Submission by:

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1. Media overview:

The crisis facing the Australian media gets worse by the year. Until 2019, the already highly concentrated media landscape still included the independent Fairfax Media, which owned The Age and SMH. But since 2019, those two major metropolitan mastheads have been subsumed into the ownership of Australia's largest TV company, Nine Entertainment. Nine is chaired by Peter Costello, former Liberal MP and Treasurer. As the company's name makes clear, "entertainment" is its core business - not public interest journalism. The business rationale for owning the major metropolitan media outlets is to cross-promote its TV schedule to support its ratings war with Channels 7 and 10. The content offering of The Age and SMH has been largely merged into one. The net result of Nine and NewsCorp owning and dominating the media landscape in metropolitan Australia (where the majority of Australians live) is a very narrow editorial agenda and offering.

Outside the cities, Nine Entertainment offloaded its regional network of papers (formerly Rural Press) as they did not closely align with its business interests. Nor does the rationale of cross-promotion through those regional papers work, as other companies own the bulk of the key regional TV and radio stations.

Aside from media ownership in metropolitan Australia being concentrated in the hands of ever fewer corporations, the greatest collapse of the commercial media has been in the regional, rural and remote areas of Australia, due to a failure to sustain advertising and paid-for subscriptions. That market failure has rendered many parts of Australia "news deserts", with either no media presence in many towns whatsoever, or one so pared down it is no longer able to sustain a community and public interest service. The precise number of newsrooms and news outlets that have shut will be available via PIJI and others.

Newswires

The ability of media outlets to provide a comprehensive Australian news service was further damaged when in 2020 AAP closed and laid off 500 staff. After 85 years of media companies across Australia jointly supporting AAP, the view of two of the largest players, NewsCorp and Nine Entertainment, was that they were simply propping up a service which helped their competitors (especially The Guardian) access content.

This act of vandalism against a player long instrumental in the widespread provision of public interest journalism (coverage of police rounds, the courts, town halls etc) meant many media players were no longer able to offer their readers certain basic public information.

AAP 2.0 resurfaced with a current staffing of around 80 - much diminished in what it could provide its remaining clients, and in turn, the service said outlets are able to provide to their readers. It is now largely a breaking news operation without the resources to do in-depth features, investigations or off-diary reporting.

Press release journalism

Medianet's 2024 Media Landscape Report has made an alarming and worrying finding: a vast majority of Australian journalists (81 per cent of those surveyed) are increasingly reliant on press releases as primary source material for their reporting. Press releases, according to the report, are now the second most used story source.

Those press releases are largely generated by former journalists who are hired because of their story-telling expertise. However, instead of generating public interest journalism they seek to place and insert commercial or political messages directly into media outlets.

The implications for the calibre of public interest journalism in Australia are clear. If harried journalists predominantly rely on press releases, there's a heightened risk the Australian media primarily becomes a tool to amplify particular commercial agendas or biases, rather than a critical, analytical beacon acting in the public interest.

Restricted access subscription models

To replace the revenues previously derived from advertising, the larger media outlets have turned to building subscription-based businesses. To force sign-ups, each media outlet puts its best content behind a paywall, creating an "information gap" between those who can afford subscriptions and those who can't. To compound matters further, in recent years there has been a protracted campaign to politicise key media players who still provide a quality free news service, such as The ABC and The Guardian. As a result, large swathes of the Australian electorate who cannot afford subscriptions may instead seek out poor quality alternatives. In addition, this exacerbates the already increasing reliance on social media for news which, in turn, drives echo-chambers, polarisation and less informed public debate.

Such developments pose very real dangers to our national cohesion and thus the social, political and institutional pillars which underpin our democracy.

Recommended interventions:

- Funding support must only be given to news organisations which are demonstrably Australian-owned, independent and reinvest into Australia.
- Build capacity and resilience in the media ecosystem, with a focus on the most fragile parts of the media ecosystem: the regional, remote, community outlets.

- The Government should not reinforce the disparity by funding existing commercial players who place their content behind paywalls. Instead, assistance should be prioritised to those who offer free, open-access content.
- Funding support should be given to AAP to allow it to better support all outlets across Australia.
- Funding support should be given to other players that provide **news features content** to all Australian outlets, such as 360info.

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2. Countering the impact of Google, Facebook and other Big Tech players to defund Australian media. *And a robust remedy.*

The advertising pool which previously funded Australian media has been largely drained by Google and Facebook who between now take 82 cents of every advertising dollar.

The News Media Bargaining Code agreement is flawed insofar as it favours those who pushed for it, largely NewsCorp, and lacks any transparency in terms of who gets support. It does little to promote diversity of voice and ownership - nor address those areas of acute media failure, namely remote, rural and community outlets.

Recommended intervention: A practical and meaningful proposal that could correct some of the worst market failure outcomes and allow for greater media diversity of voice and ownership.

- A "social licence" or "community levy" be placed on the gross revenue turnover of the digital platform operators in Australia to fund public interest journalism through (say) **Independent Future Fund for Journalism** (IFFJ) which would seek applications from existing and new entrants to fund journalists for content creation and production. The Fund must be seen as independent and operating at arms-length from government, much like the way the BBC is funded.
- Funds would be invested in the suppliers of news and journalism, primarily in those areas where the market has failed to deliver the resources required to support outlets in regional, rural, remote communities - those smaller newsrooms most disrupted by changing business models.
- Specifically, the funds would be used to hire reporters, editors, production staff, photographers and back office support. Those areas that require support due to market failure (and watchdog journalism) leading to reduced or poor quality coverage include coverage of:
  Town Halls
  Courts and police rounds
  Regional (bush) coverage
  Specialist reporting (the health, education, transport, environment, arts and other rounds)
  Federal and State Parliaments
  Foreign Correspondents
  Community and multicultural/diversity matters

Investigative journalism
Specialist business and sports coverage.

For details, see ACCC invited submission by Andrew Jaspan
https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Andrew%20Jaspan%20%28March%202019%29.pdf

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3. Improve quality and diversity of voice and perspectives: the case for universities to step up as a new trusted provided of information for the public

Publishers and broadcasters are resource and time poor. That often means they don't have time to fact-check or carry out in-depth consideration of complex stories and issues.

With the failure of the so-called Fourth Estate, there is an historic opportunity for **universities** to reposition themselves at the heart of a new information ecosystem that provides evidence-driven information with integrity to address societies' problems and solutions. In service to the world's citizens.

Universities are uniquely suited to be information suppliers, given their broad remit to educate and tackle the world's most pressing issues – while able to deliver reliable and fact-driven information underpinned by long-held commitments to codes of conduct, integrity and freedom of independent inquiry and research to benefit society.

Yet they remain in many ways a stranded public asset. That is the view of Education Minister Jason Clare who placed a key requirement on universities "to demonstrate the societal benefits (economic, commercial, environmental, social, or cultural) of the proposed research beyond the academic community". That requirement underpins the case for the $22bn pa that universities and ARC received from the Australian Government.

The relative failure of the sector to deliver on that requirement is to some extent due to the current methods deployed by universities to share their research outcomes. Namely, each university employs large teams of "communications" specialists (usually journalists driven from shrinking newsrooms) to deliver PR stories about the wonderful new research its university has published. The purpose of such "branded content" is to raise the profile of the university and support student recruitment - the business model of universities. As such, this type of content is rightfully not considered a legitimate form of neutral, trusted information. As an example, AAP will not carry content from those university websites.

Two years ago 360info was launched as an independent content supplier to counter this problem. It operates as an independent, nonprofit, business-to-business digital newswire global media platform. Providing free access to public-interest research from universities around the world. In doing so, it works to support and supply under-the-pump newsrooms everywhere with high-grade content which can both build newsroom capacity (at no cost) and help support its business resilience.

As an open access service, 360info delivers reliable, verified high-value text, image and video content - **at no cost** - under Creative Commons. This ensures the widest and most diverse reach possible and over 1,600 media outlets and journalists from Australia and the Indo-Pacific region access our content. Both commercial and public-funded media have free access..

Unlike AAP, Australia's other newswire, 360info is not a breaking news service. Nor like consumer-facing website driven by clicks. The B2B service is a powerful resource that supplies newsrooms and journalists with news features.

360info does not provide opinion and advocacy. Just the facts.

360info can go where traditional reporting can't. Instead of a 24/7 service which reports what happened yesterday, 360info applies the research conducted by universities to better understand the major challenges we face - and utilise the research to offer evidence-driven ways to address, mitigate or solve those problems. That is the sort of information readers are more inclined to read rather than a constant diet of bad news - a phenomenon partly responsible for the big switch-off from the news media.

Finally, to gain the confidence and trust of our content partners, 360info is committed to a policy of full transparency of our funding, governance, codes of conduct and working practices. Our professional editors are bound by an Editorial Charter. (https://360info.org/about-us/our-charter/).

Our editorial independence is paramount. Editors work free from external influence and avoid bias or prejudice. If the editor of an article has a political, financial or personal affiliation that creates – or may be perceived to create – a conflict, it must be disclosed next to the article.

How does 360info support media diversity and public interest journalism?

360info took a deliberate decision not to launch another website that competes against existing media players for reader eyeballs and advertising revenues.

Instead, 360info is a collaborative service that offers high quality, evidence based, solutions focused content *to all publishers at no cost to support them all*.

Working with universities across the world (with a particular focus on the Indo-Pacific region), we bring greater diversity of expert voices and perspectives than are heard in the current media landscape.

Further, because 360info content is free to use, we hope publishers will reduce their reliance on poor and polluted information and use 360info content to help improve the information ecosystem.

The largest users of 360info content are the smaller and medium-sized regional, remote and community newsrooms. 360info provides them with content they would otherwise not be able to source, afford or have time to cover themselves. In that way 360info provides extra content capacity which hopefully supports their longer-term sustainability.

As Elizabeth Voneiff Marx, Editor, The Small Newspaper Co, writes:

"As a regional publisher (The Daily Journal, the Stanthorpe Record and the Country Journal) we are hyper focused on local news but we have found ourselves extremely fortunate to be able to offer our readers on the Southern Downs something more sophisticated. We work on a very tight budget and skeleton staff and without 360info we would not be able to offer the in-depth coverage on special issues that we do. It is excellent to be able to offer regional readers this sort of professional, thought-provoking content. Items we have run from 360 have been received with interest. It is a valuable contribution to a critically-endangered Australian journalism landscape".

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4. Engagement and promoting media literacy

There is a clear and present threat to public discourse, and an undermining of public information through the proliferation of dis-and-misinformation. In addition to the spread of misinformation, a "post-truth" scenario poses a serious threat to global security. All this is made worse by the development of generative AI content capable of creating pitch-perfect text, video and data in seconds - without leaving any trace of its authorship, provenance, or agenda. Leaving readers, and in particular the younger and less experienced news consumers, unable to discern between fact or fiction.

We see an opportunity to elevate the role of primary and secondary schools in training a new generation of information and news consumers to check, recognise and combat misinformation and disinformation. By targeting younger audiences we seek to engender intergenerational change which will lead to a better informed citizenry and a resilient democracy.

The establishment of a new cohort of media savvy, critical thinking students would represent a significant investment into the future of news media consumption in Australia.

Rather than being overwhelmed by the ever- constant news cycle or being led astray by social media algorithms, students with media literacy training will be empowered to identify and consume accurate and reliable / 'clean' information and become more likely to support public interest journalism into adulthood.

Recommendation and intervention:

The Government should consider early intervention strategies for tackling the misinformation and disinformation crisis, such as developing media literacy skills in school students. By incorporating media literacy, critical thinking, and digital literacy into the broader education system, we can equip individuals with the skills necessary to navigate the information environment effectively.

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