media concentration, considerable in the Australian print media, has not aided the health of our democracy. MM ownership of around two-thirds of Australian press, combined with its control of Sky News on cable, a controlling interest in Foxtel, ownership of the second biggest Australian digital news website and Lachlan Murdoch's ownership of 2 major high rating radio networks would alarm informed observers. This concentration may now add ownership of a Newswire service in 2021. The negative impact of the potential loss of AAP (through resultant competition) for rural radio/media would be most concerning.

Concentration is also of concern as MM corporate culture has recently shifted from its old, centre right, slightly lax but perceptible news values, to what two meticulous New York Times researchers describe as "an unashamedly nationalist, far right and hugely profitable political propaganda machine". (1) Much has been written, and will be written, about this but its worth noting in the UK OFCOM had to ban Fox hosts due to contravention of no less than 3 provisos of the UK broadcasting code (3).

Responsible governments would take steps to inhibit further concentration in Australian media and continue to ensure journalistic standards. In addition, removal of remaining sport from Free to Air (FTA) TV to Foxtel would not only be extremely unpopular but would a) damage our free to air commercial networks and b) force Australians into paying for a cable option most do not choose. Australia is an outdoor country – cable has less appeal here. Removal of remaining FTA sport would further restrict diversity.

Media concentration is an issue because MM's drift from normal editorial standards holds potential danger for our body politic. The horrific and avoidable US pandemic death toll is one thing but attacks on legitimate democratic procedures and violent threats to state governors and electoral officers there are also of concern. Two factors – high use of social media in the USA and MM influence over news agenda in the USA– contributed to the situation and both exist here. The issues of MM are well covered, so my focus **is on an aspect of Social Media and the sharing of items within Australia and then rural information disparities**

AUSTRALIA IS VULNERABLE TO SOCIAL MEDIA 'ATTACKS' AND WE NEED A FACT CHECK OPERATION OUTSIDE OF MEDIA BASED IN EACH STATE

I will deal with social media in detail because this is a proven international threat and issues about MM and concentration are well known. Social commentators chart the rise of toxic social media as an instrument of cultural destabilisation to the last decades. "Post Truth" was Oxford Dictionary's "word of the year" in 2016. (4)). The emergence of "post truth" cultural artefacts required unregulated social media platforms and the mass acquisition of internet capable mobile phones and the desire of the Russian state to use these to exploit conflict and destabilize other countries to achieve political objectives, such as the weakening of NATO.

These insidious social media 'artefacts', often automated, were originally developed in Putin's Russia where social media platforms were used to spread misinformation for domestic political purposes and then deployed within Russia's ex-Soviet Union neighbours. They were then refined to destabilise other "enemy or target states" involving substantial extra investments in personnel and technology. Conspiracy theories and targeted international attack bots, distributed on social media, were then used (or in jargon "weaponized") by various populist commentators, demagogues, and dictators. This proved effective in promoting the interests of Russia in countries of the ex-Soviet Union, in parts of Europe and now America. Some projects, e.g., the attempt to destabilise the election of Macron in France were unsuccessful, some were not. Peter Pomeransteve, from the London School of Economics is expert (5) Wikipedia sums up "Post Truth" as a "political concept for the disappearance of shared objective standards for truth". (5)

However, there is now a lively countervailing PRO TRUTH movement. (6) Make no mistake, all liberal democracies are under attack, but we now know what post truth, conspiracy theories and "bot" attacks aim for: confusion, enhancement of internal conflict within target states and destabilisation of their political systems. Australia, far from major trouble spots, is not a focus, but we are not immune.

Institutions engaged in "Pro Truth" and PIJ in Australia should therefore be supported. Social media "memes" will have already impacted public responses to Vaccination.

This is the main reason for this submission. Given factors above, we are best served by the establishment of a new facility, based at organisations with expertise in journalist training. This will ensure resilience against a) attacks on our social norms via social media and b) also encourage good editorial practices in PIJ

RECOMMENDATION: SET UP A WORLD CLASS “FACT CHECK AUSTRALIA” (FCA)

Well-funded reality checking is a good strategy and one that is growing elsewhere in the world where the problem of social media “unrealities” has emerged. ABC and AAP already do some of this and will continue, but it puts pressure on stretched resources and it’s not large enough – and a world class operation needs a) clear independence from the media b) the imprimatur of academia and c) a dedicated purpose and expertise – as it is a specialist activity.

Fact Check Australia could disseminate information about how and why malignant social media “artefacts” are created, their “provenance” exposed and give hints on how people, especially the young, can best deal. Expertise would be based in all states.

Because social media has already caused problems elsewhere, I advise that we do this quickly:

1. Expand cyber security with systems giving the govt. ability to alert the public through Fact Check Australia and the operation would be able to liaise back. Social media is essentially non-public and moves like a virus. Regular reports of main “cultural artefacts” from outside sources could form a regular report.
2. A FACT CHECK AUSTRALIA(FCA) initiative is perhaps best based at those universities with a record of journalist training (e.g. UTS/Newcastle and Bathurst universities in NSW and equivalents in all states - such as the already substantial Fact Check unit at RMIT in Melbourne which works in conjunction with the ABC). This must be big enough to ensure profile and credibility. An annual Press Club event and a weekly podcast helps profile. And FCA may distribute information to government departments when required and other media. FCA would give young journalists expertise, which will disseminate through the industry and also encourage Australian research in an expanding field.
3. FCA would also ensure that young people learn simple methods to differentiate truth and fiction e.g. the 5 C’s and how confirmation bias works (5) – e.g. material for schools, and visiting lecturers.

I now turn to issues concerning rural areas:

EQUITY IN INFORMATION DISTRIBUTION IN RURAL COMMUNITIES: ABC REGIONAL MEDIA/COMMUNITY STATIONS/COMMERCIALS

There is great disparity of information access between rural and urban areas in Australia. Because of the difficulty of raising ad revenue in places with lower populations/vast spaces, the ABC is best placed to do the heavy lifting of news coverage in the regions because of its excellent and expert regional reporters and its big transmission facilities.

The only solution is to fund great local radio, good transmission, local internet, local free sheets through the public purse. You won’t find commercial organisations with ad revenue for rural reports because the revenue isn’t available.

This has to be the domain of the public service a) the ABC and b) the community media sector c) and some brave and dedicated local operators that manage to put together some local newsprint. The latter two cannot afford to subscribe to AAP but they do a good job. Grants to enable access to AAP would help. Local court reporting, local councils are important and rural communities need to know what is happening with their representatives in councils, in the state and in the federal government and to have the opportunity to talk with their political representatives, which that can do with phone ins over the radio. Getting around to everybody in a big electorate is impossible without.

Rural commercial radio, with a few exceptions, is a bit of a misnomer. When visiting rural commercials for the BBC, the joke was “sure we’re local, well ad revenue is local - but the programming outside of drive comes by

satellite ... Commercial radio can't use limited drive ad airtime to examine local issues (and no criticism for that). ABC and community media can and will.

RECOMMENDATION: Fund ABC to provide a) better transmission b) more regional content (both to communicate regionally but also to 'explain the nation to the nation'. Transmission improvement is vital.

But ABC does not drill down far enough to provide news for our smaller communities, and that's impossible without the great Australian tradition of voluntarism and our admirable Community Radio Sector.

THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF COMMUNITY RADIO IN RURAL COMMUNITIES:

Paid journalists funded under the public purse, placed within local community radio, in places with proven audience success can create a) local web services/blogs and b) news-letters c) feed into AAP. These could also act as "stringers" for any newswire organisation wanting national reach perhaps as a quid pro quo for local media to gain the AAP subscription (or other news service)

RECOMMENDATION: Paid journalists funded by grant, could be embedded in community radio, in places with proven success, to create a) local web services/blogs and b) liaise with other operators on print.

the role that a newswire service plays in supporting diverse public interest journalism in Australia: AAP is vital and the role of AAP plays in Community Radio news is important for rural areas. If AAP runs into difficulties in competing with MM's projected Newswire service what will happen to the news service to small rural stations and their attempt to bring diversity and services to lifeline environments – they are really the only local media in places like my own small country town.

RECOMMENDATION: RURAL POLITICIANS TO SUPPORT AAP FOR COMMUNITY NEWS SERVICE SUPPORTING RURAL STATIONS.

FUTURE HOPE IN ENDING "THE TYRANNY OF DISTANCE"

Being able to get reliable information to all Australians, all of the time, is an essential part of nationhood but vast areas of Australia represent what WS calls "lifeline" media environments. Services to the home by VAST satellite help but rural Australians mainly work outdoors and are incredibly mobile – emergency services alone need 24/7 mobile streaming – internet by sat or DRM. The premature removal of SW was unfortunate. It is doubtful whether the CRA lobby would have interest in DRM but only one question is important-**what technology can bring 24/7 information/the net to rural Australia for least cost?**

An examination of technologies that can equalise "information access" could be timely. DRM, currently adopted in India, Brazil and China and broadcast from the BBC site in Singapore and now in Europe in conjunction with Deutsche Welle (9) is well worth investigation both for Australia and in the Pacific, (PNG's communication infrastructure is of great concern). DRM is cheap to run. Contrary to a report to the Senate by ABC in 2017, the BBC continues to support DRM and SW where appropriate e.g. large areas with small populations.

A new global satellite "internet to mobile devices" project - Jeff Bezos's Project Kuiper aims to put 3,236 satellites into low orbit around the world to provide high-speed 24/7 internet everywhere via mobile phones.(10) The most ambitious and lucrative market is Africa. Starlink, Elon Musk's satellite-internet project is also around. (11) Of the two the Bezos project looks most interesting – the timelines are 2026 for substantial progress and then 2029 for completion – that's under FCA licence so the deadlines are likely to be reached. While it's a way off this **represents possible solutions to Australian rural/urban information disparities.**

RECOMMENDATION: THE SENATE SUPPORT A REPORT on TECHNOLOGIES FOR FUTURE 24/7 MOBILE COMS FOR RURAL AREAS EXAMPLES DRM AND PROJECT KUIPER

I will leave you with a thought: satellites don't respect international boundaries, streaming services via the "Amazon of the air" over Australia will bring new challenges to our doorstep.

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