

ARN Submission for the News Media Assistance Package (News MAP) 27 February 2024

Introduction

ARN welcomes the opportunity to respond to the News Media Assistance Program (News MAP) Consultation Paper.

As the operator of 58 radio stations across 36 markets, and a leading provider of local content to regional Australians, ARN is committed to preserving the sanctity of news and safeguarding the public's right to accurate and reliable information.

Traditional compliance models and linear methods are becoming increasingly antiquated and restrictive, when ARN wants to maximise its news force to meet changing audience habits. Current regulatory obligations should be reviewed in the context of the significant shift to on-demand content by audiences.

Recommendations

1. Mutually Advantageous Partnerships in Regional News

Investment in regional news should be viewed not solely as a public service but also as a commercial opportunity. Recognising the potential for growth and sustainability in regional markets is crucial for fostering a diverse media landscape. Without the support of commercial partners or opportunity to apply for government funding, the potential for ARN to build on its local news content in regional communities may be limited.

Recommendation 1:

Explore federal funding opportunities to showcase the government's backing for public interest journalism through collaborative funding initiatives with regional media providers, aiding in government awareness campaigns. This approach goes beyond mere revenue generation, offering content collaboration opportunities, particularly focusing on public issue coverage, thus ensuring the relevance of government policies to diverse audiences. Examples could include voter enrolment, community safety, local business support, and public awareness campaigns.

2. Broad Definition of Public Interest News

The definition of public interest news should be extended beyond investigative reporting to encompass local news and information. Ensuring access to diverse and relevant news content is essential for an informed society and vital to communities outside of capital cities. ARN welcomes a discussion on integrity markers that are transparent and visible to the public, while also being practical for stations. Appropriate integrity markers would serve as a reassurance to our audience and communities that ARN is committed to prioritising local news.

Recommendation 2:

Public interest news should be defined broadly to include material that is relevant to local communities and establishes a connection with its audience. This need not necessarily entail hard-hitting investigative or long-form content but could instead encompass material related to lifestyle, events, and community, potentially disseminated through social channels and on-demand platforms. The definition should not be confined to a specific genre of news content or limited to publication on particular platforms. For example, an ARN listener's personal daily news consumption, may involve:

- Waking to use a mobile device to listen to a national news update published by ARN Network News Desk at 0600
- Hearing two x 90 second updates on KIIS FM at 0700 + 0730 whilst driving to work
- Downloading a "Your News Now" news update at lunchtime via ARN's a third party podcasting platform
- Being pinged with the latest showbiz headlines via ARN's iHeart app or a website subscription
- Consuming an iHeart[News] longform podcast recapping and previewing local news

Recommendation 3:

The concept of "local" should not be confined to geographical boundaries but should encompass communities of interest across diverse licence areas. This approach ensures that news coverage remains relevant and reflective of the interests and needs of various communities. For example, Burnie and Devonport in Tasmania, and locations to the west of Central Queensland and Mackay in Queensland, where the big centres like Moranbah and Emerald don't count towards compliance even though matters there can be of great significance to locals.

3. Addressing Regulatory Barriers

ARN urges the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) to consider the practicalities of providing substantial amounts of news relevant to extremely small licence areas. ARN would support measures that reflect the practical difficulties encountered in micro licence areas, such as a reduced compliance target. The current target of 62.5 minutes of local news per week per regional licence area is particularly cumbersome for smaller licence areas, where the infrequency of news events reflects the population size of that community.

Recommendation 4:

We recommend local news compliance targets be reviewed for "small market licence areas". Targets should instead be determined by population density and lowered to reflect the challenges of sourcing/reporting news in such a region. We understand this would require legislative amendment to the Broadcasting Services Act 1992. Some of our licence areas services populations of less than 2000 people. The local news compliance in these licence areas is the same as a licence area like Wollongong, with a population of 312, 000 (Census 2021).

4. Local News Compliance Frameworks and Journalist Workflows

Structural and legislative inhibitors often hinder the ability of journalists to focus on original journalism and digital-first opportunities. Journalists face substantial workloads, primarily driven by daily bulletin requirements to reach benchmark

bulletin and compliance targets, which can detract from in-depth reporting and innovation in content delivery. The definition of "eligible local news bulletins" in Section 61 CD of the Broadcasting Services Act, 1992 should be broadened beyond linear, as audiences evolve and embrace new consumption habits.

Recommendation 5:

A broader definition of public interest news material would open up more flexibility for the focus on story telling. This flexibility would enable a significant shift in our journalist's news gathering workflows, which are tethered to satisfying compliance targets for broadcast within a news bulletin format. If daily broadcast "minutes" could be reduced, and compliance conditions broadened to count the material published online, within podcasts and on social channels, journalists would find more space within their workflow to produce content for changing audience consumption habits, and less time "chained to the studio". This would require very little expense to media networks.

5. Recruitment and Talent Development

Regional radio stations continue to be the career launch pad for junior journalists but attracting and retaining high calibre talent to local news roles that require the journalist to work as a sole entity, can be very difficult. Recruitment challenges persist in local news markets due to disparities in journalist awards and the cost of living. The lack of formal journalistic pipeline pathways exacerbates these challenges, leading to difficulties in attracting and retaining high-calibre talent in regional areas. Industry-led initiatives, such as grassroots talent development programs, are crucial for nurturing the next generation of journalists.

Recommendation 6:

The government should explore the implementation of an industry placement initiative aimed at incentivising and retaining media professionals in regional areas. With many leading universities discontinuing traditional journalism programs, such as the recent closure of the BA Communications - Journalism degree at Charles Sturt University, there has been a noticeable decline in the number of qualified journalists entering regional markets (Source: ABC News, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-24/journalism-degree-at-charles-sturt-university-nears-end/102613728>). To address this shortage, a strategic Career Progression Wage Subsidy program could be introduced, whereby media networks would receive financial support for facilitating placements of journalists in regional positions for a specified duration.

Conclusion

The News MAP initiative represents a critical step towards supporting a diverse and sustainable news media sector in Australia. By addressing regulatory barriers, redefining the scope of public interest news, and investing in talent development, policymakers can foster an environment conducive to quality journalism and informed public discourse. Collaboration between government, industry stakeholders, and the wider community will be essential in implementing effective interventions and safeguarding the future of journalism in Australia.