



**Australian Government**

**Department of Infrastructure, Transport,  
Regional Development, Communications and the Arts**

# **News Media Assistance Program Consultation Paper**

December 2023



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ISBN 978-1-922879-16-5  
December 2023

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## Introduction

Public interest journalism plays a critical role in our society. The Australian Government considers that government intervention to support public interest journalism should be done within a principles-based and evidence-informed framework.

That is why the Government committed to develop the News Media Assistance Program (News MAP), to secure that evidence base needed to inform news and media policy interventions and formulate measures to support public interest journalism and media diversity. This paper seeks stakeholder input on future policy settings, and their implementation, including the role for government.

The Government recognises the multiple pressures facing many news producers, and acknowledges the number of reviews and inquiries which have examined these issues and made recommendations to address them, in recent years.

These processes have involved comprehensive stakeholder input and led to action in a range of areas, including financial assistance to news businesses and the News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code. However, some measures have been ad hoc or reactive.

A holistic approach is needed to respond to the interlinked social, economic and technological drivers shaping news and journalism in Australia.

Government intervention to support public interest journalism and media diversity should be principles-based and evidence-informed across policy development, implementation and evaluation.

The News MAP is being designed to meet these needs through consideration of:

- **Objectives:** establishing clear policy objectives to guide effective policy development, implementation and evaluation to support the sector,
- **Measures:** identifying potential measures to support the sector and factors to be considered in the effective application of measures, and
- **Evidence:** improving the evidence base needed to assess the state of public interest journalism and media diversity in Australia, identify areas of need and inform policy.

This discussion paper is structured in three parts.

**Part 1, 'Framework and objectives'**, discusses the role and benefits of public interest journalism in our society, the factors which may moderate those benefits, the factors which influence when and how government might intervene, and seeks feedback on four proposed objectives to guide future potential interventions.

The four proposed objectives are:

1. Access,
2. Quality,
3. Media Diversity, and
4. Engagement.

**Part 2, ‘Potential measures’**, discusses options to support public interest journalism. What have we learned through previous and current industry support measures? What are the factors government should consider and balance in policy and program design and implementation?

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (the ACMA) examines regulatory efficiency and effectiveness on an ongoing basis, and provides advice to the department and government on regulatory implementation considerations for new policy interventions, which includes consideration of self- and co-regulatory arrangements. The ACMA’s longstanding work suggests the need for governments to use a range of regulatory and non-regulatory approaches to realise public policy objectives, particularly in a sector undergoing a rapid series of transformations fuelled by economic, technological and social change.<sup>1</sup>

**Part 3, ‘Establishing the evidence base’**, considers what is needed to establish and maintain the evidence base for future government intervention in supporting the public good of a diverse and vibrant market for news and public interest journalism.

Feedback received from stakeholders will inform the design of the News MAP policy framework and the focus of future evidence-building activities. Subject to this consultation, it is anticipated that evidence sources to inform the News MAP will include existing news market data, such as that maintained by the Public Interest Journalism Initiative; the Media Diversity Measurement Framework developed by the ACMA; and evaluations of current and future programs.

At a practical level, it is anticipated the News MAP policy framework will help guide decisions around when government intervention is warranted, the purposes to which it should be applied, and where it should be targeted.<sup>2</sup>

We encourage stakeholders to provide detailed feedback to inform the development of a sustainable future for news and journalism in Australia.

## Definitions and Scope

As part of this first stage of consultation, we are interested in stakeholder perspectives on issues relevant to the role of government, and principles for policy intervention, relating to news and journalism. However, it is necessary to exclude some matters from consideration. These include:

- protections for journalists and their sources, which have been considered as part of the Attorney General’s review of Commonwealth secrecy offences and press freedom reforms,
- media harmonisation—a long-term regulatory reform agenda to address professional content delivery and consumption shifts to online services and digital platforms,
- conditions for journalists reporting from foreign jurisdictions, and
- the role and funding of the National Broadcasters, noting that public consultation as part of a review of options to support the independence of national broadcasters was recently concluded.

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<sup>1</sup> [Optimal conditions for effective self and co regulatory .pdf \(acma.gov.au\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> The Hon Michelle Rowland MP, Minister for Communications, Speech to the Local and Independent News Association (LINA) Inaugural Summit, 31 March 2023.

We recognise that news and journalism do not occur in a vacuum, and that many of these issues may be relevant to the questions raised in this paper. We encourage stakeholders to identify these broader issues where they are most relevant.

This paper refers to ‘news’ and ‘journalism’ separately, although they are largely addressed together. ‘News’ is used to refer to the public reporting of relevant information and events, without any value judgement about its qualities. ‘Journalism’ is used to refer to those activities that discover, or otherwise enhance the value of that information. It encompasses investigation, critical analysis, contextualisation and explanation.

The term ‘public interest journalism’ is also used throughout the paper, reflecting the expectation that news and journalism are produced in support of public interests.

The ACCC’s final report on its Digital Platforms Inquiry defined public interest journalism as the following:

**Public Interest Journalism—ACCC definition**

Journalism with the primary purpose of recording, investigating and explaining issues of public significance in order to engage citizens in public debate and inform democratic decision making at all levels of government.

ACCC, Digital Platforms Inquiry Final Report (2019), p285

The ACCC’s definition identifies many of the characteristics essential to the democratic benefits of news and journalism. However, there are questions about whether it:

- fully encapsulates the requirements of public interest journalism; and
- is sufficient for journalism to simply inform on a matter of public significance, or whether it must do so with diligence, without the intention to mislead or influence for private or partisan purposes.

We welcome your feedback on this issue.

## Contributing Your Views

The department welcomes written submissions responding to both parts of the paper, including the specific questions raised, and any other matters relevant to the issues raised. Respondents should feel free to respond to those questions which are of greatest relevance, or where they consider they may make a valuable contribution. The questions are a guide for discussion, and we welcome submissions on other matters, including those seeking to challenge assumptions we may have made. Submissions should be received by 22 February 2024.

Written submissions can be lodged by:

Website: <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/have-your-say/news-media-assistance-program-news-map>

Post:

Director, News and Journalism Section  
Platforms and News Branch—Online Safety, Media and Platforms Division  
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts  
GPO Box 594  
Canberra ACT 2601

Submissions should include the respondent's name, organisation (if applicable) and contact details. Submissions without verifiable contact information may not be considered.

Questions can be directed to: [news.journalism@communications.gov.au](mailto:news.journalism@communications.gov.au)

# Part 1: Framework and Objectives



# The Public Interests Arising from News and Journalism

## The Benefits of Public Interest News and Journalism

Ideally, the spectrum of public interest journalism reflects the pluralism and diversity of our society and provides fair, accurate, trustworthy, timely and topical information to all of its citizens.

The majority of the benefits identified in this paper involve both private and public components. However, there may also be private benefits that, if distributed sufficiently broadly, may give rise to public interests where they support other public policy objectives.

### 1. Informed Democratic Participation

News and journalism inform citizens about the issues, options and candidates that are subject to their democratic decisions.<sup>3</sup> Well informed citizens contribute to proper functioning of democracy by improving the likelihood that outcomes will reflect community expectations and preferences, helping to dispel and discourage misleading practices, and better aligning expectations with outcomes.

### 2. Informed Public Administration and Policy

News and journalism play an essential role informing decision-makers about the issues of significance to Australian citizens and communities, and their views on those issues; empowering governments to respond to and reflect community expectations. News and journalism also play a corresponding role by providing citizens with a platform for advocacy to government and public activism.

### 3. Trusted and Accountable Institutions

News and journalism are capable of scrutinising and publicising the actions of institutions, including private organisations, elected officials, public sector agencies, courts, councils, parliaments and executive governments.<sup>4</sup>

Individuals, parliaments and regulators are thereby empowered to hold those institutions accountable for their practices and performance, and institutions are incentivised to maintain high standards of conduct. The result is greater compliance and accountability for all sectors of society, and government that is fairer, more transparent and more responsive.

This 'watchdog' function of journalism may also contribute to greater trust in democracy and public institutions where citizens develop a clearer understanding of the decisions and actions taken by their representatives and institutions, and where they perceive there to be consequences for wrongdoing.

### 4. Tested and Shared Ideas

News and journalism can also serve as a catalyst and forum for public debate and discussion. The effects of this function are enhanced by the readiness with which citizens can share and discuss the

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<sup>3</sup> [The Impact of Digital Platforms on News and Journalistic Content](#), Centre for Media Transition, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> [Media use and its effect on trust in politicians, parties and democracy](#), Australasian Parliamentary Review, 2011.

information they garner from news content. Quality journalism can also contribute to informing public debate, facilitating greater information sharing and testing ideas. The sharing and testing of ideas contribute to better informed decision-making and the selection of more robust ideas. In turn, respectful and informed debate may also contribute to greater trust in democracy, public institutions and the media.

## **5. Greater Inclusion and Social Welfare**

News and journalism have the capacity to contribute to social welfare and cohesion through their portrayal or representation of diverse social groups, provision of information about social issues, advocacy for social or political causes, or the provision of a platform for advocacy by others. These benefits may also extend to fostering greater understanding and cooperation within sectors of our society and internationally. News and journalism are also capable of the opposite, and can undermine social inclusion.

## **6. Informed Decision-Making by Individuals**

News and journalism inform the private decisions made by individual Australians, including in relation to social, financial and health decisions. Whilst this is a private benefit and does not directly give rise to a public interest, access to accurate and timely information about day-to-day decisions contributes to other public policy objectives, including economic, health, public safety, national security and cultural outcomes. Informed private decision-making may directly give rise to public benefits in cases such as natural disasters and other public emergencies such as health crises.

## **Factors Moderating these Benefits**

The existence of public interest journalism alone is not enough to guarantee that society will benefit from it. There are a range of factors that can affect the extent of these benefits. While the key focus of the News MAP is how to best support the availability of news and public interest journalism, these issues are relevant as they will shape the News MAP framework:

### **1. Availability and Accessibility of News and Journalism**

Regardless of the merits of news content, it provides no benefit if Australians cannot access it, or otherwise glean its informational content. Direct benefits are entirely contingent on this access, and indirect benefits scale commensurate with the level and distribution of access in the community. Accessibility is not limited to availability, but must also consider barriers to access, such as languages, technological resources (e.g. devices and internet access) and competency, capacity (e.g. time), disability, education and socio-economic status.

### **2. Qualities of News and Journalism**

Not all news and journalism content is the same, and the qualities of news content and journalism may substantially moderate their public benefits. Examples include:

- the accuracy and impartiality of reporting,
- clarity of presentation,
- delineation between opinion and factual reporting,

- fairness and social responsibility,
- the significance of the issues covered, and
- any harms resulting from the investigative or reporting process.

Industry and governments have developed a range of professional codes of practice and content safeguards relating to some of these issues which are variously intended to either moderate or enhance their effects.

### **3. Consumer Interest, Trust and Capability**

The benefits of news and journalism, particularly those relating to Australia's democratic systems, are also moderated by environmental factors. Key amongst these are the capabilities and attitudes of citizens, particularly their propensity to critically engage with news content and their access to a variety of sources of news.

Media literacy—the capacity to critically engage with media of all kinds in every aspect of life—is an essential capability for full and effective participation in democracy. Media literacy has much broader application than just news content. But in this context, it enables citizens to interpret, analyse, verify and share information; identify trustworthiness and quality indicators; and effectively participate in public discourse.

### **4. Control Over Production or Distribution**

Concentration of power over the gathering, production or distribution of news content represents a risk to the public interests arising from news and journalism. This remains true even where all other conditions which would otherwise benefit public interests are satisfied. This could include, for example, a decision to exclude an issue from coverage which could potentially have a greater impact than decisions about how the issue should be covered, or how the issue is represented in coverage.

The challenges of delivering the objectives of promoting diversity and managing influence provide an opportunity to consider new and better approaches to how we measure news diversity. This was considered by the ACMA as part of their consultation on *A new framework for measuring media diversity in Australia*.

### **5. Substitutability**

News and journalism may not be the only means to realise all of the public benefits set out above. For many of the benefits, there are no obvious substitutes for news and journalism. However, for other benefits (such as the sharing and testing of ideas and informed private decision-making), there may be viable alternatives, for example, local community groups on social media.

### **6. Journalistic Inputs and Risk Profile**

A range of factors, including regulatory arrangements, may influence the ability of journalists to access the information that underpins their reporting, or their willingness to report on certain topics or figures. Some of these factors may fall outside the scope of the News MAP, but we would welcome stakeholder views on which factors are most influential.

## Considerations for the Role of Government

### Commercial versus Public Interests

The vast majority of organisations producing news and conducting journalism in Australia are commercial businesses and subject to private commercial interests and incentives. These commercial incentives may, at times, align with the public interests arising from news and journalism, and news producers may also possess a strong sense of civic responsibility. However, these conditions are not universal.

Commercial news producers must generate revenue to sustain their operations, and may also have a legitimate interest in returning value for their owners. This means that there is a relationship to the news produced and its likelihood of driving demand from the audiences which support the businesses. At times, there is a risk that market forces may fail to maximise public interest outcomes, leading to calls for intervention by Government.

### Freedom of the Press

The Government recognises the importance of a strong and independent media to Australia's democracy and has committed to progress legislative reform to provide improved protections for press freedom.<sup>5</sup> On 27 February 2023 the Attorney-General, the Hon Mark Dreyfus KC MP, convened a roundtable with media organisations to discuss issues impacting freedom of the press and further options for reform.

Given press freedom protections are actively being considered by the Attorney-General, this paper is not seeking to canvas feedback from stakeholders on this issue. However, it acknowledges that the Government has a responsibility to ensure that any measures to promote and support public interest news and journalism do not undermine the independence of the press.

### The Costs and Risks of Inaction

Market conditions in recent years suggest that in order for news and journalism to play their role in the proper functioning of Australia's democratic systems of government and civic society, some level of government intervention in news and journalism is required.

However, the costs and risks of intervention need to be weighed against the costs and risks of inaction on a case-by-case basis. This approach is consistent with how government would approach most policy problems—intervene where the net benefits of intervention outweigh the net benefits of inaction, taking into consideration identified policy objectives.

## Policy Objectives

If government is to effectively weigh the risks, costs and benefits of intervention or inaction in the news and journalism sector, then it must have a clear understanding of what it is attempting to achieve.

This section sets out four proposed policy objectives to guide this assessment and inform the design and focus of future policy interventions.

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<sup>5</sup> The Hon Mark Dreyfus KC MP, Attorney-General, Media Release 19 January 2023.

We welcome your views on the proposed objectives, including how overlap or intersect, and the related questions posed below.

## Access

Citizens should have access to public interest journalism to support their democratic participation at all levels of government.

This proposed objective recognises the need for relevant public interest journalism to be produced and available, and reflects that it may be made available in multiple ways, including freely available (with or without advertising) and on a paid or subscription basis.

This proposed objective reflects that news content must also be relevant, to locations and issues, and that journalism must be responsible. An element of this objective is that all Australians have access to news services, regardless of financial means or location. This includes fostering a media landscape that supports community-led news services emerging to fill local news voids.

### Discussion Questions

**Q1.1:** Is access to news the right objective?

**Q1.2:** How should the access objective be understood, and to what extent should this include access to, or availability of, news and journalism relevant to each level of government, including national, state/territory, and local? What do citizens require at each level of government?

**Q1.3:** What are the appropriate roles for government and industry in pursuing this objective?

## Quality

News content should generally be of sufficient accuracy, impartiality and quality so that it properly informs Australians.

This proposed objective recognises the substantial private benefits of high-quality journalism; the risks of information disorders; and that private benefits and risks accrue on a sufficiently broad scale as to create significant public interests. It is not limited to public interest journalism, or content relevant to the democratic participation by citizens. It extends to all news content and journalism.

Under the primarily self-regulatory model for news and journalism in Australia, achievement of this objective is largely dependent on the effectiveness of codes of practice and the administration. In some parts of the sector there are co-regulatory models, driven by the industry but overseen by the ACMA.

While this model is widely accepted as consistent with a free and independent press, there have been calls to strengthen self-regulation to ensure other public interests, such as privacy, are appropriately protected.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Privacy Act Review Report 2022, Attorney-General's Department: [Privacy Act Review Report | Attorney-General's Department \(ag.gov.au\)](#) p.87.

**Discussion Questions**

**Q2.1:** Is quality the right objective?

**Q2.2:** How should the quality objective be understood? Is it the same for all forms of journalism?

**Q2.3:** What are the appropriate roles for government and industry in pursuing this objective?

Assessments about the quality of news content raise concerns about the independence and freedom of the press. What approaches might government consider to measuring, safeguarding and promoting the quality of news content? What content, procedural and organisational factors might be taken into consideration?

**Media Diversity**

No organisation, agent or individual should be capable of substantially defining the agenda, content or character of news coverage. The public interest is best realised through a diversity of perspectives, voices and presentation.

This proposed objective recognises that the public benefits of news and journalism to our democracy are dependent on no single body exercising substantial control over the production or distribution of news or journalism. It is achieved through a combination of regulation (rules for different categories of broadcasting service, ownership and control rules), market competition, consumer demand, and critical engagement with poor quality and/or biased news, and funding to the national broadcasters to provide an independent, trusted source of news to all Australians, as well as funding to the Community Broadcasting Program to assist community broadcasting organisations to produce media by and for their communities.

**Discussion Questions**

**Q3.1:** Is media diversity the right objective?

**Q3.2:** How should the media diversity objective be understood? How might the media diversity objective be promoted in the contemporary media environment?

**Q3.3:** What are the appropriate roles for government and industry in pursuing various elements of this objective? For example, is it the role of government to monitor media diversity and regulate ownership and control?

**Engagement**

Government should endeavour to foster citizens' civic engagement and trust in democratic government, news and journalism; and support citizens to develop the capability to critically interpret and contextualise information relevant to their democratic participation.

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The Government response to the Privacy Act Review Report: [Government response to the Privacy Act Review Report | Attorney-General's Department \(ag.gov.au\)](#).

This proposed objective recognises that the benefits of news and journalism are contingent on the propensity and capability of citizens to critically engage with and interpret news content. It highlights a growing need to understand and monitor levels of media literacy across society.

In Australian society, a range of factors may impact engagement, including income and education levels, literacy levels, including media and digital literacy, and the availability of in-language material for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. In the contemporary media environment, there are also digital media tools that may support engagement.

#### **Discussion Questions**

**Q4.1:** Is engagement the right objective?

**Q4.2:** How should the engagement objective be understood? How might the engagement objective be promoted in the contemporary media environment?

**Q4.3:** What are the appropriate roles for government and industry in pursuing this objective? For example, does government have a responsibility to foster citizens' critical engagement with news content?

## Part 2: Potential Measures



## Recent Reviews and Inquiries

Over the last decade there have been a range of inquiries and reviews into the news media sector as well as evaluations of programs aimed at supporting this sector. This includes:

- the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee Inquiry into Media diversity (2021),
- the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts Inquiry into Australia’s regional newspapers (2022), and
- the Independent evaluation of the Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation (RASPJI) package and the Public Interest News Gathering (PING) program (2022).

Successive reviews and inquiries have recommended similar measures to support media diversity and public interest journalism and recognise that the key levers available to Government include policy, legislation and regulation, and funding.

Recent reviews and inquiries have proposed both direct and indirect measures to drive innovation in the future. These include:

- direct government funding, through grants programs, for news and journalism initiatives and projects;
- tax incentives to encourage investment in research and development;
- government advertising to support sustainability.

Some media interests have also advocated for regulatory changes to enable consolidation or vertical integration to achieve scale.

As outlined above, public interest journalism is essential to the functioning of democratic society, and to the vast majority of benefits provided by news and journalism. Reviews and inquiries over the last decade have consistently highlighted the need for support mechanisms to ensure the sustainability of public interest journalism, particularly in light of the challenges faced by traditional business models in the digital age.

The Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Media and Media Regulation in 2012 observed that

**“[t]he effectiveness of the watchdog function of newspapers and their capacity for independent disclosure and for scrutiny of the operations of power in society, which are central to the democratic rationales of a free press, will be diminished if newspapers are unable to allocate adequate resources to investigative and public interest journalism. The resources needed for effective performance of the public scrutiny role of newspapers is often difficult to justify by the direct returns accruing to a newspaper or other media from the publication of the stories that are produced. But if the resultant benefits accruing to society are properly taken into account the investment of the necessary resources might well be more than justified... When earnings from other investments of resources are plentiful, accepting a low return from resources committed to investigative and other public interest journalism might be seen as a civic duty. But when times are tough the low returns are more likely to be seen as an unaffordable luxury.”**

Source: RA Finkelstein & M Ricketson, Report of the Independent Inquiry into Media and Media Regulation, 2012, pp 323-324

While focused on newspapers, this observation holds equally true for other forms of news media, and every recent public review or inquiry examining the state of public interest journalism has advocated some form of government support for public interest journalism in the face of declining revenues and changing market conditions. The continued uptake of new technologies has only heightened these concerns.

However, inquiries have also emphasised the need to strike a balance between providing support and maintaining the independence of the press.

## What the Government is Doing

The Australian Government has long provided direct support for public interest journalism through funding for the national broadcasters and the Community Broadcasting Program. Community broadcasting organisations in metropolitan, regional and remote Australia produce media by and for their communities.

In 2023, the Government is providing \$1.4 billion to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) in part to support their role as trusted sources of news to all Australians.

The Government has a long record of supporting community broadcasting, with financial support provided through the Community Broadcasting Program, which is administered by the Community Broadcasting Foundation, an independent not-for-profit agency. The Government is providing over \$20 million in funding per year from 2023-24 to foster local content, training, infrastructure and online services, and is working with the sector to identify a sustainable funding basis for the future through the Community Broadcasting Sector Sustainability Review.<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, the government has also provided targeted assistance to news media businesses facing financial pressures from external shocks through programs such as:

- The *Journalist Fund*—\$5 million in funding in 2022-23 to assist regional news businesses hire cadets to produce locally relevant news, including \$0.5 million to assist First Nations regional news businesses,
- The *Regional and Local Newspapers Publishers program*—\$15 million in funding in 2022-23 to provide financial assistance to newspapers facing pressures from rising print costs,
- The *Public Interest News Gathering Program (PING)*—\$50 million in funding over 2020-21 to 2021-22 to provide relief to publishers and broadcasters during the COVID pandemic.
- The *Regional and Small Publishers Jobs and Innovation Package*—\$60 million in funding including the \$50 million *Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund*, the *Regional and Small Publishers Cadetship Program* to support 200 cadetships, and 60 regional journalism scholarship from 2018-19 to 2020-21.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/media-communications-arts/media-industry-programs/community-broadcasting-program>.

The Government has also provided funding support to capacity-building initiatives, such as the Local and Independent News Association (LINA) which supports digital, hyper-local and independent publishers, as well as funding for the Australian Associated Press (AAP).

It has also recognised the impact of the rise of digital platforms on news media businesses through the introduction of the *News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code* (the Code). The Code, which came into effect in 2021, aims to help support the sustainability of the Australian news media sector by addressing bargaining power imbalances between digital platforms and Australian news businesses.<sup>8</sup>

The Government is also committed to a program of media reform to modernise media regulations and fulfil the legitimate expectations of citizens and consumers and industry for consistency and equity in our regulatory environment. The Government's media reform agenda will be informed by News MAP, and is otherwise subject to its own separate work streams and consultation processes.

## Considerations for Future Policy, Regulatory and Program Design

Government intervention to support public interest journalism may carry significant uncertainty and risk of unintended consequences. For instance, direct funding and tax incentives may risk creating a dependence on government support or inadvertently favouring certain types of organisation or models. Regulatory changes may permit greater flexibility, but must be balanced against the purposes that justify those regulations in the first place.

Some of the policy considerations that need to be weighed in assessing the appropriateness of these or other approaches include:

- Whether support will compromise editorial independence;
- The potential impact of support on media diversity, competition and sustainability;
- The role for the private sector versus government in supporting public interest journalism;
- How to treat established entities versus new market entrants; and
- How, when and where support should be targeted.

The work of good public administration continues after policy interventions are agreed. Effective and best practice implementation asks government to consider by who and on what basis grants will be awarded; when industry is better placed to meet their own needs; how to target measures to particular needs, such as cadetships within different sorts of organisation; how to avoid distorting competition and innovation; and the role of subsectors in addressing sectoral change.

We welcome your views on these considerations and the related content and questions posed below.

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<sup>8</sup> News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code—the Code's first year of operation, Treasury November 2022: [News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code - The Code's first year of operation | Treasury.gov.au](https://www.treasury.gov.au/News-Media-and-Digital-Platforms-Mandatory-Bargaining-Code-The-Code-s-first-year-of-operation).

## Direct Funding to Support the Production of Public Interest Journalism

The question of whether to provide funding or future support for the news media sector will be principled and evidence based. The Australian Government will consider any future grant funding programs in the context of the News MAP Policy Framework. Should Government provide funding, future support programs would also be designed to ensure they are sustainable and targeted:

- **Sustainable** support for the news media sector should strengthen the ability of news providers to build resilience and capacity to adapt to technological and other changes in the future. This aims to ensure any public funding is directed towards sustainable, long-term outcomes.
- **Targeted** support reflects the needs of regions and communities across Australia. The principle of targeted support would include considering the needs of vulnerable cohorts and tailoring assistance when required.

In the event grant programs are awarded, these would aim to support the production and craft of journalism by promoting the ongoing development of skills for professional journalists. The Australian Government is also considering the impacts of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on journalism. It is likely that a combination of supports will be required to ensure access to quality public interest journalism for all Australians.

As the evidence base grows through the implementation of the ACMA's Media Diversity Measurement Framework, there will be more data to assist in identifying areas of Australian most in need of additional support to access news and public interest journalism.

### Discussion Questions relating to funding programs to support public interest journalism

**Q5.1:** In what circumstances is it appropriate for government to intervene in the form of direct funding? What are the competitive impacts of Government funding?

**Q5.2:** How can any government support for public interest journalism be structured to maintain the editorial independence of recipients and avoid undue influence over news content? What factors should be taken into consideration, and how do these factors change between short-term and ongoing support?

**Q5.3:** How should any support for public interest journalism be targeted? For what purposes and to what entities and why? For example, should regional areas and local news be a focus of Australian Government support? What other factors are relevant to targeting? Serving particular communities or addressing particular issues? Organisational form such as not-for-profit organisations or commercial providers? What are industry or private interests best-placed to deliver?

## Support for Business Models

### Findings from past reviews and inquiries

Given the challenges facing the sector, innovation and the development of new business models will be critical to the future of public interest journalism.

Whilst the business models that traditionally funded Public Interest Journalism remain broadly viable in large markets, such as at the national level and in the more populous states and territories, their viability at the local level is increasingly at risk.

- **Large, national-level publications** have tended to experience less disruption as a result of sectoral change than smaller publications. Large publications with access to a national market can help support investment in public interest journalism even with lower advertising revenues and disaggregated offerings. However, there has been a noticeable reduction in diversity and competition at this level, and there are clear pressures on all news producers to reduce costs, find alternative revenue sources and build stronger subscriber bases.
- Smaller markets, such as **local news in outer-metropolitan and regional areas**, have seen the largest business disruptions. Innovation is most evident in these markets, where ultra-local micro-businesses have emerged in the wake of larger publications ceasing to operate. These publications are frequently digital natives and some operate exclusively through social media, although others have partnered with local institutions to distribute in print. While these businesses serve to address gaps in news production and availability, limitations and risks arise from their comparatively slim resourcing and potential knowledge gaps.

Recent reviews and inquiries have consistently emphasised the need for innovation to sustain the news and journalism sector and the difficulty that news businesses have faced in responding to this pressure for change.

In 2018, the Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism stated that:

“[i]t is evident that the pace of change following the Finkelstein inquiry has continued exponentially. There have been some positive signs from the growth of digital modes of communication. As the Finkelstein Report prefigured, the sector has seen low barriers to entry encouraging innovation and proliferation of new media in the sector, new modes of delivery and technology platforms being developed, both in Australia and globally, and a promising range of new partnerships between journalists, publishers, universities and private institutions. However, it is also clear that the scale and speed of these changes has had profoundly negative effects on the traditional news media sector, including a depletion of the capacity for many organisations to provide quality public interest journalism. This is particularly concerning as many of these traditional media organisations have over many years provided the bedrock of investigative and public interest journalism, informing the public and holding all levels of Australian government to account... Perhaps the most common theme in evidence received from the media sector was the struggle to adapt to new business models, including the implications of the move away from a reliance on revenue from advertising and newspaper sales, toward monetising the publication of material on masthead sites, and through the aggregators.”

Source: Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism, Report, 2018, pp 23-25

### Discussion Questions relating to support for business models

**Q6.1:** What are the key barriers or challenges faced by news media organisations in adopting innovative business models or pursuing new revenue streams? How can these barriers be addressed through policy, regulation, or industry-led initiatives?

**Q6.2:** How can government and regulators encourage and support innovation and the development of sustainable business models in the news media sector? Are there any examples from Australia or internationally that could be adapted to serve this purpose?

**Q6.3:** How are news organisations reacting to, or leveraging, the development of more sophisticated artificial intelligence services? What are the likely consequences for news and journalism resulting from existing and novel artificial intelligence services over the coming years and decades? What opportunities and challenges are likely to emerge?

## Tax-based Incentives

### Findings from past reviews and inquiries

A number of reviews and inquiries have considered tax-based incentives to support public interest journalism. For many stakeholders a key benefit of tax-based incentives is that they are legislated, and are generally self-assessed with uncapped funding. This provides stakeholders with certainty that support will continue to be provided and may result in reduced compliance costs compared with applying for a grant. However, these same features can increase the risk that incentives are not appropriately targeted, adaptable to changing circumstances, or sustainable.

The *Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications Report on Media Diversity in Australia* recommended that the Government extend Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status for appropriate ventures in public interest journalism. Under the existing DGR framework, there is no general category for not-for-profit media organisations whose principal purpose or activity is public interest journalism. To access DGR status, these organisations would need to be endorsed under another general DGR category, or be specifically listed in Division 30 of the *Income Tax Assessment Act 1997* (Cth).

The Productivity Commission (PC) is currently undertaking an inquiry into Philanthropy, which will include an examination of the effectiveness and fairness of the DGR framework, and how it aligns with public policy objectives and the priorities of the broader community. The PC's draft report was released on 30 November 2023, and the final report is due in May 2024. The interim recommendations include reforms to tax settings which would increase the eligibility for deductible gift recipient status across a range of charitable purposes, including public interest journalism.<sup>9</sup>

The Report on Media Diversity also recommended the government consider concessional rates of taxation be made available to new ventures investing in public interest journalism<sup>10</sup>. The department will

<sup>9</sup> *Future Foundations for Giving, Draft Report*, Productivity Commission, p.17, [Release of the Productivity Commission's draft report on philanthropic giving | Treasury Ministers](#)

<sup>10</sup> Recommendation 2f of the *Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications Report on Media Diversity in Australia*.

work with the Treasury to consider the appropriateness of tax or other incentives to support investment in public interest journalism, against the News MAP Policy Framework.

#### **Discussion Questions relating to tax-based incentives**

**Q7.1:** What are key advantages and disadvantages of tax-based incentives to support public interest journalism?

**Q7.2:** Are tax-based incentives preferable to other mechanisms, such as grants?

## **Government Advertising**

### **Findings from past reviews and inquiries**

Government advertising in certain print publications has been identified as a measure in past reviews and inquiries. For some stakeholders the key perceived benefit of government advertising is that it provides news publishers with a consistent revenue stream that supports sustainability and the stability needed to attract staff, adapt business models and innovate. Commensurately, there is seen to be mutual alignment with Government wanting to reach audiences across Australia with government advertising and in supporting newspapers which reach such audiences.

The Australian Government recognises the critical role that local news publishers play in Australian communities. We recognise the pressures facing the sector, particularly for local news in regional areas. Several newspaper publishers, including regional newspapers and multicultural newspapers, have approached the Government requesting a minimum guaranteed advertising spend in their newspapers.

Government information and advertising campaigns are subject to guidelines issued by the Department of Finance (the Guidelines), which operate on the premise that all members of the public have equal rights to access comprehensive information about government policies, programs and services which affect their entitlements, rights, and obligations. Further information is available at [www.finance.gov.au/government/advertising/australian-government-guidelines-information-and-advertising-campaigns-non-corporate-commonwealth-entities](http://www.finance.gov.au/government/advertising/australian-government-guidelines-information-and-advertising-campaigns-non-corporate-commonwealth-entities).

### **Regional newspapers**

Analysis of advertising campaigns across all departments and agencies shows that over the last several years the Government's advertising spend in regional newspapers has substantially exceeded the 20 per cent target recommended by the 2022 Inquiry into Regional Newspapers.

Going forward, it is likely that expenditure on government advertising in regional papers will continue to exceed the target of 20 per cent of all print advertising. However, the overall amount of expenditure will vary depending on the scope and purpose of individual Australian Government advertising campaigns. We welcome stakeholder views on how to strike the right balance to support the regional news publishing sector while supporting compliance with the Guidelines, in particular, the need for communications to be undertaken in an efficient, effective and relevant manner.

**Discussion Questions relating to government advertising**

**Q8.1:** What are key advantages and disadvantages of government advertising to support public interest journalism?

**Q8.2:** Is government advertising preferable to other mechanisms, such as grants?

## Fostering Media Diversity

The majority of reviews examining media diversity and ownership have concluded that Australia’s news media sector is one of the most concentrated among democratic states. The 2012 Report on the Independent Inquiry into the Media and Media Regulation found that

**“Australia’s newspaper industry is among the most concentrated in the developed world... [of 26 countries examined in the study] Australia is the only country in which the leading press company accounts for more than half of daily circulation.”**

Source: RA Finkelstein & M Ricketson, Report of the Independent Inquiry into Media and Media Regulation, 2012, pp 59-60

More recently, the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee Inquiry into Media Diversity reached similar findings.

The available data appears to support these concerns, with market intelligence reports suggesting that, at least as recently as 2021, the 4 largest news publishers accounted for approximately 87 per cent of print and digital newspaper revenue when digital-only publishers are excluded.

However, Australians are increasingly accessing news online and through news and evolving delivery channels. This means that market share within individual medium, technological or delivery segments is unlikely to remain a fit-for-purpose measure of media diversity. Digital-native publications control a growing share of news consumption, and numerous reports and authorities have commented on the critical role played by digital platforms.

The implications of these changes are unclear, and likely multifaceted.

In 2021, then Chair of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, Mr Rod Sims AO, suggested that “we’ve probably got more diversity than we used to have because of the Internet”<sup>11</sup>. The same year, the Inquiry into Media Diversity concluded that:

**“[t]he problem of concentration has been exacerbated by the rise of global internet platforms, which aggregate information from many sources, including the mainstream news media, but which at present are not subject to effective and independent regulation.”**

Source: Senate Environment and Communications References Committee, Media Diversity in Australia, 2021, p xii

<sup>11</sup> Economics and Legislation Committee [Hansard - Committee 22/01/2021 Parliament of Australia \(aph.gov.au\)](https://aph.gov.au/Hansard-Committee/2021/01/22/Hansard-Committee-22-01-2021)



## What the Government is Doing

The Government currently fosters and supports media diversity in Australia through a combination of regulatory controls and financial support.

Australia's existing media diversity rules are set out in the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* and regulate the number of 'voices' in a market. Currently, this is based on the ownership and control of commercial television and radio broadcasting services, as well as 'associated newspapers' operating within these licence areas. The Act also provides for different categories of broadcast service, including national broadcasters, commercial broadcasters, community broadcasters, subscription broadcasters and narrowcasters.

An important financial support mechanism for news and journalism is funding for the independent national broadcasters, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Special Broadcasting Service (SBS). In 2023, the Australian Government is providing \$1.4 billion to support the two national broadcasters to provide programming, content and cover other costs, including to provide quality news to communities across Australia.

In recent years, the Government has also provided both direct and indirect financial support to help sustain regional and local news. This includes provision of over \$20 million a year to support community broadcasting, along with targeted support through programs such as the Journalist Fund to help sustain regional businesses and grow the voice of First Nations media organisations. It also includes ongoing investment in the broadcast, mobile and internet connectivity infrastructure which underpins community access to news and journalism.

The Government has outlined several priorities to guide media reform in the future, including that Australians have access to a vibrant and diverse range of news media, where no one voice dominates political and social debates.<sup>12</sup> It recognises that any concentrated control over the production or distribution of news content imparts significant influence, and potentially risks significant harm to our democracy.

## Considerations for Future Policy, Regulatory and Program Design

While the media diversity rules set out in the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* continue to provide a protection against the excessive ownership or control of news media voices, these rules were formulated over 30 years ago and do not account for the digital transformation of the news sector.

The ACMA has undertaken work to develop new approaches to measuring diversity which better reflect the modern ways news is produced, distributed and consumed (discussed in Part 3 below). It is anticipated these contemporary metrics will inform consideration of options to reform or update the current BSA rules, along with how and where the News MAP framework is applied in broader policy and decision making.

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<sup>12</sup> The Hon Michelle Rowland MP, Minister for Communications, speech Communications and Media Law Association (CAMLA) and International Institute of Communications (IIC) Australian Chapter, October 2022.

Several questions need to be considered in assessing how best to modernise existing policy settings; in particular:

- Whether greater diversity of news sources available to consumers is translating into effectively greater consumer choice when considering discoverability and consumer awareness;
- What impact more diverse consumer-facing news sources may have on investment in journalism, the viability of news publications, and availability of local news; and
- What role digital aggregators play in media diversity.

We would welcome your views on the following questions, and any other matters relevant to additional practical measures government might take on media diversity, concentration and ownership.

### **Discussion Questions**

**Q9.1:** Who should be regulated? The contemporary news ecosystem includes a broader range of actors, including intermediaries such as digital platforms. How should these intermediaries be considered in relation to diversity of control, and should they be subject to any specific regulations or requirements? What other factors affect diversity? Should this consider transparency of the source of donations or funding? Should diversity be considered at the production or program-input level? Should personnel diversity within an organisation be considered?

**Q9.2:** Why should they be regulated? Should news media diversity be regulated at a national level or at a more localised level (for example, major cities, regional and remote)?

**Q9.3:** How should they be regulated? What are your views on whether government regulation of news media diversity be focussed on the media through which it is delivered or be agnostic to the media delivery mechanism?

## Support for Media Literacy

### Findings from Past Reviews and Inquiries

The benefits of news and journalism are contingent on the propensity and capability of citizens to critically engage with and interpret news content. This is known as ‘news literacy’ or more broadly, media literacy.

Media literacy does not have an official definition in the Australian context but is most simply understood as the ability to critically engage with media of all types, in every aspect of life. In the context of news, media literacy is frequently referenced as a critical skill required for citizens to seek out, analyse, interpret and in some cases create and distribute news content that is factual, accurate, impartial and of relevance to them, their lives and their local communities. In this way, media literacy is an enabler for full and effective participation in society and democracy.

Evidence from research studies suggests that news literacy in Australia is quite low, with 68% of consumers found to have low or very low levels of news literacy.<sup>13</sup> News consumers with higher news literacy can better identify poor journalism, political spin and advertising or other sponsored content.<sup>14</sup>

The need to improve media literacy to protect Australians from a range of harms has been repeatedly raised in reviews and inquiries related to media diversity, misinformation and disinformation, defending democracy, online safety, scams and virtually all policy areas that are impacted by communications technology and media content.

For example, the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation has been linked to the erosion of trust in democratic processes, news, journalism and civic institutions. It has also been shown that media consumers are increasingly concerned about misinformation and their confidence to recognise fake news including advertising that looks like news. These consumers are changing their news consumption habits as a result.<sup>15</sup> In 2021, sourcing news online was the second most common way for people to consume news (74%), behind television (77%), and those sourcing news online are predominantly using social media to do so.<sup>16</sup> This is concerning in light of research that shows 76% of people who rely on social media for their news have low or very low news literacy.<sup>17</sup>

The 2017 Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism called for government to take action to improve media literacy as a lever to support public interest journalism. It recommended that:

**“...the Commonwealth work with the states and territories through the Council of Australian Governments to determine how areas of the Australian Curriculum may be improved regarding digital media awareness and media literacy.”**

<sup>13</sup> Centre for Media Transition 2020 *News in Australia: Impartiality and commercial influence*.

<sup>14</sup> Park et al 2018 *Digital News Report: Australia 2018*.

<sup>15</sup> Park et al 2018; Centre for Media Transition 2020; Deloitte 2017 *Media Consumer Survey 2017: Australian Media and Digital Preferences 6<sup>th</sup> edition*.

<sup>16</sup> Social Research Centre 2022 *Media Content Consumption Survey: Analytical Report*, pg. 67.

<sup>17</sup> Park et al 2018.

The 2019 Digital Platforms Inquiry (DPI) also supported this recommendation but went further to recommend that media literacy be improved in the broader community as well. It advised

**“[a] Government program be established to fund and certify non-government organisations for the delivery of digital media literacy resources and training...[and] should be broadly delivered through community centres, libraries, schools and seniors centres for the benefit of all Australians.”**

## What the Government is Doing

Both the national broadcasters, along with commercial news organisations, already undertake valuable work to improve media literacy; for example, through hosting projects that support school students to create news stories or exercise critical thinking skills. In addition, partnerships between digital platforms, media organisations, academia and multinational social media companies are emerging to fund fact checking initiatives and media literacy programs.<sup>18</sup>

The Government has also recently provided targeted support for media literacy tools in schools, through the Alannah and Madeline Foundation, and in culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, through the Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia. The government is also mapping media literacy efforts across the Commonwealth.

## Considerations for Future Policy, Regulatory and Program Design

While there is general acceptance of the value of improving media literacy, approaches to media literacy education in Australia have been fragmented and inconsistent. Education is dispersed amongst schools, industry, community and families in formal and non-formal settings. Programs to date have mostly been focused on school age children. Yet, 30% of Australian adults report having no support to help them access, use, understand and create media.<sup>19</sup>

There is also limited understanding of the communities that are most in need of news and media literacy support. A one-time national survey of adult media literacy in Australia in 2021 found people living in low income households, people with a low level of education, people living with a disability, people living in regional Australia, older Australians and Indigenous Australians should be considered priority groups for media literacy interventions.<sup>20</sup> But the study also noted that consultation with a broader range of stakeholders should be undertaken. The Australian Media Literacy Alliance has proposed a national strategy to support this.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Google News Initiative, Meta Journalism Project, , RMIT FactLab, AAP FactCheck.

<sup>19</sup> Australian Media Literacy Alliance 2021 *Adult Media Literacy in Australia: Attitudes Experiences and Needs*, 2021, University Western Sydney, Queensland University of Technology and University of Canberra.

<sup>20</sup> Australian Media Literacy Alliance *AMLA National Consultation Report—Towards a National Strategy for Media Literacy*, 2021.pg.12.

<sup>21</sup> Australian Media Literacy Alliance *AMLA National Consultation Report—Towards a National Strategy for Media Literacy*, 2021.pg.17.

Considering the background, history and issues outlined above, we welcome your thoughts on the following questions.

**Discussion Questions**

**Q10.1** What segments/groups/demographics in the community most need support from government to improve media literacy?

**Q10.2** In what areas (e.g. Access to trusted news, media technologies and environments, evolving news consumption habits etc) is media literacy education or research most needed?

**Q10.3** What are the social and economic risks of low media literacy levels in the community?

**Q10.4** What further research and evidence is required to inform understanding of the impact of media literacy levels on the quality of news and journalism?

**Q10.5** What metrics and data sources should be considered to track media literacy levels of Australians in the future? What can Australia learn from approaches adopted in other countries?

## Part 3: Establishing the Evidence Base

## Measuring Media Diversity

Through the News MAP, the government has flagged the need for a more robust and long-term evidence-base to inform policy interventions and other measures that support the provision of public interest journalism and the longstanding objective of media diversity.

In 2020, the ACMA published a one-off research paper outlining a potential new approach to measuring the state of diversity and localism across the Australian news sector. In late 2022, the Minister for Communications asked the ACMA to consult on its draft News Measurement Framework and to provide advice on how it could be implemented.

In January 2023, the ACMA released a short consultation paper seeking public feedback on the scope and likely effectiveness of the framework, new sources of third-party data and research, and opportunities for further projects to address outstanding data gaps. Copies of stakeholder submissions, and summaries of workshops with key industry and academic stakeholders, are available on the ACMA's website: [www.acma.gov.au/consultations/2023-01/new-framework-measuring-media-diversity-australia](http://www.acma.gov.au/consultations/2023-01/new-framework-measuring-media-diversity-australia).

Stakeholder views informed further changes to the framework, and in August 2023, the ACMA provided advice to the government on its newly renamed Media Diversity Measurement Framework, as well as recommendations on how it could be implemented. These recommendations included that the ACMA build or take carriage of key datasets on the Australian news market, work with researchers to fill identified knowledge gaps, and establish a regular reporting series to track changes in news availability and consumption over time.

The government has accepted the ACMA's advice and provided additional ongoing funding for the ACMA to take on these new functions. The ACMA will be launching a dashboard and releasing its first report as part of the Media Diversity Measurement Framework by the end of 2024. Updates on this work will be made available on the ACMA's website: [www.acma.gov.au/consultations/2023-01/new-framework-measuring-media-diversity-australia](http://www.acma.gov.au/consultations/2023-01/new-framework-measuring-media-diversity-australia).

While this Consultation Paper is not seeking views on those elements already consulted on by the ACMA, we welcome views from participants on whether there are other elements of the evidence base that could appropriately complement the ACMA's work.

## Mapping—Maintaining news market data across Australia

Public Interest Journalism Initiative (PIJI) is an independent, non-profit company that produces the Australian News Data Report, which assesses media diversity and plurality. PIJI is investigating a sustainable future for public interest journalism.<sup>22</sup>

In February 2023 the Minister for Communications, the Hon Michelle Rowland MP, announced \$900,000 would be provided to PIJI to support data projects aligned with the objectives of the News MAP.

This funding is supporting continued provision in 2023 of PIJI's data maintenance, collection, analysis and visualisation activities relating to public interest news and journalism in Australia.

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<sup>22</sup> [About - Public Interest Journalism Initiative \(piji.com.au\)](http://www.piji.com.au).

PIJI's data is assisting the department and the ACMA to assess the current evidence base for the News MAP.

## Evaluation—Learning lessons from the evaluation of measures

As part of continuous improvement of the News MAP Policy Framework, the Government will complement the ACMA's Media Diversity Measurement Framework with research and evaluation activities. Evaluations will be designed in accordance with the Commonwealth Evaluation Policy,<sup>23</sup> which aims to improve the way agencies assess implementation, measure the impact of government programs and frame policy decisions on revised or new programs.

Importantly, program evaluations provide lessons for what works, in what circumstances. The department has already commenced with the recent evaluation of the RASPJI and PING programs.<sup>24</sup> The evaluation assessed program design, delivery, outcomes and improvement opportunities. Overall, the evaluation found most stakeholders who received grant funding were satisfied with their involvement in the programs. The evaluations identified opportunities to better coordinate, sequence and promote the programs to amplify the impacts and public value delivered. The Government will continue to evaluate and feed these lessons into the design of any future measures.

The department will continue to work with stakeholders such as PIJI to identify the need for targeted research and data collection. This will ensure that over time the News MAP evidence base is continually strengthened to support effective and principled policies for public interest journalism.

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<sup>23</sup> [Commonwealth Evaluation Policy, the Treasury.](#)

<sup>24</sup> [Independent evaluation of RASPJI and PING | ACIL Allen.](#)