

Supplementary data and comments

Submission to the Select Committee on Future of Public Interest Journalism

News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra

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Additional information requested on notice at the Senate public hearing of 22 Nov 2017

1. Definition of public interest journalism
2. Australian news consumers' interest in general news and political news
3. Polarisation of Australian news consumers in comparison with other countries
4. News avoidance and filter bubbles

1. Definition of Public Interest Journalism

In response to the request of the committee we have provided greater detail around the definition of public interest journalism. As stated during the hearing, this is a complex area where conceptions of news and the role of journalism are in a state of flux. However, we understand for policy purposes those

theoretical debates are problematic and difficult to reflect in practical guidelines. For the purposes of simplification and application in a policy context we propose the following definition of Public Interest Journalism based on six key principles:

i. Educating the public

Public Interest Journalism must be conducted with the primary intention of educating the public about issues of importance in local, national and international communities. In the contemporary era of networked distribution of digital news, this requires a dialogue with audiences and not a simple transmission of information.

ii. Scrutiny of those in power

The primary goal of Public Interest Journalism must be to apply scrutiny to those in power and to the impact of decisions made by those in power, across all sections of society. Those in power relates to any person/organisation that has power over another. That includes elected officials, teachers, parents, employers etc.

iii. Comprehensive context

Public Interest Journalism is comprehensive in its coverage providing the public with relevant history and context of events and perspectives of those involved.

iv. Professional *Code of Ethics*

Public Interest Journalism is conducted according to contemporary ethical principles of journalism practice with a focus on accuracy and transparency. The journalist/organisation has a publicly available Code of Ethics stating its mission to inform the public via scrutiny of those in power and the impact of the decisions those in power make on society. Please note the current MEAA journalists' Code of Ethics is out of date and needs to be revised to better reflect contemporary journalism practice in the digital age. Better ethical codes to emulate are the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics¹ which was updated in 2014, and that proposed by McBride and Rosenstiel (2014)².

v. Independence from commercial, partisan or personal interests

¹ <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

² McBride K, & Rosenstiel, T. (2014) *The New Ethics of Journalism*, Thousand Oaks, CA: CQPress

The motivation to educate the public must be the primary interest which is not allowed to be undermined by commercial, partisan or personal interests and thereby strives for independence from other interests. Whilst commercial imperatives do present a tension with the public interest, excellent public interest journalism can be conducted by commercial news organisations as well as independent journalists. The emphasis here must be on the primary motivation to inform and educate in the public interest by applying scrutiny, as well as the transparency and accountability of the journalism being practised.

vi. External accountability

The news organisation/journalist agrees to external oversight by a third party, consisting of representatives from professional peers and the public, and has transparent accountability processes to manage complaints from the public.

2. Australian news consumers' interest in general news and political news

As part of an effort to provide empirical evidence to better inform policy decisions, we have further analysed Australian news consumers in the global context. There are both similarities and differences among international news consumers. Overall, Australians are not as polarised as some other nations. However, they tend not to seek diversity in news, frequently avoid news, and are less interested in political news.

Australians have high interest in news but less so in political news, compared to other countries' news consumers. Among the 36 countries surveyed in Reuters Institute Digital News study in 2017, Australia ranked 19th in their interest in news. However, the gap between interest in general news and interest in political news was 0.59 and ranked 27th (Figure 1). This level has not changed significantly in the past three years.

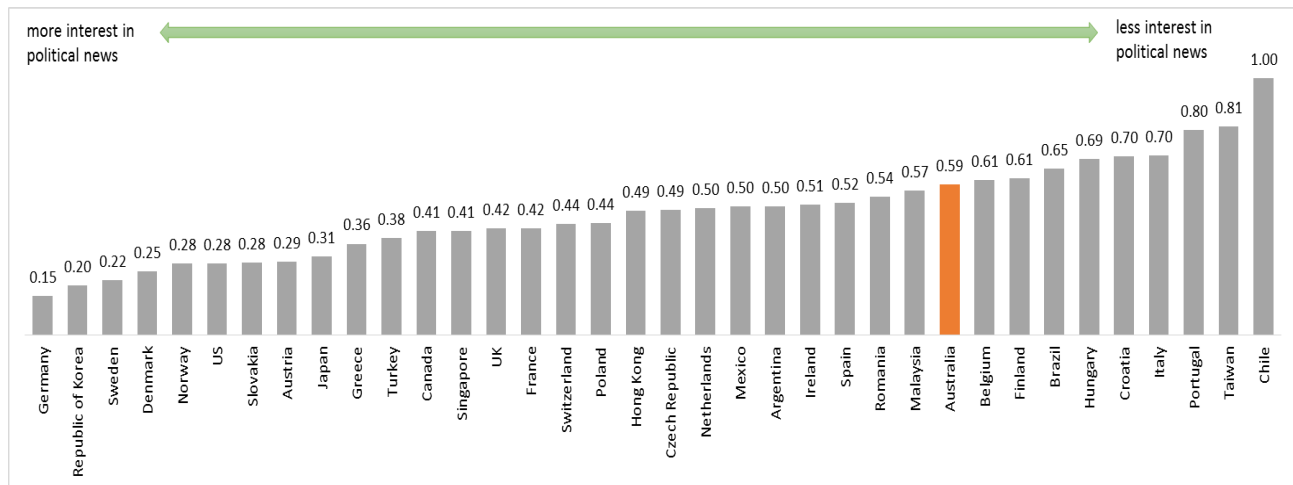


Figure 1. The gap between ‘interest in news’ and ‘interest in political news’

Survey respondents were asked ‘How interested, if at all, would you say you are in news?’ and ‘How interested are you in the following type of news? – Political news’, both measured on a 5-point scale

3. Polarisation of Australian news consumers in comparison with other countries

Polarisation among news consumers in Australia is not as high as in many other nations. Among the 22 countries compared, Australia ranked 14th on the polarisation score, implying that online news consumers are relatively balanced in seeking viewpoints from different news brands (Figure 2).

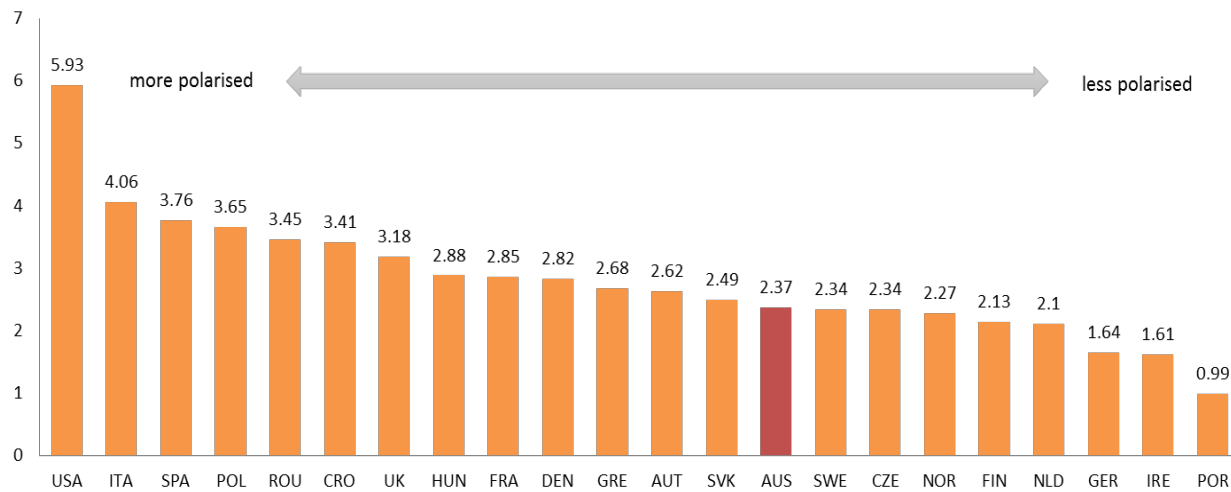


Figure 2. Online news media polarisation – select countries

Survey respondents were asked: Some people talk about 'left', 'right', and 'centre' to describe parties and politicians. With this in mind, where would you place yourself on the following scale? (7- point scale). Which of the following brands have you used to access news ONLINE in the last week? Please select all that apply. Online news media polarisation score for each country is the mean of the polarisation score for each of the top 15 online brands multiplied by their weekly reach.

Source: Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A, Levy, D. & Nielsen, K. (2017). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, p39.

As Table 1 reveals, many news brands attract Australian news consumers from different political viewpoints, offering a balanced view, some brands more than others.

Table 1. Online news reach by political orientation of news consumers

Brand	left-wing	centre	right-wing
Herald Sun (heraldsun.com.au)	32.9%	34.4%	32.7%
nine.com.au	31.6%	37.7%	30.7%
Skynews.com.au	33.7%	36.1%	30.2%
Daily Telegraph (dailytelegraph.com.au)	35.9%	34.5%	29.7%
Yahoo!7	30.7%	45.3%	24.0%
News.com.au	38.5%	33.6%	27.8%
The Australian (theaustralian.com.au)	42.6%	26.5%	30.9%
Australian Financial Review (afr.com)	38.9%	34.9%	26.2%
Channel TEN news online	42.4%	29.1%	28.4%
CNN.com	41.4%	35.2%	23.4%
Mail online	41.6%	35.3%	23.1%
Courier Mail (couriermail.com.au)	41.9%	35.7%	22.4%
BBC News online	44.2%	32.8%	23.0%
ABC News Online	48.3%	27.8%	23.9%
The Age (theage.com.au)	46.5%	33.0%	20.5%
Sydney Morning Herald (smh.com.au)	50.7%	27.9%	21.4%
The Advertiser (adelaidenow.com.au)	49.9%	30.5%	19.6%
Huffington Post	60.9%	20.5%	18.6%
Junkee	61.3%	20.6%	18.1%
Guardian online	62.5%	19.0%	18.5%
BuzzFeed News	61.0%	26.4%	12.6%
New York Times online	62.1%	25.5%	12.4%
Crikey	63.6%	24.2%	12.2%
The Conversation	67.0%	19.2%	13.8%
Vice News	71.7%	15.0%	13.3%

Survey respondents were asked: Which of the following brands have you used to access news online in the last week?

4. News avoidance and filter bubbles

Australians tend to avoid news (57%), more so than UK news consumers (51%) and less than US news consumers (67%). The main reasons for Australians avoiding news are because it can have a negative impact on mood (26%) and they do not trust the news (17%) (Figure 4).

News avoidance is also related to the type of information news consumers are exposed to on social media. Unlike consumers in the countries that we compared, Australians who encounter brands and ideas outside of their usual interest, while using social media, tend to avoid news more. This has implications for the formation of online filter bubbles. Australian news consumers may feel more comfortable while accessing news that they are familiar with and avoiding different viewpoints.

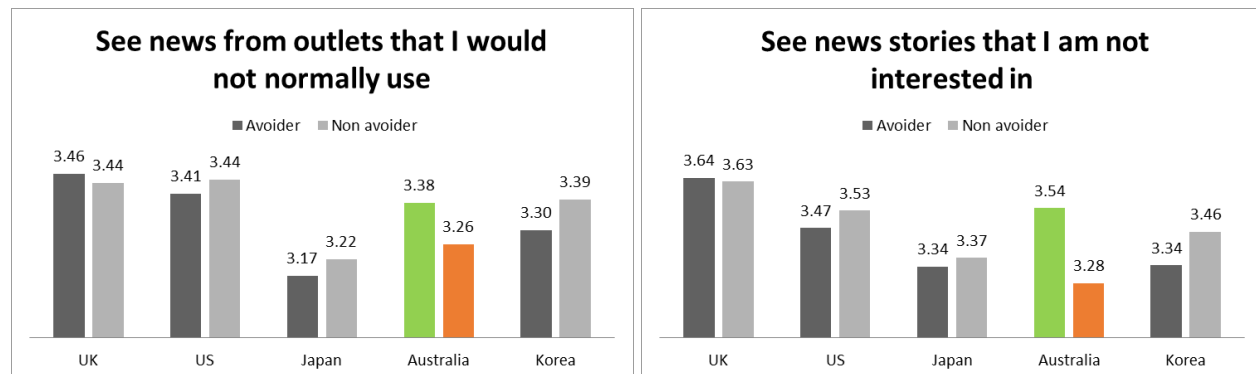


Figure 3. News avoidance and social media news consumption

Survey respondents were asked: *Do you find yourself actively trying to avoid news these days? Those who answered 'often', 'sometimes', and 'occasionally' were included in the analysis.*

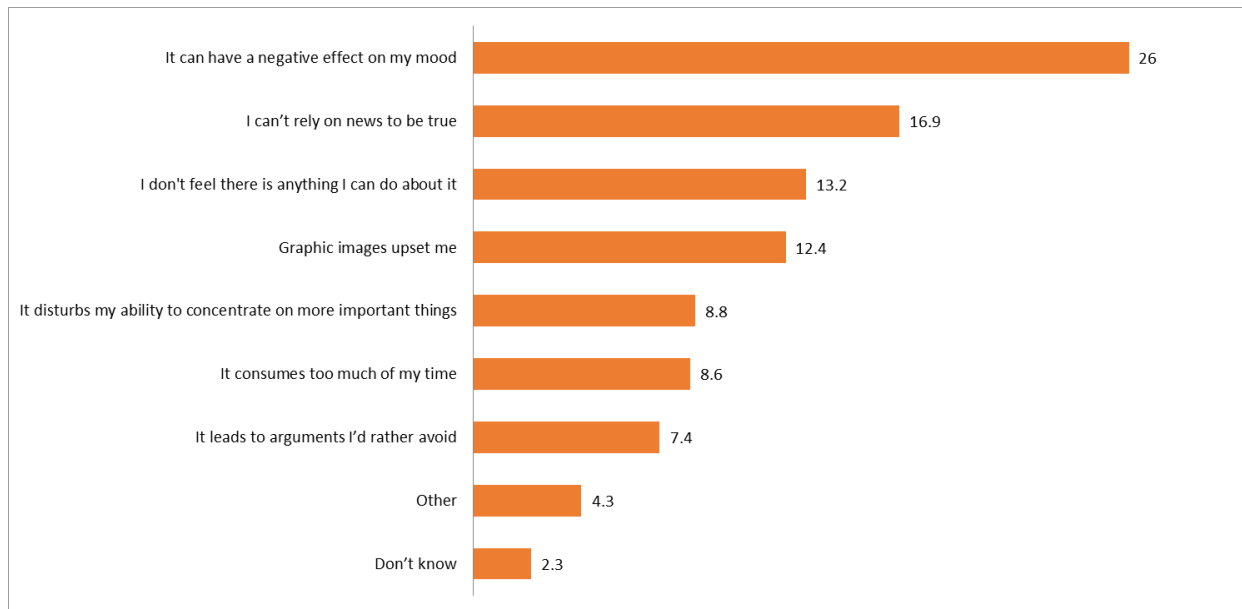


Figure 4. Reasons for avoiding news (% , Australia)