



**JOURNALISM EDUCATION
& RESEARCH ASSOCIATION
OF AUSTRALIA**

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Submission to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional
Development, Communication and the Arts on the News Media Assistance
Program (NewsMAP)

<https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/have-your-say/news-media-assistance-program-news-map>

Submission prepared by:

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On behalf of the Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia

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The Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia Incorporated (JERAA) is the peak body of Australian journalism educators and researchers from tertiary education and industry organisations. JERAA's primary aim is to raise the standard of teaching of journalism and to foster excellence and integrity in current and future generations of journalism practitioners. JERAA also supports research, knowing that good research seeks out new information, identifies issues and resolves problems for the benefit of the news media industry specifically and society more broadly. JERAA advocates for and celebrates excellence in journalism and in journalism education. JERAA provides annual awards and grants for journalism researchers and journalism students.

This submission has been written on behalf of JERAA's executive by the co-treasurer of the association Dr Chrisanthi Giotis and informed by members of the JERAA executive.

This submission concerns the government's consultation on its commitment to develop the News Media Assistance Program (News MAP), to secure that evidence base needed to inform news and media policy interventions and formulate measures to support public interest journalism and media diversity. The consultation paper is broad ranging and all of the questions are relevant to JERAA's mission of fostering excellence in future practitioners as that excellence can not be

achieved in an industry in crisis. However, we will focus on specific issues most aligned with our roles as educators and researchers. This submission will also address the opening question regarding the definition of Public Interest Journalism.

Overview

As journalism educators and researchers we are responsible for preparing the next generation of journalists around the nation. We aim to prepare graduates who know how to produce quality journalism across a range of media forms in all parts of the news media. As such the responses here should be read with the understanding that they are informed by a wish to foster the best possible opportunities for our graduates, so they can move into an industry allowing them to practise the best version of their profession in organisations large or small, city or country, in a newsroom or freelance. In preparing our students for the difficult transition to the workforce it is important to stay abreast of the latest industry developments and this response is informed by that research. This response is further informed by an understanding of the urgent need to future-proof the profession through strengthening access and engagement to news and cementing the important role of original, quality journalism in civil society.

This consultation comes at a point where the news industry has been struggling for many years with the term ‘crisis’. Quality newsrooms are needed to usher in the next generation of quality journalists. Yet the twin impact of digital platform disruption and COVID-19 showed us how fragile the industry is. Overseas, profit and job losses in key bastions of the profession have led to claims we are witnessing a “mass media extinction event”, in Australia the collapse of advertising revenue continues, as do resultant job losses (Saeed, 2024). As opportunities for training in newsrooms dwindle it is still not clear what business models can support the next generation of professionals producing quality public interest journalism. What is clear is the urgency of this support.

Key points in this submission include:

Public interest journalism definition. Expanding the definition of public interest journalism to specifically recognise the issue of quality and the role of journalism in community building, thus contributing to civic engagement objectives.

Getting the framework right for the access, engagement and media literacy objectives. The objectives of Access, Quality, Media Diversity and Engagement have many overlapping elements that should be considered together. We suggest that Access and Engagement become one policy objective. Conversely, we suggest that it will be more impactful to consider media literacy as a separate objective.

Supporting jobs so as to support quality journalism. The importance of supporting newsrooms has been recognised in the current Journalist Fund and the previous Regional and Small Publishers Cadetship Program. This assistance needs to continue to achieve the policy objective of quality.

Learning from overseas local news partnerships. In looking at potential measures supporting new business models to produce quality public interest journalism the government can learn from the UK’s, BBC Local News Partnerships and the New Zealand Local Democracy Reporting Service.

Moving quickly on tax and advertising. We recognise that much work is already being done in this area. We wish to highlight the urgency of implementing reforms so as to

create a more even playing field for original, quality journalism to compete in the attention economy.

Support for standpoint diversity. We commend ACMA's ambition to introduce standpoint diversity into future iterations of the Media Diversity Measurement Framework. This is also an issue for engagement, if audiences do not see themselves and their issues represented they disengage from news media.

The definition of Public Interest Journalism

On the question of the ACCC's 2019 definition of Public Interest Journalism we do not believe that this fully encapsulates the requirements of public interest journalism or the changes which have happened since that time, including the development of the core news definition in the News Media Bargaining Code and the continued pollution of the information ecosystem. The consultation document asks whether it is sufficient for journalism to simply inform on issues of public significance or whether it must do so with due diligence, without the intention to mislead or influence for private or partisan purposes. This is a valid concern for the government — why should money be spent supporting journalism that may further pollute the information ecosystem? This concern also aligns with the second news MAP objective to support quality journalism. Furthermore it is also important to note that in the current era of 'outrage' media poor quality public interest journalism could also be driven by commercial interests. As such the definition offered below incorporates extra words aimed at addressing this issue.

In the News Media Bargaining Code the second clause in the definition of Core News is:

b) current issues or events of public significance for Australians at a local, regional or national level.

This definition clearly points to the importance of news at different levels of community. It should also be noted that Australian journalism researchers have long established the important role regional newspapers play in giving a sense of community, civic leadership and helping to build the social capital needed for civic life (Bowd 2011, Hess 2015, Richards 2014). The Public Interest Journalism Initiative has also adopted a definition of Public Interest Journalism which specifically incorporates the community building role of journalism through the clause "content which relates to community and local events".

The definition we suggest here is informed by the above and by the specific objectives of the news MAP program around quality and engagement.

Original journalism with the primary purpose of recording, investigating and explaining issues of public significance in order to engage citizens in accurate and informed public debate, contribute to decision making at all levels of government, and foster the development of local, regional and national communities.

Part 1: Framework and objectives

Access

Access to news is in itself in the public interest, however there is industry concern at the moment in news being crowded out by the algorithmic choices of digital platforms. There may be lessons to be learned here from issues of ‘prominence’ currently being discussed in regards to Australian TV content currently being investigated by the Environment and Communications Legislation Committee for inquiry and report by 26 March 2024.

It is also important to note the emerging concerns from overseas that news deserts are not the only problem. Zombie papers published without a local staff, reporters, or newsrooms are a concern as they “threaten to complicate audiences’ perceptions of news credibility and trust” (Assman 2023). There is also the problem identified by the Nieman Lab of [news mirages](#). This is the use of generative AI to flood underserved communities with mis- and disinformation. It is argued that flood of content makes it difficult for communities to then access the small amounts of quality information that they may have available to them and can also break down community cohesion.

We also wish to sound a warning bell in the assumption that community-led news services can fill local news voids. A review of Australian and international literature and research prepared for the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) points to declining watchdog journalism in Australia and the fact that hyperlocals both in Australia and overseas struggle to replace this function (Wilding, Giotis & Koskie 2020).

This objective is closely related to the process of fostering a vibrant news ecosystem and broad policy and regulation measures to foster this ecosystem should be adopted (see part 2). It is also important to recognise that access, diversity and engagement are intimately related. The Digital News Report 2021 asked news consumers about representation. It found many women, younger people, people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and regional audiences felt themselves under represented and unfairly represented. **These audiences are also less likely to be heavy consumers of news (Park et. al. 2021)** On the issue of young people specifically, greater access to news about themselves would also enhance the policy objective of media literacy with young people wanting more news about themselves and those who consume more news being more media literate (Notley et. al. 2023).

More broadly, there is long-standing research that argues access and engagement are intimately related. In a longitudinal, comparative study of 13 news environments in Europe Esser et. al., (2012) found that political engagement increased when there were more “windows of opportunity” to view political journalism content.

Given the above overlaps and research we suggest that the framework and policy objective of Access be changed to Access and Engagement.

Question 1.3

While, there are many strands to achieving this objective, research from our members would suggest the current focus should be on underserved communities such as CALD, Indigenous and regional and remote communities. In this respect maintaining and expanding the various attempts to identify areas of news deserts is important.

In terms of guaranteeing access to public interest journalism specifically this intersects with the next issue of quality.

Quality

Quality news relies to a significant extent on thriving newsrooms. Regional publishers and editors often cite “too few reporters as the biggest constraint on news coverage” (Fray & Giotis 2019 p.50) . With fewer reporters, remaining reporters are stretched thin. This is happening across Australia, in city and country, we hear a common lament about not enough colleagues and resources/time to discuss the development of stories.

The importance of supporting newsroom hires has been recognised in the current Journalist Fund and the previous Regional and Small Publishers Cadetship Program. This assistance needs to continue to achieve the policy objective of quality. It should be noted that in mentoring young journalists, older journalists also improve. In terms of monitoring, ensuring young journalists supported by any News MAP initiatives are actually receiving appropriate training and mentoring opportunities is an important part of achieving this quality objective.

Questions 2.1 and 2.2

While the question of quality will always raise issues of subjectivity, we agree that quality is the right objective and note that new research is developing on how to understand this objective in the current information environment (Lawrence & Napoli 2023).

Question 2.3

Due to the unique relationship the media and government face, any quality monitoring should be at arms distance. As such, self-regulating and co-regulating schemes remain important and government and industry must invest in their robustness. Another approach which might be worth considering is the development of quality news ombudsmans. Although focused on quality the office of an ombudsman could help with access and engagement through providing greater consumer confidence. Ombudsmans could also help identify consumer concerns and research foci, particularly if this office was delegated to have different ombudsmans for different communities of interest and geographic regions. The ombudsmans could also be involved in media literacy initiatives targeted at their specific communities of concern. We offer this idea as blue-sky thinking, noting that it is not supported by specific research but was raised in a round table discussion on the News MAP and the issue of quality.

Media Diversity

Questions 3.1 and 3.2

These questions ask: is media diversity the right objective and how should it be understood in the contemporary media environment? There is an argument to be made here that the internet has provided an explosion of diverse forms of content. However, that explosion of content does not necessarily lead to a better information environment. As noted above information environments where quality news has ceased to exist can be flooded with mis-and-dis information in a process known as [news mirages](#).

The current lack of staff resources must also be taken into account. In a previous submission on the Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee following the senate's referral of the Murdoch Media Inquiry Bill, JERAA noted research with community members in towns lamenting declining quality in their local News Corp publication as diminishing *real* competition (media diversity).

In the words of one community member: "I know there's a lot of pressure for subs [subscriptions], basically, and so it's like, insert town here's top five worst criminals and it's a lot of clickbait. The substance journalism that they used to do really well has diminished a lot. It's quite obvious that their staff have dwindled as has their quality, which then therefore reduces the amount of competition that we have locally".
(Ricketson & Thomson, 2023)

Given the above, one option is that the media diversity objective, particularly in regards to this news MAP project, could be more narrowly understood in terms of access to a *diversity of quality public interest journalism*. To be clear this does not in any way suggest that current ACMA regulatory settings around ownership or local news diversity quotas be changed. We have not engaged with these issues. Rather this suggestion is aimed at helping to focus the effort of targeted interventions.

In the contemporary media environment standpoint diversity is also important. As noted above audiences that feel themselves under represented or poorly represented are less likely to engage with news content and this is why, in part 3, we support the goal of moving to measuring and evaluation of standpoint diversity.

Media Literacy

Media literacy is an urgent issue for future proofing the news industry and democratic life. If news consumers can't discern between quality journalism and mis and dis information they will continue to avoid news and lose trust in news. Media literacy is important for all Australians and should be part of the national curriculum. It should also be tackled at an early age to allow for young people to develop good news habits and fully participate in civic life. Yet research has found three in four young people did not receive any lessons in school over the past year to help them determine if news content is true and trustworthy, indicating a gap in media literacy education (Notley et. al. 2023).

Given the clear role for government intervention through education, we suggest media literacy should be developed as part of the News MAP as its own targeted policy objective.

Part 2: Potential measures

We recognise that much work is already being done in this area. We wish to highlight the urgency of implementing reforms so as to create a more even playing field for original, quality journalism to compete in the attention economy.

A key principle here is that potential measures can't be just about direct assistance, the government has a role to play in providing an even playing field to support the development of a quality news ecosystem. This means addressing the economic dominance of digital platforms. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) work in this area is extremely important but it could be argued that the potential of the News Media Bargaining Code has not been fully realised, and questions remain about the value of future deals — this needs to be closely monitored and action taken if current industry fears are realised. The ACCC's work in terms of digital platforms advertising recommendations is also important for the sustainability of news businesses. In terms of potential measures, above all we wish to highlight these measures cannot work without broader reforms to the information marketplace.

In this section our responses will be limited to a few key questions.

Question 6.2

It is important to point out the assumption implicit in this question about the value of innovation. While there is a strong argument for the support of innovation there are also strong arguments for the support of traditional business models. Some news organisations, particularly at local levels, have found success in reinvigorating traditional news business models. Government support should be agnostic about the type of news business as long as it is providing quality public interest journalism.

On the second part of the question around examples from overseas, the partnership model, which leverages the resources of existing public service news is certainly worth exploring. The UK, BBC Local News Partnerships and the New Zealand, Local Democracy Reporting Service are partnership models that have been specifically developed to help news businesses produce quality public interest journalism. We note that there is currently a three-year Deakin-led Australian Research Council study to determine how the ABC can best develop partnerships and collaborations with regional news outlets to support public interest journalism. It follows a recommendation by the 2022 Parliamentary Inquiry into Regional Newspapers suggesting Australia's public broadcasters should increase their efforts to support regional news sustainability through partnerships. Such a partnership model could also be valuable for suburban fringe papers and other news organisations serving underserved communities, SBS could also develop a partnership model with CALD news providers.

Questions 7.1 and 7.2

Other respondents will no doubt provide more detailed submissions addressing tax-based incentives. However, given our ambition to have our graduates enter many diverse forms of news organisations we would note that tax deductibility status for donation-based news organisations is a matter of urgency and fairness, as many news organisations now operate on this model (in part or in whole) and their consumers are not able to gain tax benefits from their news ‘purchases’ unlike consumers of traditional news business products.

It is encouraging to see the recommendation for this status in the Productivity Commission’s interim report. We believe that this tax deductibility should be recognised as its own category so as to highlight the importance of public interest journalism to the general public, in line with media literacy objectives. We also note the role that philanthropy is playing in attempting to navigate the current crisis and this tax change will be important for catalysing more investment in this area.

Question 7.2 asks if tax-based incentives are preferable to other mechanisms such as grants. This is not an either/or answer. As a general principle tax base incentives are preferable for long term industry support and there are lessons here that can be learned in terms of tax credits and offsets offered to other creative industries in Australia. The government can also look overseas to countries such as Canada to see how they have supported their news producers with tax credits and offsets.

However, as highlighted at the very outset of this submission, the industry has been in crisis for some years and this is having an impact on news consumption habits. The latest Digital News Report Australia shows high interest in news has declined 11% since 2016 (Park et. al. 2023). In this era of crisis/transition grants to industry are not only appropriate but urgently needed. Without access to quality news the news habit will be lost and, given the crucial symbiosis between quality journalism and democratic life, this is not a loss to be taken lightly.

Questions 8.1 and 8.2

As mentioned in the preliminary remarks for this section the issue of advertising needs to be considered broadly in light of the unequal playing field currently in place in the digital economy. However, government advertising, like all government procurement, should look to achieve multiple benefits from each dollar spent.

On this principle there is a role for the government in recognising the importance of local news providers. Regional newspapers in particular are keystone media (Nielsen 2015) providing the bulk of reporting on local political candidates. Surely this creates appropriate synergies in terms of civic participation. The federal government should consider adopting the Victorian Government commitment to a full page ad each week in each regional newspaper and encourage other states to follow suit.

We would also like to see more transparency around current dollar spends on advertising (not just percentages and quotas) and encourage policy makers to be aware of potential biases and assumptions in city-based procurement processes. There are significant differences between city and regional information consumption habits.

On the question of is government advertising preferable to grants, again this is not an either/or answer. Given the variety of news business models in the marketplace advertising will be preferable for many traditional news businesses while inappropriate for others. The News MAP program should aim to provide appropriate support across the news ecology spectrum.

Part 3: Establishing the evidence base

In providing a general response to this section, as researchers we applaud the principle of evidence-based policy, as educators working to place our students in quality newsrooms, we also recognise the need to balance this principle with the urgency of the current news business crisis.

Responding specifically to the discussion of ACMA's Media Diversity Measurement Framework, we recognise the constraints and difficulties of content analysis but we wish to register our strong support for the ambition of moving towards standpoint diversity measures.

As discussed extensively under access (above), engagement with news is linked to being able to see yourself represented in the news — standpoint diversity is crucial in this regard. Furthermore, given the emerging concerns about race and gender biases in AI generated content there is a danger the use of AI may generate an even greater lack of standpoint diversity (Manasi, Panchanadeswaran & Sours 2023, Thomas & Thomson 2023).

In terms of meeting ACMA's ambition to move towards standpoint diversity measurement, we strongly encourage policy makers to work with university partners to help our researchers engage directly in the process of developing this crucial body of work .

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