

28/02/24

Director, News and Journalism Section
Platforms and News Branch – Online Safety, Media and Platforms Division
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts
GPO Box 594
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Director, News and Journalism Section

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications & the Arts

News Media Assistance Program (News MAP) Submission

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission as part of the News Media Assistance Program (News MAP) Submission.

We understand that you are seeking views on the development of a principled and evidence-based Policy Framework under the News MAP and that the Policy Framework will guide the implementation of measures supporting public interest journalism and media diversity in Australia.

The News MAP is a program of work to establish a robust evidence base and clear principles to guide future policy interventions that support public interest journalism and safeguard media diversity.

Media Diversity Australia (MDA) is a national not-for-profit organisation founded by journalists and communication professionals working towards a media landscape that looks and sounds more like Australia. Our mission is to bridge the divide between the Australian population and how it is represented in the media through research, advocacy and highly targeted programs.

Our flagship research, MDA's 2020 and 2022 ground-breaking report '*Who Gets to Tell Australian Stories?*' is a 'report card' on Indigeneity and cultural diversity in television news, with insights into what has changed, what has stayed the same, and opportunities to lead the charge toward greater diversity. It revealed a challenging picture about the representation of culturally diverse people in the media.



We are uniquely placed to hold up a mirror to the media industry via our flagship research, whilst simultaneously working alongside them, to implement the recommendations of our research in an endeavour to accelerate industry wide change.

Our membership base includes 100% of Australia's TV broadcasters (both public and commercial). Our members include ABC, SBS, News Corp Australia, Channel 7, Channel 9, Channel 10, AAP, The Guardian, The Daily Aus, Private Media Group, The Conversation Group, Junkee Media & ARE Media.

Last year we held our inaugural industry roundtable in Sydney, bringing together Australia's media leadership and the Federal Communications Minister Michelle Rowland to commit to a path to industry-wide improvement around diversity, equity and inclusion. This was the first time an industry-wide discussion was held among Australia's top media organisations to discuss the specific issue of cultural diversity and Indigenous representation.

The meeting, which was held at SBS, brought together the CEOs, Managing Directors and other senior representatives from MDA member organisations.

Some notable attendees included Nine's CEO Mike Sneesby, Ten's Executive Vice President, Chief Content Officer & Head of Paramount, Beverley McGarvey, Seven's Chief People and Culture Officer, Lucinda Gemmell, ABC's Chief Content Officer, Chris Oliver-Taylor, SBS's News Director Mandi Wicks and News Corp Australia's Group Executive, Corporate Affairs, Campbell Reid.

Put simply, the face of and management of broadcast journalism in Australia is more diverse since MDA released its landmark reports and rolled out its programs. MDA is holding up a mirror to the industry, while also providing solutions. There's been a notable push from many newsrooms to have their journalists and commentators reflect the broader community and by default, the wider conversation.

Given our work, influence and reach within Australian media companies, this News Media Assistance Program (News MAP) Submission is of great interest to us and we welcome the opportunity to provide a submission.

A summary of our recommendations is outlined below.

Please feel free to contact us should you require any further information.

Yours sincerely,

Mariam Veiszadeh
Chief Executive Officer

Isabel Lo
Founding Chair

ABOUT US

A media landscape that looks & sounds like Australia

Media Diversity Australia (MDA) is a national not-for-profit organisation, led by journalists and media professionals, that promotes cultural diversity in Australian journalism and news media. Our core mission is to bridge the existing gap between Australia's population and its representation in, and by, the media.

Our mission is to champion cultural diversity, representation, and active participation within the Australian journalism and news media industry. Founded in 2017 by a team of journalists, MDA envisions a media landscape where diverse voices are fully and equally integrated at every level, creating an Australian media environment that truly reflects the nation's rich diversity.

Our team brings deep knowledge of Australia's media, together with an understanding of the challenges faced by minorities – based on our first-hand experience as journalists, commentators, and media professionals.

Our membership base includes 100% of Australia's TV broadcasters (both public and commercial). Our members include ABC, SBS, News Corp Australia, Channel 7, Channel 9, Channel 10, AAP, The Guardian, The Daily Aus, Private Media Group, The Conversation Group, Junkee Media & ARE Media.

We work in close collaboration with industry stakeholders and we are proud of our expertise in delivering ground-breaking research projects, evidence-based programs, and tailored initiatives, all of which disrupt the status quo and pave the way for diverse representation across the Australian media landscape.

At the heart of our organisation lies the influential Advisory Board, featuring esteemed figures from media (such as Waleed Aly and Stan Grant), law, advertising, and academia. These dedicated individuals are committed to fostering diversity both on and off-screen, further enriching our mission.

Our long-term objectives are to work towards proportionate representation of culturally diverse people across news media and see a significant increase in markers of social cohesion when it comes to media narratives.

MDA SUBMISSION

Our submission points are categorised in accordance with headings outlined in the Consultation paper.

Access

While there is a necessary focus placed on barriers to accessing news content such as languages and socio-economic status, it is important to understand what additional barriers exist when it comes to Australia's culturally and racially marginalised communities and how these barriers can impact their access to news.

A recent [article](#) by Dr Tanya Notley and Abdul Aziz highlighting research with 5 low-income multi-lingual, migrant families in Western Sydney concluded that low-income parents in Western Sydney perceive digital inclusion as necessary and important for their children but also as a burden that has social, financial and emotional dimensions. They further argue that complex multi-dimensional forms of disadvantage and deprivation prevent low-income migrant parents in Western Sydney from using technology for social inclusion.

A 2023 joint [University of Canberra and SBS research](#) report examining a sense of belonging among multilingual audiences concluded that multilingual audiences who feel represented in the news were more likely to feel a sense of belonging and that those who feel they belong, in turn, are more willing to participate and engage in Australian society.

MDA's flagship ['Who Gets To Tell Australian Stories 2.0' Research](#) which served as a 'report card' on Indigeneity and cultural diversity in television news highlights that non-European Australian audiences have the least amount of trust in news and are also the most concerned about representation on screen.

A higher proportion of non-European respondents' said they had stopped consuming news or current affairs sources because they thought it was biased. We elaborate further on our findings later in this submission.

MDA is of the view that barriers to access should also consider the lack of representation and perceptions of bias amongst culturally diverse communities. More research needs to be done to further explore the extent of this issue.

A 2020 [Centre for Media Transition paper](#), "News in Australia: diversity and localism Review of literature and research" also articulated some of the challenges:

"Media play a key role in the social cohesion that underpins national policy (Jakubowicz 2009; Markus 2015)

Studies of culturally diverse audiences and their news consumption have demonstrated that many ethnic minorities feel alienated from the mainstream media in Australia, but not only because of language barriers.

Rodrigues and Paradies (2017) used their own survey data to propose that this increasing alienation has driven minority audiences (people from diverse cultural backgrounds) away from the mass media and Australian mainstream news services, towards online and social media sources.

They point to a dual phenomenon – that poor representation of minorities in mainstream media stories drives those groups away from mainstream media, while this same poor representation contributes to a worsening of relations between cultural communities.”

We are of the view that culturally and racially marginalised audiences are turning away from mainstream media and that their reasons for doing so requires further research and analysis.

RECOMMENDATION

To commission further research that consider to what extent, a lack of personnel diversity across the media and perceptions of bias amongst culturally diverse communities impede their access to public interest journalism.

Quality

Over the course of the past 12 months, a series of nationally significant issues have brought concerns around accuracy and impartiality in public interest journalism to the forefront of the national consciousness and media spotlight.

One of these included the media’s reporting of the 2023 Australian referendum for constitutional recognition and an enshrined Voice for Aboriginal people.

[Research commissioned by the Murdoch Referendum Accountability Project](#), released in November 2023, narrowed its attention on News Corp Australia in particular, arguing that it "frequently published and broadcast anti-Voice misinformation and racially charged commentary".

It also highlighted that this took place in an environment where media is increasingly melding news with opinion, including in a hybrid 'infotainment' format. This blurring, the report argues, has been found to make it difficult for audiences to distinguish between news and commentary, with four out of five Australians struggling to differentiate between fact and opinion in news and current affairs reporting. ACMA’s report also found that 85% of Australians are concerned about whether news is being presented in a balanced and impartial way. (ACMA June 2022 report)

The public debate in the lead up to the Voice referendum was highly charged and seemingly divisive and Australians barely had time to process its implications before an ongoing war further escalated

in the Middle East which had significant reverberations domestically including across Australian media.

During this period, MDA found itself grappling with how to best serve its mission of supporting culturally diverse and First Nations journalists and media workers. Responding to demand, we ran listening services and listening circles (as we had in the post Stan Grant racism row) trying to support those who were turning to us confidentially.

Over the course of the last 4+ months we have personally supported and collated experiences of over ~45 journalists and media workers from a range of backgrounds including of varying faith, culturally and racially marginalised and of First Nations backgrounds. Some of them spoke about feelings of isolation, self-censorship, psychological safety and raised concerns about impartiality. In the months that followed, there was a growing chorus of journalists from across Australian and abroad calling for improved media coverage of the ongoing war unfolding in Israel and Gaza.

[New research](#) from Boston Consulting Group confirms that the notion of psychological safety within workplaces helps double retention rates of employees and even more so in particular for women (>4x retention), people of color (>4x), people with disabilities (>5x), and for LGBTQ+ employees (>6x). The lack of psychological /cultural safety with media companies directly contributes to an exodus of diverse talent from the sector, an issue we have been warning about for the last few months.

The circumstances surrounding Antoinette Lattouf's dismissal and the departure of top tier talent, Nour Haydar from the ABC has further reignited debates about media impartiality. By way of full disclosure, Antoinette Lattouf is the co-founder of MDA but is no longer involved in our organisation.

Our work in the past year at a grassroots level has allowed us to have deep insights around the challenges journalists face within the sector and the inadequacies of their newsrooms to navigate them.

We also work directly with Australia's top media companies through our unique media memberships and Industry Round Tables and Working groups and have sought to convey our concerns about the future of the sector and the urgency of needing to foster culturally safe working environment to ensure there is a retention of the diverse pipeline that MDA is helping to channel into their newsrooms.

We have also raised our concerns about how the climate of the past 12 months serves as a catalyst for the departure of this same cohort of talent.

Adding further fuel to the raging debate about diversity and impartiality, is the public commentary which has tried to frame media diversity in a negative light, suggesting it's in direct conflict with objectivity.

RECOMMENDATION

Given recent debates around the intersection of public interest journalism and diversity, particularly as it impacts the capacity for impartiality, MDA recommends a series of cross-media consultations to arrive at a policy position to be adopted by news media organisations, supported by the ACMA framework, that incorporates the diversity of views held within the journalism community and which may serve to repair some of the fractures the sector has suffered.

Media Diversity

There is clear consensus that public interest journalism is best realised through a diversity of perspectives, voices and presentation and yet calls for greater ‘media diversity’ often fails to sufficiently cover diversity not just in terms of who owns and controls media outlets, but who steers media content, and the faces and voices that appear on our television screens, on audio programs and in written content - essentially the people who tell ‘our’ stories. This form of diversity is increasingly referred to as ‘standpoint diversity’ or ‘personnel diversity’.

Aside from MDA’s flagship research which is privately funded, there is no comprehensive analysis of this form of diversity and therefore little policy discussion about the implications stemming from a lack of diversity of this kind.

MDA’s first of its kind, flagship [‘Who Gets To Tell Australian Stories 2.0’ Research](#) served as a ‘report card’ on Indigeneity and cultural diversity in television news. Aside from MDA no other organisation in Australia seeks to build a research evidence base of this kind and then operationalise its research findings in an endeavour to tackle this form of media diversity.

Our research examining how Australian media news reports about issues affecting minorities, found the language was divisive resulting in ‘othering’ of minority cultures, while All Together Now (2021) criticised the Australian media for favouring ‘elite’ voices and neglecting the historical and cultural context of news stories about Indigenous peoples. The media can also frame how a minority group views itself, with adverse outcomes including lower self-esteem and negative implications for health and wellbeing.

We strongly believe that the Government needs to play a role, through vehicles such as ACMA, in encouraging the production and distribution of a wide range of information and viewpoints across the media market while simultaneously preventing any single media voice from exerting undue or unacceptable levels of influence over public discourse.

This requires effective measuring and tracking of levels of ‘media diversity’ in Australia and expanding this term to consider a range of viewpoints including additional intersectional indicators that provide richer data sources helping to paint a broader snapshot of a “range of viewpoints”

including but not limited to, Gender, Cultural /ethnic background, Disability, Age, Educational background, Socio-economic background and Geographic location.

At present there is no standardised national approach to measuring cultural diversity and heritage of newsmakers, making it difficult for industry to not only comply, but trust the methodology. MDA is keen to work collaboratively with key bodies to revise how the industry gathers data from its staff, and standardize an industry wide approach. MDA is working on a range of measures with its media members and industry stakeholders at present.

Ofcom in the UK have been collecting information on broadcasters employees on the basis of sex, race and disability on a mandatory basis since 2003, when it was [enshrined as part of the Communications Act](#).

Efforts are currently being made in Australia to address this gap in other industry sectors. A research paper written by Liz Allen at ANU has advocated for "[The case for more comprehensive ethnic data in Australia](#)".

RECOMMENDATION

That the federal government supports (whether financially or otherwise) effective measuring and tracking of the levels of standpoint and personnel diversity across Australian media.

Engagement

In MDA's flagship ['Who Gets To Tell Australian Stories 2.0' Research](#) we asked questions to understand audience attitudes on Indigeneity and cultural diversity in news and current affairs. We also sought to dig a little deeper around the audience's trust in Australian sources of news and current affairs.

What we found was that non-European Australian audiences have the least trust in news and are the most concerned about representation.

A majority of respondents agreed that Australia's cultural diversity is well-represented in news and current affairs. However, a clear majority of non-European background respondents say they would like to see more cultural diversity represented among presenters and stories told – indicating that cultural diversity may not be as well-represented as asserted.

There are also variances in non-European respondents' trust in news with a higher proportion saying they had stopped consuming news or current affairs sources because they thought it was biased.

44% of respondents agreed that 'most news and current affairs sources operating in Australia can be trusted to provide reliable, objective, and truthful information', and a little under one-third (31%)

agreed that 'I often find overseas news sources more reliable than Australian news sources' (28% disagreed and 41% neither agreed nor disagreed). There were few differences in total agreement across most demographics.

In addition, close to four out of 10 respondents (39%) agreed that in the last year they had stopped using a specific news or current affairs source because they thought it was biased, while around one-third (32%) disagreed and 29% neither agreed nor disagreed. One-third (34%) of those who identified as Other European background agreed and 42% of those of Non-European background agreed, indicating a notable variance.

Similarly, just over one-third of respondents (36%) agreed that they often find overseas news sources more interesting than Australian news sources, one-quarter (25%) disagreed and 39% neither agreed nor disagreed. Again, there was some variance between those who identified as Other European background and those who identified as Non-European background: one-third (34%) of those who identified as Other European background agreed, while 44% of those of Non-European background agreed.

While at first glance it appears that Australian audiences believe Indigeneity and cultural diversity are well-represented, our survey indicates a more complex story. Non-European viewers noted they were most likely to have stopped watching a news source and also most likely to switch to overseas news sources as they were seen to be more interesting.

On the issue of needing to better foster citizens' civic engagement and trust in democratic government, news and journalism, MDA believes that the approach must be customised when it comes to culturally and racially marginalised communities.

MDA has previously ran various capacity building programs targeted at these specific cohorts and recognises that there are inherent barriers in place which impede civic engagement.

In 2021, in partnership with the Judith Nielson Institute, MDA ran the Community Voices program which offered a group of young culturally and racially marginalized people training, support, practical experience and industry knowledge over the course of 12 months.

Over the course of 2021 and 2022, MDA delivered its groundbreaking Amplifying Voices Program which sought to build the capacity of Muslim community delegates to engage with traditional Australian media and their skills as media spokespeople. It did this by strengthening Muslim community delegates' knowledge of how social media operates and how they can better engage their audiences as well as helping improve the relationship between Muslim communities and media professionals.

MDA has plans to deliver Amplifying Voices as a national program and target it towards culturally and racially marginalised cohorts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The federal government consider funding an expansion of existing research examining why non-European Australian audiences do not trust Australian news sources and how their concerns about a lack of representation impacts their levels of trust.

That the federal government seeks to better understand the barriers that exist for culturally and racially marginalised cohorts when it comes to civic engagement and trust in democratic government, news and journalism and fund national programs that help build their media, political and racial literacy.