

# News Media Assistance Program (News MAP) Consultation

The AJF is a small, registered charity with DGR status that fights for press freedom and the right of journalists to report the news in freedom and safety in Australia and the wider Asia Pacific region. This includes working with governments to ensure legislation supports media freedom. The AJF was established in 2017, following the release of Australian journalist, Peter Grete, from imprisonment in Egypt. Since then, we have become the leading voice on media freedom in Australia in both public discussions and policymaking.

We would like to thank the department for conducting this round of consultation and look forward to working with the government to improve Australians' access to high quality public interest journalism regardless of location. In responding to this submission, the AJF acknowledges that some of the discussion relates to topics outside our areas of expertise. In such questions, we have made no response.

Broadly speaking, the AJF believes Australian journalism is facing a crisis of declining professional standards and public confidence. While journalists themselves must shoulder some of the responsibility for that crisis, much of it is driven by the collapse in business models and the consequent drive for commercially successful content. This is fundamentally incompatible with journalism that genuinely serves our democracy.

The economics of the news business is beyond our scope. But we believe a professional journalists' association that upholds ethics and standards, and helps audiences distinguish content produced according to those standards from other content, will go a long way towards improving the quality of news as well as public trust.

We now address the questions raised in the discussion paper in more detail.

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

1.1.1 Australia does not have an expressly stated right to free speech. Instead, our courts have read into the constitution an implied right of political communication which is widely cast to protect most forms of speech. This is because the courts recognise that the right to political communication is crucial for an effective democracy. Citizens must have easy access to a wide variety of high-quality news to arrive at a principled decision at the ballot box.

1.1.2 The AJF believes that access to high quality news is an essential part of that process. The principle behind press freedom is not to protect a particular class of professional, but rather to support the flow of high-quality information about current events and the political process. In that regard, journalists and news organisations are merely instruments in the service of that democratic imperative.

1.1.3 By focusing on 'access', we place the emphasis in a way that supports the democratic objective of a free press without unduly privileging a particular class or profession.

**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?

1.2.1 Access to news reporting on local, state, and regional issues is falling<sup>1</sup>. The Public Interest Journalism Initiative (PIJI) has mapped the closure of newsrooms and loss of journalists' jobs across the country. It has reported huge reductions in the availability of news at a local and regional level. The research shows that there are fewer journalists covering local councils, local courts, and government departments at the state level.

1.2.2 A 2018 study by the Brookings Institute in the United States, [\*Financing Dies in Darkness\*](#), found a direct causal relationship between the closure of local newspapers and a substantial rise in the costs of running local government. The study found that the loss of media scrutiny leads directly to less efficient government. While no similar study has been conducted in Australia, it is reasonable to suggest that the spread of 'news deserts' has a similar impact on the community here.

1.2.3 Another issue facing newsrooms is the loss of specialist reporting. As news organisations attempt to cut costs, the more expensive and experienced specialist journalists tend to go first. This includes areas such as the environment, industrial relations, the courts and police, defence, economics, and the arts. These subjects require highly experienced and well-connected journalists with the background and knowledge to present in-depth analysis. Specialist reporting is not necessarily a huge driver of clicks when compared to sports, celebrity gossip, and opinion pieces, but is vital for high quality public debate.

1.2.4 Without well-staffed specialist interest sections diving into important but non-commercial issues and strong local newsrooms holding councils and state legislatures to account there is a real risk that political debate becomes shallow, glossy, and packaged to fit in the celebrity interest columns.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://theconversation.com/local-news-sources-are-closing-across-australia-we-are-tracking-the-devastation-and-some-reasons-for-hope-139756>.

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

1.3.1 Because it is vital to maintain the independence of journalism, it is inappropriate for governments to directly interfere with the news business. However, we make the point that

only the government has the power to establish mechanisms to regulate and financially support news organisations. The specifics of such mechanisms are beyond the expertise of the AJF, but we suggest they could include favourable tax regulations, or a levy (similar to the Medicare Levy) managed by an independent authority that could direct funds to news organisations in exchange for a commitment to upholding editorial standards.

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

2.1.1 The current digital environment privileges the quantity of news over quality. In 2023, NewsCorp acknowledged using artificial intelligence to produce 3000 stories per week for its local news outlets.<sup>2</sup> The AJF is concerned that commercial pressures are compromising editorial standards, leaving consumers with hollowed out news products generated by AI or young, inexperienced and cheap staffers. There are few points of pressure pushing the quality of news upwards.

2.1.2 The AJF believes at least part of the solution is a professional association for journalists, to encourage quality output. The AJF, in collaboration with The Ethics Centre and Gilbert +Tobin, is in the process of establishing such an organisation, *Journalism Australia (JA)*. JA will grant membership to anyone who demonstrates they understand editorial standards and ethics, and consistently apply them to their work. JA will operate a complaint's mechanism to hold members accountable, and give them an opportunity to badge their work with a 'kite mark' to distinguish it from less reputable content.

2.1.3 The current system of industry self-regulation is widely recognised as outdated and ineffective. At present, the Australian Press Council handles complaints related to publishers, while the Australian Communications and Media Authority deals with broadcasters. That system is relatively meaningless in a digitally converged world where news organisations routinely publish written content as well as video and audio. It also holds news corporations rather than individuals accountable, rendering their ability to uphold standards relatively weak. In contrast, JA holds its members accountable. It would work alongside and constructively with such regulatory bodies to ensure standards are met by members who work or produce content in areas not covered by existing regulation.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mediaweek.com.au/michael-miller-tells-publishers-how-news-corp-australia-had-best-year-in-a-decade/>

2.1.4 JA would deliver professional development courses to educate members about changes in the industry such as the development of AI, mis/disinformation, and changes to the law. This would equip members with the skills and knowledge required to keep abreast of the rapidly changing environment in which they work.

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

2.2.1 The AJF believes journalism should be considered as a *process* rather than a particular class of individual. We define it as a means for gathering, organising, and presenting information according to a set of generally accepted professional standards, ethics, and principles. Those standards should apply to all forms of journalism, regardless of the content and regardless of the job title of the person who produces it. It is just as important to make fashion or entertainment journalism accurate, balanced, and timely as any other.

2.2.2 The AJF also believes there needs to be a clear distinction between commentary and reporting. Online, it is difficult to distinguish between genuine news produced according to those professional standards, and content that appears the same but fails to make the grade. Journalism Australia members would be able to attach a kitemark to their work to help audiences distinguish between the two. Social media companies could also use the kitemark as an indicator of good journalism and reward it by boosting it up their rankings.

2.2.3 Consumers who believe JA members who have failed to meet their professional obligations could lodge a complaint through an independent complaints mechanism. When complaints are upheld, an ombudsman would have the authority to apply sanctions, including suspending or revoking membership. Such a system would encourage compliance and provide upward pressure on journalistic standards.

**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?

2.3.1 It is inappropriate for government to assess the quality of news, uphold standards or sanction breaches. Such a system should be handled by an appropriate, independent association for industry self-regulation. However, the current system is ineffective and urgently in need of reform. We recommend converging the Australian Press Council and ACMA into a single organisation independent of the companies it would be regulating. The design and structure of a new organisation is beyond the scope of this submission, but we also maintain that a separate professional association is urgently needed to uphold standards among individual journalists.

Such an association, led by a diverse board of industry professionals and independent but well-regarded members of the public, would set standards, admit members who understand and consistently apply those standards, and run an independent adjudication system to manage complaints about lapses.

2.3.2 While the Australian Press Council has insufficient powers to sanction breaches of its General Principles, its system for handling and adjudicating complaints is effective and should be a model for any future mechanism. A council committee vets complaints for those deemed inappropriate or out of scope, and sends legitimate ones to formal adjudication panels. They are made up of independent journalists and members of the public who interrogate both the publishers and complainants before arriving at their conclusions and publishing them.

2.3.3 Whatever institutional arrangements are put in place, the funding must be independent of government and sufficiently diverse, so they don't depend on any one news organisation. The APC is routinely accused of being beholden to NewsCorp which provides 70 percent of its funding. Whether or not the APC acts in the interests of a publisher, the *appearance* of partisanship is enough to undermine public confidence in its ability to defend journalistic standards.

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

4.1.1 With new technologies and ways to access information it is important that journalists adapt to reach readers where they are. However, it cannot be the only objective. Journalism that has a high democratic value might not necessarily have high engagement. Stories about procurement policies in a local council might struggle to get a significant number of readers, but the act of holding councils accountable has an important democratic function. Similarly, the presence of a reporter in the chamber has an impact on the conduct of the councillors.

4.1.2 The ABC's flagship current affairs program, Four Corners, attracts small audiences compared to commercial rivals, but sometimes its journalism has an outsized impact that flows into the rest of the media. The initial Four Corners story of the abuse of teenagers at the Northern Territory's Don Dale Detention Centre did not attract large numbers of viewers, but most Australians became aware of it through other news coverage, and it triggered a Royal Commission.

4.1.3 Focusing on engagement also risks devaluing specialist reporters who develop skills, knowledge and a network of contacts for a deep understanding of a particular subject. If engagement becomes the key metric for their value, we risk losing the quality of their reporting. Few newsrooms have specialist environment reporters, for example. It is hard to justify purely on engagement because other forms of reporting – such as celebrity news or sports – garner far more attention. However, by losing those specialists, we also lose quality journalism and thus end up with poor quality public debate and policymaking.

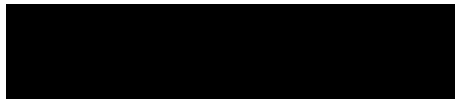
**Q9.3:** How should they be regulated? What are your views on whether government regulation of news media diversity be focussed on the media through which it is delivered or be agnostic to the media delivery mechanism?

9.3.1 The AJF's model is deliberately agnostic of the media through which the journalism is delivered. We focus on the ethics and standards that lie behind the journalism, regardless of the medium. In a world with technology so rapidly transforming, any mechanism that focusses on the medium risks becoming quickly redundant.

Finally, we commend the government for recognizing the urgent need to address the crisis in Australian journalism, and we stand ready to answer any questions about our submission either in writing or in person.

Yours sincerely,

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