

ABC submission on media diversity in Australia

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Executive Summary

In this submission, the ABC acknowledges the benefits to society and its own operations from media diversity in Australia. Principally, it notes that:

- Media diversity is a characteristic of strong democratic societies. It gives audiences a better chance to access a wider range of perspectives around issues as well as relevant news and information. This supports a more engaged and better-informed society.
- The ABC is an essential element in the Australian media landscape. It provides a foundation for public interest journalism across the country and has a focus on presenting a diversity of views. It ensures that Australians always have access to a free source of independent news and information.
- Other news outlets extend and increase coverage and provide additional perspectives, further informing and enriching public debate. More concentration among news outlets, either through consolidation or closures, may mean that stories are missed and voices are lost. This danger is particularly acute at the community or “hyperlocal” level where it is more difficult to sustain commercial newsgathering efforts.

Introduction

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee's inquiry into media diversity in Australia. This submission provides the ABC's perspective on the areas of interest to the Committee where they are relevant to the ABC's role, functions, and operations.

The ABC Charter establishes that the ABC is part of an Australian broadcasting system that consists of national, commercial, and community sectors and requires the ABC to take account of the commercial and community sectors in the provision of its services.¹ This requirement frames the ABC's operations as one provider among others, recognising the value of, and support for, media diversity in Australia.

The Charter also establishes the ABC as an independent media provider that stands apart from both government and commercial interests. It is a pillar supporting the democratic principle of a free press that strives to keep citizens informed and hold the powerful to account.

Diverse media ownership is an additional democratic safeguard. It creates opportunities for a range of views to be heard and helps to ensure that no single voice or viewpoint dominates public debate. It increases the opportunities for, and likelihood of, coverage that better reflects the diversity of Australian communities. It also creates healthy competition that encourages providers to seek and tell untold stories and reach for the quality that wins audiences and awards.

But the issue of media diversity in Australia has evolved. It is now more than a question of media ownership across print and broadcast outlets in specific geographic areas. The rise of digital media has disrupted traditional business models and made more media outlets more accessible – from anywhere in the world. It has also created virtual spaces for sharing and commenting on news coverage.

The apparent abundance of media may obscure the fact that the issue of media diversity remains problematic. While there are more outlets, more platforms, and new types of providers, sources of genuine, well-researched, and fact-based newsgathering have not grown or strengthened in equal measure. This goes to the heart of the Committee's interest in the impact of the current state of media diversity on public interest journalism.

Around the world, the rise of the so-called "tech giants" has disrupted the business models and revenue sources of traditional news outlets. Newspapers have closed and radio and television audiences have declined. Thousands of journalists have lost their jobs.

In Australia, more than 3,000 journalism jobs were lost in the decade to 2018.² Since then, more than 200 newsrooms have closed or downsized across the TV networks, newspapers, services like AAP, and especially in regional Australia.³ The ABC has also lost experienced reporters in response to funding cuts.

The loss of journalists and news outlets has reduced the amount of professional newsgathering – the kind of newsgathering that forms the core of public interest journalism. While some small independent outlets have emerged, such as *The News* in Naracoorte SA, most professional newsgathering in the commercial sector remains limited to the outlets of the major providers, News Corp, Nine Entertainment, Seven West Media, and Australian Community Media.

¹ *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983* (Cth), ss 6(1)(a) and 6(2)(a)(i).

² [MEAA Submission to the ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry](#) (2018)

³ [Number of public interest news contractions in Australia tops 200](#)

The decline in professional newsgathering means that fewer stories are told from fewer perspectives, and there is less scrutiny of government, institutions, and powerful interests. This, in turn, weakens the role the public interest journalism plays in strengthening democracy.

It is widely acknowledged that access to public interest journalism is both an indicator of, and contributes to, the health of democratic societies. For example, in establishing the Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund, the Australian Government affirmed that “quality journalism is an important feature of our democracy” and “offers the public reliable information to support decisions in political, economic and social life.”⁴

For the ABC, a commitment to the highest standards of public interest journalism is central to its purpose. It is vital for the health of Australia’s democracy and the trust Australians place in government and the institutions and organisations that shape their lives. Diversity among those that deliver public interest journalism strengthens it further.

Responses to specific areas of inquiry

a) the current state of public interest journalism in Australia and any barriers to Australian voters' ability to access reliable, accurate and independent news

The ABC maintains a strong commitment to public interest journalism and continues to deliver high-impact coverage of issues and events that affect Australian lives. However, the loss of journalists and news outlets in Australia has reduced the amount of such coverage overall.

These losses compound other conditions in the media environment that could have an impact on access to news. These may include the cost of connecting to internet and cable services, the cost of subscriptions to news providers, and the difficulties audiences may encounter in identifying trustworthy sources in a crowded online environment. Barriers may also exist due to inadequate measures for making content accessible for people living with a disability and/or from non-English speaking backgrounds.

For its part, the ABC aims to provide services that reach all Australians via radio, TV, and digital platforms and to make each service as accessible as possible. In some cases, this means partnering with other media providers and distributors, including those at the community level, to ensure that public interest journalism reaches as many different audiences as possible.

The extent of these services depends on the level of funding the ABC has to allocate to newsgathering, while meeting its other Charter obligations, in an environment of rising costs. The ABC devotes a significant part of its budget to public interest news priorities, such as investigative journalism, election coverage, and emergency information. This delivers high-quality news and information that keeps Australians informed and helps them stay safe.

The ABC also works hard to innovate and find efficiencies in its newsgathering options to stretch its funding further and reinvest in new ways to produce and deliver news. For

⁴ [Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation Package](#)

example, ABC reporters routinely file stories for radio, TV, and digital platforms using lightweight equipment that allows them to operate alone in the field.

In this way, the ABC provides a foundation and benchmark for public interest journalism in Australia. However, it was not created – and does not have the resources – to cover all the stories that could and should be told across the country. Australians benefit when they have a choice of providers delivering public interest news they can trust.

Regional communities have endured the most significant decline in media diversity in recent years. The loss of local newspapers as a result of the decline in advertising revenue and the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced access to news from, and for, smaller communities. There has also been a marked decline in suburban newspapers.

The ABC plays a critical role in connecting rural and regional communities and gives them a voice in national conversations. Its regional radio and digital services have a strong focus on keeping these communities informed and sharing a wide range of perspectives. However, while ABC networks and digital services reach all Australians, its journalists must travel extensively to report from many locations.

Local news outlets also play a vital role in keeping their communities informed. Each outlet that closes reduces the sources of public interest journalism available to them. This, in turn, creates gaps or “news deserts” where there is little, if any, regular news reporting at a community and local government level.

b) the effect of media concentration on democracy in Australia

Media diversity is important for democracy. Multiple independent providers create the best chance for important stories to be covered, for all voices to be heard, for issues to be debated, and for governments and other powerful interests to be held to account.

The ABC contributes to diversity, standing as an independent provider at regional, state, and national levels. The ABC’s Charter also requires it to provide a comprehensive service that is impartial and reflects cultural diversity. However, in the markets it serves and at the local community level, there are often few alternatives. In some regional areas, the ABC may be the only provider of independent public interest journalism reporting for the region itself.⁵

A lack of media diversity may manifest in different ways. It may occur through the loss of reporters, which severs the connection between communities and the national conversation. This may affect regional communities or marginal groups which may go unrepresented when there are not enough reporters and outlets to raise their voices.

A lack of diversity may also occur through vertical and horizontal integration, where a corporation owns multiple outlets and operates at multiple levels of the supply chain. In such cases, content in multiple outlets may be syndicated from one source.

It should be noted that other aspects of the current media landscape may threaten democracy as well. These include the rise of partisan outlets, misinformation/disinformation, attacks on science and professional journalism, attacks on press freedom and freedom of speech, and the “filter bubble” effect that draws social media users into an “echo chamber” that limits their exposure to a variety of media sources.

⁵ ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry Final Report (June 2019).

c) the impact of Australia’s media ownership laws on media concentration in Australia

The ABC takes commercial media operators into account in its operations and service planning. It aims to be available for all Australians to provide a source of independent news alongside commercial and community media. Beyond this, ownerships laws do not directly affect the ABC.

Increased concentration that results in the loss of local news services places some additional demand on the ABC. In response to this, the ABC’s Five-Year Plan places a greater emphasis on local news and increasing its coverage for regional and outer-suburban areas. The ABC has also undertaken to direct any dividend from the proposed ACCC News Bargaining Code to public interest journalism in regional Australia.

d) the impact of significant changes to media business models since the advent of online news and the barriers to viability and profitability of public interest news services

This issue is not directly related to the ABC’s role and functions, although the ABC’s impact on the market has been questioned in the past. In 2018, the Competitive Neutrality Review found that the ABC was competing fairly, and that the “most significant competitive pressures for news, entertainment and advertising are coming from giant international companies.”⁶

It is worth noting that, due to those pressures, the value of public interest journalism has only increased. Likewise, the ABC’s role as a provider and contributor to media diversity has also gained in importance.

e) the impact of online global platforms such as Facebook, Google and Twitter on the media industry and sharing of news in Australia

The impact of the “tech giants” on the media industry is undeniably profound and far-reaching. For the ABC, it has required new approaches to content-making and distribution to ensure that Australians have access to, and encounter, independent and trustworthy news on the platforms they chose to use. This has placed an additional burden on organisations gathering, producing, and distributing news content.

There are also challenges for all news providers in reaching audiences. There is increased competition for attention due to the variety and volume of content available online. News providers also have little or no control over the algorithms that search engines and social media platforms use to display content to audiences.

Increasingly, governments around the world are attempting to regulate the markets built around digital platforms and the activity on them. This includes confronting risks associated with privacy, the use of personal data, defamation and hate speech, and the competitive market environment. It also includes directing digital platforms to create their own industry code for dealing with disinformation on their platforms to better protect audiences.

The regulatory efforts aim to protect rights and create fair market conditions. In Australia, the Government has established inquiries, such as the ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry, and

⁶ [Inquiry into the Competitive Neutrality of the National Broadcasters—report by the Expert Panel](#)

undertaken reviews of legislation relevant to the technology and media sectors, including a review of the 1988 Privacy Act.

The ABC has participated in these inquiries and reviews and will continue to monitor action on these issues. The hope is always that they will lead to positive outcomes for news providers, technology companies and, most of all, the public. However, it is also important to remain watchful for possible negative consequences. The ABC may be affected by regulatory efforts in different ways. For example, laws governing data use and privacy may be strongly in the public interest but increase compliance costs while laws that regulate free speech may have a “chilling effect” on the practice of journalism, especially investigative journalism.

f) the barriers faced by small, independent and community news outlets in Australia

As noted above, the ABC acknowledges the threats to community news outlets in Australia. These outlets rely heavily on local advertising and other sources of funding. The ABC sees value in these outlets and is currently investigating ways it may be able to support them, such as through training or content sharing, if funding becomes available.

g) the role that a newswire service plays in supporting diverse public interest journalism in Australia

The ABC makes use of content from a variety of agencies, including AAP. This content enables news outlets to offer a more comprehensive service to their audiences. AAP, in particular, provides court reporting and other public interest journalism, which effectively spreads the cost of this wider coverage across the industry.

Viable news wire services make an important contribution to public interest journalism in Australia. If these services are lost or reduced, the public record is diminished and there is a real risk that important stories may be under-reported or missed altogether. For the ABC, this would place additional pressure on news operations to cover reporting gaps, stretching limited resources more thinly.

h) the state of local, regional and rural media outlets in Australia

As noted above, commercial coverage at the local and regional level is under threat and the loss of reporters and outlets is widespread. The decline of local news will reduce access to public interest journalism in general, as well as resulting in less news from, and for, communities. It could also reduce accountability and transparency at the local level in many communities.

The Australian Government has provided some support for commercial local media through its Public Interest News Gathering program and other measures in response to the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.⁷ These measures are welcome, but it remains to be seen if the sector will find a successful revenue model that will enable it to continue longer-term.

If the decline continues, however, the ABC may face increasing pressure to provide more news at a community or “hyperlocal” level. This would not address the loss of media

⁷ [Relief for Australian media during COVID-19](#)

diversity, but it would give communities access to public interest journalism that is directly relevant to them.

It should be noted that the ABC was not established to deliver hyperlocal news across Australia. This was the province of the once profitable local newspaper sector. The ABC was aimed more at bringing national news to communities and helping local voices to be heard in their regions and in national debates. More recently however, in response to the decline of local news, the ABC has worked to cover more ground at the local with the funding it has available. This includes undertaking initiatives to place more reporters in outer-suburban centres and extend the range of reporters to more remote communities.

i) the role of government in supporting a viable and diverse public interest journalism sector in Australia

The ABC believes government has a critical role to play in supporting a viable and diverse public interest journalism sector in Australia. Its support includes funding and protecting the independence of public service media and ensuring that industry regulation encourages a viable and diverse commercial media sector.

The ABC is at the forefront of public interest journalism in Australia. Programs like *Four Corners* have a long record of investigative journalism that has exposed corruption and triggered Royal Commissions. The ABC's coverage of elections is second-to-none and it has been acknowledged that its emergency coverage saves lives. The ABC also operates foreign bureaux that apply an Australian perspective to important international news events.

This critical work depends on a level of government funding that enables the ABC to sustain high-quality journalism and national coverage against a tide of rising costs and the need to reach audiences on an increasing number of platforms.

Conclusion

Media ownership in Australia remains relatively concentrated and this is one measure of diversity in the sector. The loss of journalists, consolidation across newsrooms, and the loss of local newspapers also represents fewer stories and fewer voices being heard around the country. Wherever public interest journalism is diminished, there is less accountability and less transparency, and Australia's democracy becomes less resilient.

The ABC would welcome further positive steps to increase media diversity. Any improvement in the number of outlets and reporters contributing to public interest journalism in Australia would serve to strengthen communities and raise the level of public debate.

At the same time, it remains vital to maintain and strengthen the ABC to ensure that public interest journalism continues to be available to all Australians. The commercial media sector may be subject to further uncertainty and disruptions. The ABC allows the Government to ensure that there is always an independent and free source of information available, especially in times of crisis. The popularity of the ABC's news and emergency services during the 2019–20 bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic are strong testaments to this.