

## **News Media Assistance Program Consultation Paper, December 2023**

**Australian Government Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communication and the Arts.**

**“We encourage stakeholders to provide detailed feedback to inform the development of a sustainable future for news and journalism in Australia.” - Page 5**

Please find below my experiences as a lone journalist covering a local council as evidence to help you assess the state of public interest journalism at the level of local government.

I am a trained journalist with 40 years' experience.

I am also “someone who started a blog”, a term that my local council uses to describe the work I do now for nothing but it's the same work both that Murdoch and then Fairfax employed me for many years to do.

My local council media department uses the term blogger as the reason why they do not have to answer my questions.

However, I am the only journalist who attends every council meeting and publishes council's every decision on my facebook page Council Watch.

These posts often lead to community engagement with local issues, or outrage directed at Council.

### **Problem number one: it takes time and effort to keep an eye on a public institution such as a local council.**

Unfortunately, to have someone like me watching every one of the 128 NSW councils would cost lots of money and news outlets can't afford to pay for the time and effort that it takes.

- 1/ First, you have to read the council agenda business papers and attachments.
- 2/ And then attend the meetings.
- 3/ On top of that, there are agendas and minutes from advisory committees.
- 4/ Also, planning proposals and development applications' Statement of Environmental Effects to read and
- 5/ Local Planning Panel meetings to cover.
- 6/ Learning to find some public notices and other important news on a council website becomes a real skill: nothing is easy to find.

For example, the only place to find a list of homes council was selling for overdue rates and charges was on the State Government Gazette, not on the council website at all.

- 7/ Court cases in the Land and Environment Court are a good source of council news. For example developers are going to the LEC for “deemed refusals”.

The local court also can be a source of news; an upcoming case relates to a civil engineering company facing more than 15 charges relating to sediment control of a subdivision.

8/ Public meetings relating to council issues such as changes in classification of council-owned land from community to operational.

9/ Then there are the public exhibitions of Council plans, strategies, projects and drafts of, for example, Coastal Management Plans and Dogs in Open Space strategies.

All these documents have to be read and let me tell you, that can be hard work. Trying to make sense of them can be difficult.

10/ I attend the LGNSW annual conference. Just reading the submitted motions can take days.

Good stories always come out of this work; but it could take two hours to read and write up one development application; it can take four hours or more to read a Council business paper with attachments.

The stories are important. They add to local democracy in a way that is helpful.

It is helpful because it is factual information, not vague wonderings of something someone might have heard and decided to share on social media.

The good thing for me is that I now have seven years of knowledge of this particular council.

And I have a back catalogue of stories to remind me of past decisions; the fact I've noted every decision has become a godsend.

**“AI text stands out as it's often long-winded, repetitive, contradictory and doesn't cite sources.”** - from a David Astle column in the SMH, Feb 17, in which he quotes English in Progress editor Heddwen Newtown.

This quote could also be true about information coming from council media departments. Truth is hard to find; press releases are everywhere.

I was taught to throw press releases in the bin or use them as a starting point to a story but never just print them.

But I can see that too often now, media releases across the country are printed as received, just to meet the google target of X number of stories uploaded a day.

This is great for the person writing the press release, but it is not good for the reading public.

It muddies the water: what is truth and what is spin?

I am not surprised people say they don't know what to believe anymore.

Asking questions of media departments is simply inviting spin.

If a journalist doesn't know what's going on, some media departments won't attempt to enlighten them.

If a journalist does know what's going on, some media departments will attempt to spin it. Either way, a media department's response rarely adds anything of substance to a story.

When a journalist poses a question to a media department, it is in writing. Journalists rarely get an opportunity to talk to the person involved in the issue.

It was not always this way: journalists used to talk to the real people who knew the issue or to the boss and we would have this thing called a conversation where questions naturally arose from the answer just given.

It made for a better story with facts, background and explanations all there in one story.

I have to put it on the record, that council staff dealing with me as a resident, not a journalist, are really helpful but, of course, I can't quote them.

Our council gives less and less information to the public.

For example, it used to give regular updates on DA numbers and average decision times.

Now it doesn't. It says it follows the requirements of the Local Government Act.

It used to give more financial detail than it does now. It says it follows the LG Act.

Recently the full business paper from the Audit, Risk and Improvement Committee was uploaded apparently when it should not have been. Best information I'd had in years!

Council does a lot of surveys - and they get a lot of criticism about bias in the questions.

For example; residents who aren't on town sewer and water complained that a recent survey did not allow them to explain why they didn't want to be connected.

**So, problem two: the truth is not easy to source anymore.**

Who cares?

Not a lot of people, but enough to make me continue my work.

My council area is quite well covered media wise: there is the local ABC radio station, numerous other radio stations; a News Ltd newspaper behind a paywall; a business magazine and a free local newspaper.

I work a few hours a week for the free local newspaper and the Council media department will answer my questions when they are for the newspaper.

But they won't answer questions for my Council Watch.

Why? Because it's a blog is the official answer.

I think the real answer is because they can ignore something that isn't traditional and they would rather I went away.

And the trouble is, sooner or later I will.

And when I do, stories will go unwritten because paid business models do not spend the money to allow journalists to do the amount of work I do for free.

Background - who am I?

My journalism career began in the 1980s after I graduated from Mitchell College of Advanced Education (now Charles Sturt University) with a degree in journalism.

I gained a cadetship at my local newspaper, the Central Coast Express, and less than a year later was sent north to start the Lake Macquarie Advocate.

I spent the next 25 or so years writing for or editing suburban newspapers for News Limited, including a seven year stint as editor-in-chief of Quest Community Newspapers, a network of 16 papers which covered greater Brisbane.

In 2008, I joined Fairfax/Rural Press.

I worked as a journalist for The Senior, a national newspaper focused on seniors' issues, before spending about seven years as an editorial trainer with Rural Press.

This training role sent me to country towns around the country, wherever Rural Press had a newspaper, to provide one-on-one mentoring to editorial staff.

My retirement in 2016 coincided with the merger of the former Gosford and Wyong councils in NSW to create Central Coast Council, and the subsequent councillor elections in 2017.

I was annoyed at the lack of scrutiny given to the candidates by the local press, including my old newspaper, and so I started a facebook page and a website called Central Coast Council Watch.

My plan was to keep an eye on council for three years until the next election: by then I would be able to supply some decent stats on which councillors attended the most meetings; how they voted on major issues and how effective they were on behalf of the community.

That plan blew up spectacularly with Covid pushing the election back a year but, even worse, when the elections did roll around, the Central Coast did not get to vote.

Instead, we had been put under administration and our councillors were suspended and then sacked after a public inquiry into the council's finances.

So, I'm still watching. Elections are being held this September.

Kind regards,

Merilyn Vale

