

A Submission to the Senate Enquiry: Media Diversity in Australia

Introduction

I have been involved in research and development, in Australia and overseas, on the ways digital technologies change human learning, behaviour and social experience for more than forty years. My experience has been in academia, industry, and government contexts including research projects with the Australian Army. In that time, I have watched enormous changes in the way information and community news is exchanged, discussed, and used to enable personal and group decision making. In particular, the very notion of media has been transformed by a transformation of digital technologies and the ways they are used to share news. The current state of media in Australia reflect the uneven patterns of development over that time, the uneven development of digital infrastructure (NBN), changes in business practice, and the evolving economies of information exchange. Many of these developments have occurred for commercial and technical reasons with little attention to their impact on public interest.

Key Points

Of particular concern to me is the quality of media experiences for different sectors of the population and how this has been used increasingly for political and commercial purposes without regard for public interest. Many people receive selected information passively through broadcast media, newspapers and most recently webcasts. However, the selection of information that is of 'public interest' is now a much more politically contested areas as indicated by the recent conflict over the Four Corners broadcast about Australian Forces alleged war crimes. The traditional passive consumer role where an 'educated' journalist edited and simplified information for general consumption still exists as the dominant form in media and a preferred form for communication between government and the electorate. More recently, internet-based platforms have enabled more widespread sharing of information, interactive engagement in discussion, and a wider use of strategies to check 'facts' and understand different cultural and social perspectives. This has resulted in an enhanced environment for the 'civil learning processes' (Habermas 1985¹) that are so essential for informed consensus building during times of change. One result of the recent Covid-19 pandemic has been to widen participation in these activities. The recent rapid change has revealed an urgent need for a review of the various forms of media, how they function, to what purpose and to the benefit of which group. It is time to question what 'public interest' means in the twenty first century, and how commercial laws and government funded regulators protect it. Two things are of particular concern.

One, is the way some groups, including politicians and marketing groups, have used the media for personal or group interest with little regard for the public consequences of misleading or biased information.

The second is the increasing erosion of protection for people releasing information in the public when institutional avenues of complaint fail. A part of this erosion reflects the increased asymmetries between surveillance powers and civilian freedom of speech. A most spectacular example of a failure to recognise the changing face of media publication in the public interest, are the current legal proceedings against Julian Assange the Australian CEO of Wikileaks.

¹ Habermas, J. (1985) Theory of Communicative Action (Volume 2) Trans T. McCarthy, US, Beacon

Response to Enquiry

- a) Public interest is now a matter of opinion and increasingly defined for commercial or political purposes by corporations, media platforms and the multitude of communicators. In digital media the technical issues of defining 'reach' and level of engagement as a basis for commercial survival and to attract advertising have essentially commodified and redefined the concept of 'public interest'. It appears that in a 'post truth era', engagement, polarisation, and outrage trump facts commercially. This is now reflected increasingly in government communication in social media and how issues, raised and discussed in public forums, eventually appear as edited 'news' later in the broadcast media. Over time, and with notable exceptions, traditional journalism is perceived as less reliable, less accurate, and less trusted as a basis for informed action. The advent of the RMIT Fact Check service on Twitter is a symptom of these changes in public opinion.
- b) The concentration of media ownership and reduced investment in, and independence of, the public broadcaster (ABC), are creating new opportunities for bias, misleading information, and propaganda in the media that reach most people, most of the time, in many communities. The media that dominates can clearly shape public opinion for political purposes or for secondary commercial interests and gains. If there were working checks and balances in media regulation in the past, they appear substantially weakened now. Two major examples of less focus on public interest are:
1. The polarising media activity, particularly by some media, around the pandemic public health responses of the states and federal government
 2. The gaps and framing of the threats of climate change – causes, increased bushfires, health impacts, and energy requirements.

The concentration of and bias in Australian media are impacting governance. Too often the bias shapes policy and diplomatic relationships and editorial silence or ideological bias prevents (or slows) community based civil learning and consensus building that is an essential element of informed democratic voting.

- c) Our media ownership laws, and public interest discussion about them, are still framed in a time of stand-alone corporate ownership and competition for newspaper sales and TV licences. In this century, media reach involves complex TV screening contracts with and between corporations and government (E.g. Sky News is broadcast on aircraft, in many public spaces such as rail stations, and on free to air television on WIN in regional areas). These arrangements shape funding and production decisions and frame broadcaster commentary. Where broadcast media are the major source of news, in regional communities, they substantially influence civil learning processes and resulting behaviour. There is an increasing need for a review of how public interest information is presented, accessed, shared, and discussed locally and nationally.
- d) Internet business models have used advertising reach and engagement measures to sell advertising in the traditional way and to obtain subscription payments to avoid such advertising. However, the social media platforms have also essentially commodified users, without oversight, to sell meta-data, information and patterns of human behaviour and preferences as a secondary commercial opportunity. There is an urgent need for a review of how this information is used, by whom, and to what purpose. Our current privacy laws appear inadequate for this purpose. The new media environment (commercial and technical) suggests a need for new monitoring processes and regulatory checks to protect national and public interest.

- e) Despite increased use of sources like U-tube and the internet as a source of information by some sectors, and to share expert information, these platforms are still not used effectively by many public institutions. In addition, the new capability of data scientists to publish expert data in accessible form² is creating new tensions for traditional journalists and politicians. The value of expert information, and opinion, appears to be more recognised by the public, as they find ways to access it and become more discerning about the quality of information or the expertise of the person sharing. However, there has been little 'public interest' investment in increased access to expert and accessible information by government. The existing digital infrastructure for public communications has become increasingly commercially focussed in a time of rising economic inequality and as a result affordability has become more problematic for many. In emergencies this has resulted in uneven access to essential public interest information. For example, the recent bushfires in 2019, revealed the essential importance of community exchanges of information as smart phones have become more available. These informal exchanges certainly saved lives when official resources were overwhelmed by the conditions. There is an urgent need in times of change to invest in sharing accessible expert information in the public interest and to provide educational opportunities to access and learn to use all the information available. Finally, the capabilities, on some platforms, to translate between languages means greater public access to international news, expertise, and perspectives than ever before. This is arguably in the public interest as digital services reduce the geographical and cultural isolation of Australia and open new economic and social opportunities. It also means the ethnic backgrounds and beliefs of our diverse population are much better understood by all.
- f) Surviving regional newspapers struggle to provide essential local public interest news about developments, achievements, cultural and sporting events. In addition, despite a recent bid by an independent news outlet for Fox Media, most emerging independent media are struggling to create viable business models in the face of severe competition from both the commercial broadcast media and the public broadcaster. An innovative program of public policy and government investment in ensuring regional communities have equal access to media services is needed to create a positive environment for this evolving business space in the public interest.
- g) A newswire service might support access to national news in regional areas and be funded to support regional news media.
- h) The commercial focus and concentration of media (and the similar focus on saving resources in an underfunded public broadcaster) has resulted in a very Southern city centric approach to news and commentary. The recent NewsCorp changes, and economic recession, have left many small regional media outlets struggling. This is noticeable even in major capital cities in other states such as Brisbane.
- i) In Australia government has always had an essential role in providing national access to public interest news – traditionally this has been provided by the ABC as a national broadcaster with a charter of independence. The ABC has also traditionally provided news about Australia globally as an essential service in the public interest. More recently both the independence of broadcasters and any regulation of their activities has been severely eroded or outdated by technical developments, global business agreements and complex structures. In the 21st century, internet platforms and increasingly concentrated news services have essentially commodified citizens as a means to build viable business models, attract advertising, broadcast rights, and 'ratings'. This focus has shifted media

² E.g. www.worldometers.info is used by most people under 30 years

considerations and much journalistic practice away from traditional ideas of public interest. The commercialised policy approach to digital news services and a lack of interest in how bias, misinformation, and polarisation has become strategic as a means to engage people as 'click bait' for internal advertising and reach measures has permeated much of our media and changed the behaviour of some politicians. The huge volume of broadcasting about the Trump style misinformation was clearly a commercial, not a public interest, decision in Australia. Many have copied his behaviour.

As mentioned above, most traditional news outlets now use free expert information available in social media as a source for broadcast material. It is unclear why the media platforms would pay for secondary media material from organizations posted online and not for the primary material in social media. The current push by struggling commercial media to be paid for posting material on the internet platforms seems ill informed and an attempt to avoid direct engagement with the changing environment.

Some Suggestions for Change

The following suggestions may provide a basis for a smoother evolution of media services in the public interest.

1. Begin with a national public discussion and consensus building processes about what constitutes public interest in the 21st century and why. A basic principle of such a discussion would be that it is in the public interest that people engage with understand and share such information
2. Recognise that the emerging technologies, and some power asymmetries, mean that traditional media organisations, media regulators and our public interest laws to protect people who 'publish' information need a major update and continuing independent review.
3. Recognise that traditional communications media are now even more supported by volunteer community-based expert interactive and informal communication in social media, especially in emergencies, and value the public interest citizen communication in all its diversity.
4. Invest in and support a broader diversity of media organizations to provide public interest 'news' and essential information and, where necessary, designed to meet the needs of diverse groups. The Covid_19 pandemic has shown us how even state departments of health can rapidly learn to upgrade communication in the public interest and produce it as necessary in languages other than English. Who would have thought that 'doughnut days' would come to mean successful suppression of a health threat.
5. Recognise that the current media concentration and commercial dominance:
 - a. Has slowed the evolution of new business models and a more diverse market of independent media
 - b. Created a style of biased, divisive, misleading, and callous editorial processes that are not necessarily in the public interest
 - c. Has commodified and distorted the interactive informal discussions and civil learning processes that underpin a healthy democracy

It is essential that all governments take regulatory steps to ensure that all citizens have access to a range of public interest media in affordable and understandable ways and can question, discuss, and adapt such information in their own lives.