

**SBS SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE STANDING ENVIRONMENT AND
COMMUNICATIONS REFERENCES COMMITTEE
MEDIA DIVERSITY IN AUSTRALIA
DECEMBER 2020**

Key Points

- The Special Broadcasting Service Corporation (**SBS**) supports Australia's democratic society by providing impartial and balanced news and information in English and 63 languages other than English, informing the community about local, national and global events, and enabling participation in civic life.
- This year, SBS television marked 40 years of broadcasts and SBS Radio marked 45 years. SBS has a long legacy of ensuring that news and information is available to Australia's multicultural and multilingual communities, and these services are more relevant now than ever before.
- The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (**ACCC**), through its Digital Platforms Inquiry, and related inquiries and consultations, has undertaken in-depth analysis of the impact of online global platforms on Australian news media businesses. As a public broadcaster, SBS continues to play an extremely important role in delivering public interest journalism to all Australians, addressing potential under-provision of certain forms of journalism including to particular language communities and First Nations peoples, and contributing to media plurality.
- In recent years, like other news media businesses, SBS has seen changes in traditional business models. The dominance of major digital platforms, and their ability to attract advertising revenue traditionally earned by broadcast platforms is relevant to SBS—particularly as approximately 30 percent of its revenue is earned from commercial sources, principally advertising. The introduction of a remuneration framework under the proposed News Media Bargaining Code, with payments from digital platforms to news media businesses for news content, would support SBS's ongoing investment in public interest journalism.
- As news content is increasingly made available online, digital media literacy is becoming more important. With additional funding, SBS is ideally placed to have a key role in any future digital literacy initiatives through its trusted multilingual news services and SBS Learn platform.
- Government appropriations to SBS reflect the relevance and value of SBS as a trusted public broadcaster and constructive public policy investment, contributing to the vitality of Australia as a successful, inclusive, democratic society. Continuity and certainty of funding are critical to the ongoing planning and provision of these valued services.

Introduction

The Special Broadcasting Service Corporation (**SBS**) appreciates the opportunity to submit to the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee inquiry into the state of media diversity, independence and reliability in Australia and related impacts on public interest journalism and democracy.

SBS supports Australia's democratic society by providing impartial and balanced news and information in English and 63 languages other than English, informing the community about local, national and global events, and enabling participation in civic life. SBS is an independent national broadcaster operating under the *Special Broadcasting Service Act 1991* (the **SBS Act**). Under the SBS Act, SBS has sole responsibility for determining its content. Independent, non-partisan public broadcasting delivers significant public benefits, including holding governments and institutions to account, and reporting on matters in the public interest.

SBS delivers content that enhances and enriches the Australian community through creating a more informed society, and promoting social and civic inclusion. Our unique connections and experience with multicultural, multilingual and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities enable SBS to cover news and tell the stories of those communities, and through the perspectives and voices of these communities. In particular, the news, current affairs and information services provided by SBS inform and promote understanding among all Australians of different cultures and maximise opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds to engage in social, political and cultural discourse. SBS has rigorous editorial standards and Codes of Practice¹ in place which underpin the delivery of its independent and balanced news and current affairs services.

This year, SBS television marked 40 years of broadcasts and SBS Radio marked 45 years. SBS has a long legacy of ensuring that news and information is available to Australia's multicultural and multilingual communities, and these services are more relevant now than ever before – for example, reaching all Australians with vital public health information has been essential to saving lives during the COVID-19 crisis². SBS has a unique ability to reach Australia's many language communities through its multiplatform services in English and in 63 other languages.

SBS Radio news services

SBS provides extensive news services across radio, television and digital platforms. SBS Radio services are available in 63 languages. Following each Census (every five years), SBS reviews its language services to ensure they reflect today's Australia and are meeting the needs of the community, and that SBS is delivering balanced and impartial news and information on the platforms and devices audiences are choosing to use. SBS has an unparalleled connection to these communities, with SBS Radio staff actively involved in community events and issues. SBS Radio services produce original content, which also feeds into SBS English-language news and current affairs services.

SBS has made a significant investment to ensure the quality and reach of its language news services. For example, prior to 2016, SBS Radio was broadcasting two hours of Arabic language content daily, primarily attracting listeners from the Lebanese Australian community. In 2016, SBS launched SBS Arabic24, a 24-hour service to better serve all Arabic-speaking communities (which represent more than 20 cultures in Australia). Audience demographics have since shifted substantially, with over 90 per

¹ <https://www.sbs.com.au/aboutus/sbs-codes-of-practice>

² In less than a week, the SBS Radio team developed and launched the SBS Multilingual Coronavirus Portal in 63 languages—to curate all COVID-19 content in one, easily shareable destination www.sbs.com.au/coronavirus

cent of listeners born overseas³. The Australian Iraqi community is now the largest audience segment, and Lebanese is the fourth largest. Many recently arrived communities are now engaging with Australian news and information in Arabic. SBS Arabic24 has the largest Arabic-speaking radio audience in Australia, more than twice the market share of the next largest provider, with 55% of Arabic speakers in Australia engaging in SBS services.

SBS television and digital news services

SBS's news and current affairs services are among the most trusted in Australia, according to *The Essential Report Trust in Media survey*, the most recent results from which were published in June 2019. The results demonstrate that trust in SBS's television news and current affairs was 13 percentage points higher than commercial television news and current affairs and 14 percentage points higher than news and opinion in daily newspapers.⁴

Importantly, while migrants to Australia can readily access homeland news and information via satellite TV and the internet, SBS delivers Australian news and information in-language, with content subject to accuracy, impartiality and balance requirements and complaints processes set out in the SBS Codes of Practice. There is a clear public interest in ensuring that SBS news and current affairs services are readily available and accessible to the Australian community and SBS's evolving language strategy is ensuring that these services reach Australia's many multilingual communities.⁵

National Indigenous Television (**NITV**), which is part of SBS, provides news and current affairs services from an Indigenous perspective. Programs such as *NITV News: Nula* and *The Point* shine a light on issues impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia. During COVID-19 NITV's news and current affairs coverage was expanded to provide a daily news service, seven days a week, delivering accurate and up-to-date information. The importance of NITV as a news source has also been particularly apparent recently. In response to Black Lives Matter demonstrations and national discussions on issues including race, police brutality and deaths in custody, *The Point* produced four extra one-hour live panel shows. NITV has strong digital engagement audiences across its website and social media profiles.

NITV plays an important role in featuring Indigenous languages in news and current affairs content. For example, NITV marked the 2019 United Nations Year of Indigenous languages by renaming its weekly news program from *Week in Review* to *Nula* - a locational word in the Sydney-based Dharug language, meaning 'here, there or everywhere'.

SBS and NITV's suite of news and current affairs programming is highly valued by audiences. In 2020, for the first time, SBS has had an audience share of over eight percent. Ratings for *SBS World News* have increased by more than 30 percent compared to 2019, and *The Feed* has seen a 144 percent increase year-on-year.⁶ SBS will continue to build on this through its 2021 offering, with the return of its flagship news and current affairs programming.

³ SBS internal data. 2018.

⁴ <https://essentialvision.com.au/trust-media-outlets>

⁵ In 2019 SBS launched the 'Chinese Collection' and the 'Arabic Collection' on SBS On Demand. These collections include episodes of *Insight* and *Dateline* subtitled in Simplified Chinese and Arabic. Key SBS World News stories are also subtitled and provided on digital platforms (eg. COVID stories subtitled in Simplified Chinese). SBS has launched in-language login and navigation across its digital services, including Simplified Chinese and Arabic - the only Australian media provider offering this service. This will be expanded to Hindi, Korean and Vietnamese in 2021.

⁶ Oztam Metro and Regtam regional data, August 2020.

SBS is the only major Australian network providing a nightly World News service, news services made by and for Indigenous Australians, and the only network servicing communities with Australian news in 63 languages. SBS represents a unique proposition in the market that is essential to maintaining diversity in the Australian media landscape.

Changes to media business models

SBS receives approximately 30 percent of its revenue each year from commercial activities – principally advertising across its television, radio and digital platforms. SBS, through the SBS Act, is limited to five minutes per hour of advertising on its television and radio channels – in contrast, this is approximately one third the amount provided on commercial television networks. SBS voluntarily observes the same limit on its SBS On Demand service. These limits provide for a less cluttered program schedule compared with commercial television, while still providing for SBS to earn own-source revenue to invest in production of distinctive content, including public interest journalism.

SBS has a strong commercial strategy in place, to ensure that its commercial revenues continue to support its investment in Australian content. Additionally, the introduction of a remuneration framework, supporting payments from the digital platforms to Australian news media businesses, as proposed by the draft News Media Bargaining Code proposed by Government, would support SBS's ongoing ability to invest in quality journalism. SBS has previously entered into commercial agreements with these platforms, and agreements of these types are increasingly important opportunities for news media businesses.

Impact of online global platforms

Digital Platforms Inquiry

The ACCC through its Digital Platforms Inquiry, and related inquiries and consultations⁷, has undertaken in-depth analysis of the impact of online global platforms on Australian news media businesses.

SBS's response to the Treasury's consultation on the Final Report notes that as a public broadcaster, SBS will continue to play an extremely important role in addressing potential under-provision of certain forms of journalism, and contributing to media plurality.⁸

Over recent years, SBS has enhanced its delivery of services to the Australian community through investment in online, video, podcasting, and social media content, which has generated strong audience growth. SBS continues to execute its digital evolution plan to adapt and reflect the rapid changes in media consumption habits, and to maintain SBS's relevance to diverse Australian communities. SBS's ability to reach audiences through digital platforms is vital. The introduction of a News Media Bargaining Code, as is currently under development, would significantly improve the business transparency and accountability of these platforms, in their relationships with news media businesses.⁹

SBS continues to be actively involved in the implementation of recommendations from the Digital Platforms Inquiry, including commenting on a recent draft Disinformation Code.¹⁰ In an era of concern about the proliferation of misinformation and other unreliable news online, SBS's high quality news and information outputs, provided in a

⁷ ACCC Digital Platforms <https://www.accc.gov.au/focus-areas/digital-platforms>

⁸ https://www.sbs.com.au/aboutus/sites/sbs.com.au/aboutus/files/41_sbs_submission_-_treasury_consultation_-_accc_digital_platforms_inquiry_final_report_-_september_2019.final_.pdf

⁹ SBS's most recent submission on the proposed News Media Bargaining Code is available here: <https://www.sbs.com.au/aboutus/draft-news-media-and-digital-platform-mandatory-bargaining-code>

¹⁰ <SBS website reference to be added>

broad range of languages, deliver significant value to the major digital platforms by providing their users with news they can trust. SBS recognises the critical role of digital platforms in managing mis- and disinformation.

As noted above, the introduction of a remuneration framework from digital platforms to Australian news media businesses would support the production of quality, trusted, public interest journalism for all Australians. SBS has actively participated in consultations with the ACCC and Treasury regarding the introduction of the News Media Bargaining Code, aimed at mitigating the bargaining imbalance between Australian news media businesses and digital platforms. A related inquiry on digital advertising services is also in progress. SBS's submission to that inquiry is available from the website.¹¹

Digital media literacy

As news content is increasingly made available online, digital media literacy is becoming more important. The ACCC's *Digital Platforms Inquiry – Final Report* noted that 'ABC and SBS are already involved in the provision of digital media literacy resources, and the ACCC considers that organisations participating in the proposed program could partner with these entities in the development and delivery of education and training.'¹²

SBS has experience reaching a range of audiences, including children, with education resources. SBS provides education resources to both extend the reach of its content, and to meet its Charter obligation to provide radio, television and digital media services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians. SBS's multiplatform capabilities, including in producing audio-visual content, makes it a very distinctive education provider. For example, the SBS Learn website has recently published an article from SBS *World News* journalist and presenter, Darren Mara, titled 'Media literacy in the fake news era'.¹³

With additional funding, SBS is ideally placed to have a key role in any future digital literacy initiatives through its trusted multilingual news services and SBS Learn platform. SBS has experience working with partners to draw on expertise of relevant subject matter experts. For example, ahead of the August 2019 premiere of SBS drama, *The Hunting*, SBS partnered with the eSafety Commissioner to produce educational resources to assist parents and teachers keep young people safe online.¹⁰ Available through SBS's education portal, SBS Learn, the resources provide families, carers, teachers and school communities with conversation starters about image sharing and cyber bullying, to help promote safe and positive experiences online.

SBS Learn plays a crucial role in building capacity for Australian teachers and students to expand understanding of non-dominant cultural narratives and the exploration of a range of narrative voices. For example, SBS Learn provides detailed learning materials to explore Aboriginal languages using SBS interactive documentaries as a teaching tool (for example the teacher resources for both *My Grandmother's Lingo* and *K'Gari*). As official education partner of NAIDOC Week, SBS produces an in-depth guide to exploring the annual theme. This is broadly distributed to fulfil SBS's commitment to educating all Australians as a contribution to a more cohesive society. SBS Learn regularly publishes learning materials in languages other than English, building digital learning capacity for students interacting with these materials as online learning activities.

¹¹ https://www.sbs.com.au/aboutus/digital-advertising-services-ad-tech_1

¹² ACCC *Digital Platforms Inquiry – Final Report*,

<https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Digital%20platforms%20inquiry%20-%20ofinal%20report.pdf> page 21

¹³ Darren Mara, 'Media Literacy in the fake news era', *SBS Learn*, 23 October 2020
<https://www.sbs.com.au/learn/media-literacy-in-the-fake-news-era>

These and other models can be used to create further media and digital literacy resources to support the wider Australian community, including in languages other than English, and potentially through an extension of the SBS Settlement Guide.¹⁴

The role of a newswire services

Newswire services are critical to enhancing the breadth of news stories covered by Australian media. Few media organisations are resourced to provide a news service from all states, territories and regional areas in particular. Newswire services provide factual and unbiased information, enhancing public interest journalism. SBS has limited resources and newswire services assist SBS with reliable information as required, enabling SBS to prioritise relevant and unique stories for our audiences and to seek out the perspectives of those who would otherwise be unheard.

The role of the government in supporting public interest journalism

Government appropriations to SBS reflect the relevance and value of SBS as a trusted public broadcaster and constructive public policy intervention, contributing to the vitality of Australia as a successful, inclusive, democratic society. Continuity and certainty of funding is critical to the ongoing planning and provision of these valued services. SBS's role in providing multilingual news programming was recognised in the 2020 Federal Budget (October 2020), with the provision of additional funding for language services.

In late November 2020, the Government released the *Media Reform Green Paper – Modernising television regulation in Australia* (the **Green Paper**). It noted that:

...business models supporting the production of public interest journalism face significant challenges, which have been exacerbated and accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic; and support of some form will be required to safeguard the ongoing provision and dissemination of journalism, particularly at a regional and local level...¹⁵

The Green Paper proposed the capitalisation, through the sale of spectrum, of the existing Public Interest News Gathering Trust (the **PING Trust**). The PING Trust, as it is proposed, would include direct financing and equity investments, and applications would be made via a competitive grant process. While SBS is not currently eligible for the Government's Public Interest Newsgathering Initiative, should the PING Trust be introduced, it would be important for SBS to be able to access these funds to support its ongoing investment in journalism.

¹⁴ SBS Settlement Guide <https://www.sbs.com.au/language/english/podcast/settlement-guide>

¹⁵ Australian Government, *Media Reform Green Paper – Modernising television regulation in Australia* <add link>, page 26