



Australian Government

News Media Assistance Program

Government's role in news and journalism

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Introduction

News and journalism are critical to the proper functioning of Australia’s democratic systems of government, the health and cohesion of its communities, and the liberties enjoyed by its citizens. However, these benefits cannot be taken for granted. Journalism is facing systemic pressures that threaten Australians’ access to quality, public interest reporting, and further consolidate control over production and distribution of news in an already concentrated sector. At the same time, government intervention can risk undermining press freedom and editorial independence essential to the role played by journalists.

The Australian Government recognises these challenges, but also that government intervention in public interest journalism needs to be carefully balanced. This is why government intervention will be guided by a principles-based and evidence-informed framework, formulated and implemented consistent with best practice. This document is the next step in setting out that policy framework. It will:

- set out the role of the Australian Government
- detail policy objectives for the Commonwealth in relation to public interest journalism
- outline principles to guide the practical implementation of these objectives in public policy
- provide a consistent reference point for policy development and public discourse, including key terms
- explain next steps for the development of the framework, evidence base and policy.

This framework aims to foster a common understanding of the policy challenges, public interest, and the roles of government, industry, academia and civil society. It also aims to ensure that future policy interventions for news and journalism are developed to address clear policy objectives, and are based on the best available evidence.

Consultation on the News Media Assistance Program

On 12 December 2023, the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts released a public consultation paper on the News Media Assistance Program (News MAP). The consultation paper sought feedback on the role for government and objectives for news and journalism—access, diversity, quality, and engagement. It also sought feedback on the development of an evidence-base, and potential measures to support news.

Consultation ran until March 2024, and the department received over 70 written submissions and met with stakeholders from industry, academia and civil society groups. Stakeholders provided valuable input on the issues raised in the paper, including the urgent need to support the sustainability of news producers, additional policy objectives that could be considered by government, and perspectives on the role of government.

Feedback received through public consultation informed this policy framework. This includes two additional policy objectives to the four that were consulted on—freedom and representation. The addition of the objectives around representation of perspectives and press freedom have been informed by consultation and broader public discourse about related policy issues. Freedom of the press is an essential part of this framework. Input from consultation also informed the development of practical principles for policy design and implementation, as well as minor changes to clarify and refine the role for government.

Stakeholder submissions are available on the department’s website at: www.infrastructure.gov.au/have-your-say/news-media-assistance-program-news-map.

Defining news and journalism

The definitions of news and journalism adopted for the purposes of this framework are included below.

News is timely, factual and accessible information relating to current events and developments, produced with the intention to inform and/or engage a substantial subset of the public. The defining characteristics that distinguish news from other forms of content are:

- **Timeliness:** News relates to contemporary events and developments.
- **Factual basis:** News asserts to provide a factual account and is based on verifiable information. It is distinct from opinion, uninformed commentary or disinformation.
- **Accessibility:** News is made available and accessible to a sizeable audience. It is public, not private.
- **Intent to engage:** News is produced with the aim of informing and engaging its audience.
- **Public relevance:** News is of importance to, and intended to engage, a substantial subset of the public. It is not private or trivial.

Journalism is the process of discovering, verifying, interpreting, and exercising editorial control over communication of news with the purpose of enhancing audience understanding of news information and relevant matters. The defining characteristics of journalism are:

- **News focused:** For the purposes of this framework, journalism relates exclusively to news. This does not mean that it engages only with news content, but that its purpose is news.
- **News purpose:** Journalism aims to enhance the audience's understanding of news, including the relevant ideas and issues surrounding that news. It includes research, investigation, explanation and contextualization. It excludes activities which are not intended to add value (e.g., replication of existing coverage), aim to mislead or confuse, or which are not relevant to news.
- **Content focused:** Journalism acts on information and content. It includes activities that discover news and other relevant information, and that exercise editorial control over content. It excludes activities that are ancillary, such as publishing, broadcasting or reading from a script.

Defining public interest news

The forms of news and journalism that result in the most significant public benefits are referred to in this framework as 'public interest news'. This term is not intended to identify all forms of 'legitimate' or beneficial news content. However, public interest news and media diversity are the core of the Government's commitment to the News MAP, and these concepts will help to guide when, where and how government should intervene.

In this framework, the following definition of public interest news is used:

Public interest news

News that aims, with honesty and diligence, to accurately inform and engage citizens on matters relevant to their rights or responsibilities; the wellbeing of their community; and their participation in democratic processes and public discourse. It is the result of responsible and accountable journalistic practice, and remains continually subject to such scrutiny.

Public interest news is defined by:

- Civic purpose: Public interest news aims to accurately inform and engage citizens on matters relevant to their rights and responsibilities, the wellbeing of the community, and their participation in democratic processes and public discourse. In doing so, it may also seek to inform decision-makers about the matters considered important by the community and the performance of public and private institutions.
- Responsibility: Public interest news is responsible in how it holds institutions to account and contributes to public discourse, and does so with diligence to its civic purpose without undue influence.
- Accountability: Public interest news is accountable and open to public scrutiny; transparent about assumptions, sources (without breaching reasonable commitments to sources), and methods; clearly communicates any biases or interests; and corrects errors where they occur.

This definition builds on the earlier work of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) Digital Platforms Inquiry, and expands upon it in recognition of the characteristics that are important to public interest news. This includes the importance of core journalistic values, the social responsibility of public interest news, and the risks posed by irresponsible journalism.

The role of Government

The public interests arising from news and journalism are fundamental to Australia's democracy, civic society, and community wellbeing. Historically, these interests have been served by a vibrant and independent press, underpinned by favourable market conditions. These outcomes can no longer be taken for granted.

When addressing this problem, its complexity must be recognised. Government intervention in journalism carries inherent risks of compromising press freedom and editorial independence, as well as market distortion, which would threaten the benefits provided by news and journalism. These risks are substantial. To balance these risks, any support should enable the sector to adapt to emerging business models, and support the sustainability and capacity-building of Australian news organisations over the short-term. However, these are not the only risks, and the consequences of inaction can also threaten the vital public benefits provided by news and journalism.

A nuanced approach is required. Government must evaluate the costs, benefits and risks of intervention against those of inaction on a case-by-case basis. It must also remain mindful of its unique position and confront the limitations of its role to ensure measures are carefully designed to avoid undue influence.

This approach is a significant, although subtle, change in how the Australian Government engages with news and journalism. It recognises that government influence must remain checked, but that inaction is no longer a viable option. Deliberate and transparent action is required to protect the vital role played by Australian journalists and news organisations.

Public policy objectives

The crisis facing journalism demands decisive action. Past reactive and ad-hoc interventions have proven ineffective, and give rise to an unacceptable risk to the independence and sustainability of the press. For government to address this crisis while balancing the relative risks, costs and benefits of intervention and inaction, it is important to do so with a clear understanding of what it is aiming to achieve.

This policy framework identifies the Australian Government's policy objectives for news and journalism. Publishing these objectives will promote transparency and accountability, which is essential for any government role in journalism.

Under the News MAP, the government has 6 objectives for news and journalism:

1. **Access:** Citizens have access to relevant, quality, public interest journalism.
2. **Diversity:** Control over the production of journalism and distribution of news is adequately diverse.
3. **Freedom:** Access to information, and the conduct of journalism, is not unduly threatened or restricted.
4. **Quality:** News is generally of sufficient quality to properly inform and not misinform.
5. **Engagement:** Citizens have an interest, and the capability, to critically engage with relevant news.
6. **Representation:** News coverage reflects the Australian community and diversity of Australian perspectives.

Each of the objectives are intended to apply to geographic jurisdictions at each level of government (local government areas, states and territories, and the nation), as well as non-geographic communities such as:

- communities with common requirements, such as communities speaking languages other than English
- communities with unique conditions, such as incarcerated persons
- those with strongly shared interests, such as cultural groups and LGBTQIA+ communities.

Access

Citizens have access to public interest news that is:

- relevant to their community, democratic participation and public institutions at all levels of government;
- accurate, impartial, and of high quality
- accessible.

This objective reflects the critical benefits of news and journalism, that those benefits depend on the nature and quality of the news content, and benefits are proportional to the breadth and equitability of access.

Quality

It is difficult to objectively define high-quality journalism, yet it is critical to realising key policy goals for news and journalism. The definition of public interest news captures some of these characteristics, including accuracy and impartiality. Different approaches to measuring the quality of news and journalism will be appropriate in different contexts. These include:

- Characteristics of the content, for example accuracy, clarity, fairness, balance, transparency, depth of analysis, immediacy, actionability, and originality. These provide the most direct evidence of quality, but when judged by government risk imposing on the independence of the press.

- Characteristics of the news producer, including investment in journalism, independence, community engagement, and professional standards. These provide indirect evidence of quality, but impose on editorial independence to a lesser extent.

Accessibility

Access includes availability—the production and distribution of relevant journalism. However, it also includes recognition of any barriers that may prevent or limit citizens’ accessing the information in news content. News provides no public benefit if Australians are unable to access the content, regardless of its merits. The table below sets out example accessibility considerations for news content.

Table 1: Example accessibility considerations for news content

Consumer characteristic	News content characteristic	Example barrier
Level of education	Complexity and diction	Academic language or jargon
Socio-economic status	Cost of access	Purchase price or subscription
Languages spoken/read	Language of content	Local news only available in English
Technological barriers	Distribution method, complexity and support	Internet access, television reception, technical competency
Disability	Design and accessibility tools/features	Layout, text size or lack of subtitles

Diversity

No single actor can exercise control over the production of journalism or distribution of public interest news to the extent that they can substantially influence the agenda, content, or character of news coverage.

This objective reflects the substantial risk of adverse outcomes that would result from a single actor being able to define the public discourse to pursue private interests, or even inadvertently as a result of subconscious bias or blind spots. These risks are not adequately mitigated by a requirement for impartiality or accuracy, as these do not address the power of news producers to set the agenda. For example, excluding a matter from public discourse is potentially more impactful than poor or malicious reporting.

Scope of diversity

The contemporary news ecosystem includes a broader range of actors than just traditional media organisations and communication infrastructure providers. Other participants have the capacity to exercise influence and/or control over the production and distribution of news. These include:

- media owners and other participants in the corporate groups operating news organisations
- intermediaries, such as search engines, social media platforms and news aggregators
- sources of significant funding, including major advertisers and philanthropic donors
- government, including control exercised deliberately or inadvertently through support or regulation.

Government must be mindful of all actors capable of exercising influence or control over the production or distribution of news content when considering conditions for diversity and any interventions.

Production or distribution

This objective distinguishes between the production of journalism and the distribution of public interest news. This is a critical and deliberate distinction. Australians have access to a greater diversity of news sources than ever before as a result of the Internet and World Wide Web. However, this diversity of access options does not mean that there are more participants investing in, and producing, journalism.

Public interest news

This objective is focused on diversity that supports public interest news outcomes. A greater diversity of access options does not necessarily result in Australians having access to a greater diversity of public interest news sources. Only sources which provide access to a substantial amount of public interest news make a meaningful contribution to the public benefits of news and journalism.

Freedom

Citizens' access to the information needed to inform public interest news is not unduly restricted, and responsible journalistic practice is not unreasonably threatened or disincentivized.

This objective reflects that quality journalism, and public interest news, are built on robust evidence and that government plays a critical role in facilitating or limiting access to information (e.g., through freedom of information laws, secrecy provisions, or whistle-blower protections), particularly information about public institutions and government activities.

Quality

News content is of sufficient accuracy, impartiality, and quality that it properly informs, or at least does not intentionally or irresponsibly misinform, decision-making by Australians.

This objective recognises the substantial private benefits resulting from high-quality journalism, as well as the risks posed by information disorders (including misinformation and disinformation). Private benefits and risks to individuals can build up on a broad scale and create significant impacts on community wellbeing other public policy objectives. This objective is not limited to public interest news. It extends to all news content and journalism.

Engagement

Fostering citizens' civic engagement and trust in democratic government, news, and journalism, and supporting citizens to develop the capability to critically interpret and contextualise the information relevant to their democratic participation and civic life.

This objective recognises that the benefits provided by news and journalism depend on citizens having the ability and appetite to critically engage with, and interpret, news content. A critical determinant of citizens' capability is their 'news literacy' or, more broadly, media literacy. Government also has a critical role in

fostering citizens' engagement with news and journalism by supporting robust institutions, promoting trust in media and government, and creating the enabling conditions for greater civic engagement more broadly.

Representation

Conduct of journalism and distribution of news content reflects the diversity of the Australian community in that there are no barriers that would unreasonably prevent citizens from contributing to the public discourse, and Australians consider the range of voices participating in public discourse adequately reflects their perspective.

This objective recognises two distinct, but related, goals. Firstly, that all Australians are afforded the fair and reasonable opportunity to contribute to the public discourse and reporting of the news. Initial steps toward this objective include ensuring that factors such as cultural background, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual identity, age, and disability do not prevent Australians from participating in public discourse, including in a professional capacity.

Secondly, that Australians consider that public discourse and professional media adequately represent their perspective. This is a critical measure of the extent to which the media's social responsibility is being realised, and an important contributor toward social cohesion, community wellbeing and trust in public institutions.

Principles for policy design and implementation

The policy objectives in the previous section set out the high-level goals that will be prioritised in government interventions to support news and journalism in Australia. This section sets out principles that are intended to provide practical guidance for future interventions.

Deciding whether to intervene

Proportionate interventions that minimise impacts on press freedom

Where government decides that intervention is warranted, it must limit any imposition on the freedom of the press. Policy interventions must be proportionate to the risks and harms being addressed, and the benefits being sought. Any imposition on the freedom of the press must be minimised, and risks of undesirable consequences mitigated to the maximum reasonable extent.

Targeting intervention

Distinguish between, and appropriately target, specific functions and roles

Past interventions have often failed to engage with this complexity, and conflated or failed to adequately consider the distinctions between parts of the news environment. A common example is that policies addressing news production and diversity of control have not distinguished between the production of journalism, and distribution of news content to consumers.

These distinctions are increasingly important as digital intermediaries take a more significant role and barriers to entry for distribution—but not the costs of producing journalism—have declined. The existence of many consumer-facing news sources cannot be taken as evidence of substantial investment in journalism, or diverse control over the production of journalism. Interventions must target the most appropriate actors and functions to deliver their target outcomes.

Journalism policy should generally be neutral about the distribution method

Australians are able to access news content through a broad range of distribution technologies—print newspapers, radio, television, digital publications and online services like podcasts and social media. It is essential that Australians are able to access the news content relevant to their interests, democratic decisions and communities. However, government interventions should not generally be targeted to a specific distribution technology, except where there is a compelling public policy rationale.

For example, broadcast media can play an essential role in emergency situations. Government might therefore have an interest in ensuring Australian communities retain access to emergency broadcast media. Government might also support adoption of technologies that offer significant efficiencies for news producers, or offer advantages in reaching underserved communities. However, existence of an existing industry is not by itself a reason for favouring one technology over another.

Promote diversity and competition, and respond to changing conditions

Media diversity is an important objective for a healthy news ecosystem, and more effective competition serves to promote both diversity, and sector-led service and efficiency improvements. Interventions should aim to enhance diversity and competition. This includes where it may disadvantage incumbents, so long as the impacts do not contribute to sustainability pressures that would likely result in reduced access or diversity over the medium-to-long term.

Policy interventions must engage with, and adapt to, the changing policy environment such as industry conditions, market structure, consumer preferences, and the technological landscape. Policy interventions should not seek to fix or revert things to a point in time, entrench incumbents, or fail to pragmatically engage with changes in technology.

Promote a media environment that generates greater public trust

Trust in the media is a critical determinant of consumer engagement with news content, and a key input for trust in democratic institutions and government. Greater trust in the media will be essential to realise the public benefits of news and journalism.

To support this outcome, interventions should seek to support quality journalism, ethical standards of journalism, alignment between citizens' expectations and media conduct, and the capacity and willingness of news organisations to invest in public interest journalism. For these reasons, interventions should enable the sector to adapt to changing models, but should generally be time-limited to allow review and recalibration in light of changing industry dynamics over time.

Use the best available evidence, and keep building the evidence base

It is essential that government gets the policy settings for news and journalism right to avoid causing harm to Australian democracy and society by undermining the editorial independence and freedom of the press or failing to safeguard the critical role of news and journalism. The news and journalism landscape has evolved over decades, and will continue to change in response to the new role for government set out in this policy framework. Policy decisions should be based on the best available evidence, and that evidence will change over time. To be an effective support for targeting interventions, evidence needs to be robust, detailed and current.

Delivering targeted outcomes

Supports should strongly incentivise journalistic and ethical standards

It is not appropriate for government to dictate the content of news coverage, or to impose rules on individual pieces of content. However, government intervention can promote enabling conditions for quality journalism and high ethical standards and make support conditional on a commitment to those qualities.

While this is necessarily limited, incentivising or requiring adoption of minimum standards—as long as those standards do not unduly limit the topics of coverage or range of perspectives—promotes access to public interest journalism, quality content, and consumer trust and engagement. Failure to require such standards risks public resources funding services which are not committed to, and do not serve, the public interest.

Adoption of methods, technologies and tools that support policy objectives

Where adoption of new methods, technologies and tools would serve the public interest, policy should support wider adoption of these approaches. Examples include supporting more efficient digital publication practices, development of new toolchains, capacity-building to improve journalistic practice

Journalism and news literacy policies should integrate and synergise with other relevant areas

The government's policy objectives for news and journalism interact with a range of responsibilities and initiatives across government. The policy response to the crisis facing news and journalism, including broader policies such as media literacy, artificial intelligence, freedom of information, and whistleblower policies,

should be joined-up and comprehensive. This is essential to create a news and information environment that fosters trust, enables public debate and empowers civic participation.

Impose the minimum burden on participants needed to achieve objectives.

As a general rule, interventions should not impose an unnecessary burden on participants. Citizens, news producers and other participants vary broadly in their resourcing and capabilities, and any burden or barriers would risk highly inequitable outcomes and less effective policy interventions.

Delivering accountability

Policies for, and affecting, news and journalism must be open and transparent

Transparency is essential for government policies impacting news and journalism. It is a necessary safeguard against overreach, whether deliberate or inadvertent, and an important means of creating greater trust. It also underpins and enables the role played by news and journalism, and reflects the transparency expected of news producers.

This framework is a critical component of this commitment to transparency, serving to clearly and publicly outline government's expected role, and explain the implications it may have for news organisations and the freedom of the press.

Policymakers must maintain and build on this transparency in future policies for news and journalism. Example actions include:

- publishing the design and policy intent of interventions
- ensuring that guidelines and other decision-making criteria are made public in a timely manner, and to the maximum possible extent
- adhering to published guidelines and decision-making criteria
- ensuring any deviations are consistent with obligations, and given a public explanation
- providing all interested parties with adequate opportunity for input on policy
- ensuring that consultation is public and transparent, including by publishing procedural information and submissions (where appropriate and legal).

Facing a global challenge

Continued leadership in shaping the global response

Democracies across the globe are encountering similar pressures on journalism, public institutions, and the broader information environment. Governments have responded with varying success. This framework is an unprecedented step in developing a cohesive, principles-based and evidence-informed approach. Australia has an opportunity to continue its leading role in shaping the global response to the crisis facing journalism, and contribute thought leadership and exemplary policy to buttress democratic institutions world-wide.

Consistency with international standards

Australia also has an opportunity to learn from the experience of other jurisdictions tackling similar problems across the globe, including to identify promising new policy directions and potential pitfalls. Where feasible and appropriate for Australia, there is also merit in aligning policy with international standards. This can help to

clarify complex policy issues, present a stronger, more unified position when dealing with challenging stakeholders, and reduce the burden on international participants.

Policy measures

A policy framework is not a solution in itself. The framework will guide policymakers to develop targeted, effective policy to address the crisis facing journalism and navigate the risks associated with government intervention. A first set of policy measures that the Australian Government will deliver to support news and journalism is set out in this section. It is anticipated these the measures will evolve over time as necessary.

Media diversity measurement framework

In December 2023, the Minister announced \$10.5 million for the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) to implement its new framework for measuring media diversity in Australia. The ACMA News Media Diversity Measurement Framework will monitor the state of the Australian news market and measure the levels of diversity across Australia's print, radio, TV and online news media landscape. The ACMA will publish its first report, followed by a report every two years, monitoring changes to the baseline, as well as providing new insights and case studies on different aspects of the Australian news market.

Expert panel

The Government will convene an expert panel to provide advice to assist in the allocation of funding and the design and targeting of mechanisms that go to direct support and capacity building, including sectoral capacity in attracting philanthropy and implementing commercial solutions. The expert panel will be charged with advancing the policy objectives as set out in this framework.

Direct funding

The Government recognises the need for direct funding to support the sustainability and capacity of Australian news organisations, and will work to ensure this is well-targeted. The government has already provided direct funding for a range of purposes and initiatives, including:

- sustainability of eligible regional, independent suburban, multicultural and First Nations news publishers
- journalism cadetships for regional and First Nations regional publishers
- operation of the newswire service of the Australian Associated Press
- data collection and analysis on Australian news and journalism by the Public Interest Journalism Initiative
- capacity building for small news businesses by the Local and Independent News Association.

Government ad spend

In recognition of the challenges facing regional media, the Government will mandate a minimum commitment of \$3.0 million per year for 2 years from 2025-26 for regional newspaper advertising (including digital formats) across the total annual Commonwealth Government media advertising spend.

National media literacy strategy

The Government will develop a National Media Literacy Strategy to deliver a clear and coordinated approach to building Australians' media literacy, which is a critical component of the engagement objective. The Government will consult with leading media literacy experts and communities, building on other government-funded initiatives including grants to support the Alannah and Madeline Foundation eSmart Media Literacy Lab, and the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Council of Australia to improve media literacy in CALD communities.