

Feedback submission to the Federal Government's News Media Assistance Program (NewsMAP)

About us:

The Courier newspaper is a small, independent, family-owned newspaper based in the Adelaide Hills in South Australia. It has been providing an independent news service to the region since 1880 and has been owned by the same family since the 1950s. It is a member of Country Press SA.

Introduction:

As outlined in the News Media Assistance Program Consultation Paper, regional newspapers play an integral role in their communities. Not only do regional newspapers play a vital role in the democratic process, they also help to connect communities and reflect and define a community. Regional newspapers cover issues of direct relevance to the people they represent, and often report on issues that are not covered by larger mastheads. Reporters in the regions know their communities and the issues that are most important to them. Their mastheads advocate for the region's needs, provide a platform for social dialogue and, importantly, keep politicians and other community leaders accountable at all levels. Regional newspapers have a unique ability to focus on all levels of Government within a region – from the decisions of a local council that affect the day to day of a community, to the farther-reaching decisions of Federal Parliament. Local newspapers are best placed to determine how a national or state-wide issue may impact a particular area on a local level and tailor its coverage to ensure readers are provided with the most relevant information. This response will focus on the best ways for the Government to support regional media and media literacy.

Government support:

We support the Government commitments being sought by Country Press Australia, which include:

- A full page of Federal Government advertising/public messaging in every local and regional newspaper every week. This supports regional newspapers financially, thereby helping to sustain media diversity in regional Australia. But it also provides an effective platform through which the Government can reach regional communities with important messages. Deakin University's *Media Innovation and the civic future of Australia's country press* report found that the majority of responders considered a printed newspaper to be an essential service to a community and that audiences want original, local content. Advertising in regional publications has the advantage of being able to present a message that is relevant to and targeted at a particular audience. National issues will affect different communities in very different ways and by advertising through local media, the Government can communicate in ways that best engage with that particular community. In addition, advertising in regional mastheads sends a public message that the Government recognises their importance and relevance within a democratic society.
- A tax rebate of 25% of eligible journalist employment costs for publisher of public interest journalism. High quality journalism is at the heart of regional newspapers and a well-staffed editorial team is vital for a newspaper is to take a proactive approach to news (for example investigative pieces or stories that explore multiple different angles or approaches to an issues) rather than just a reactive approach (straight reporting on events/decisions). Proactive news gathering takes more time, effort and skill, but is often best positioned to maintain democracy by scrutinising policies and delving into issues that are in the public interest. A tax rebate for editorial staff provides incentive and support to maintain healthy editorial staffing levels, which in turn helps to maintain high quality reporting.
- Cadetship funding to support the employment of young journalists. Like the tax rebate, this will help media outlets maintain healthy editorial staffing levels. But where the tax rebate will play an important role to keep more senior staff employed, cadetship funding will help to secure the next generation of journalists and give them practical experience working within the regions, and the opportunity to learn from veterans of the profession.

Media Literacy:

As outlined in the consultation paper, low media literacy is widespread. Low media literacy can lead to widespread ignorance and misinformation within communities. We have witnessed a seemingly increasing reliance on social platforms for information about what is going on in a community. Often members of the public appeal to other members of the public for their information, rather than sharing or seeking information from reliable sources. We often see questions asked on social media platforms about local issues, which have already been addressed in our publication. Unfortunately the information shared on these platforms is often inaccurate or misinformed. When the public does not know where to go to get reliable sources of news, or does not understand the importance of accessing information from reputable sources, misunderstanding of local issues occurs. The consequences of this can be as minor as misunderstanding the role of each level of government and which is responsible for certain actions,

inactions or services. However, it can also have much more serious consequences, including leading to mistrust of Governments, mistrust of science-based evidence and, at times, reluctance to act in the best interested of themselves or their broader community.

The Federal Government could play a role in commissioning further research focusing on establishing which demographics have the lowest media literacy, what is driving that trend in those areas and strategies that can be implemented to improve media literacy, particularly in those demographics. Based on this research the Government could fund further programs, which not only target the educational system, but also other demographics that are found to have particularly low media literacy.