News & Media Research Centre Response to the News Media Assistance Program Consultation Paper

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Contents

List of tables and figures

The Scope of Submission

We appreciate the opportunity to respond to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts (DITRCA) News Media Assistance Program (MAP) Consultation Paper. The aim of our feedback is to inform the development of a sustainable future for news and journalism for the benefit of all Australians.

The News & Media Research Centre is Australia's leading centre for the study of news media industries, audiences and discourse. Our mission is to advance public understanding of the changing media landscape and to advocate for a media system that builds trust, inclusivity and diversity, to defend and repair the social fabric. Through the *Digital News Report: Australia* (2015-23) and related research the N&MRC provides Australia with a unique longitudinal and globally comparative evidence base for the consumption of news in the digital era.

We support the government's principle of the need for a robust and long-term evidence-base to inform policy interventions and other measures that support the provision of public interest journalism, as well as pursuing the longstanding objective of media diversity. As experts in audience and media industry research, we provide relevant evidence for the government's News MAP:

- Global longitudinal data on the shifting news audiences' behaviours and attitudes, the *Digital News Report: Australia** (2015-2023)
- Annual Heartbeat of Australia survey* (2022, 2023)
- Valuing Diversity in News and Newsrooms study (2023)
- Adult Media Literacy in Australia* (2021)
- Libraries and Media Literacy Education (2023)
- Media Literacy in Australia: A Qualitative Study (2021)
- Sense of Belonging Among Multilingual Audiences in Australia (2023)
- COVID-19: Australian News & Misinformation study (2020, 2022)
- Local News Consumers (2020)
- Australian Regional Journalists: What They Need and How They See the Future (2020)

**Digital News Report: Australia 2024* data will be available mid-year.
A list of references is included in Appendix 1.

Based on these studies and our expertise, our submission focuses its responses on the following questions:
- Policy objectives
- Potential measures
    - Considerations for future policy
    - Fostering media diversity
    - Support for media literacy
In addition, we offer recommendations to establish the evidence base.

Executive Summary

Public interest journalism is critical to democracy

The News MAP consultation paper defines and outlines the key benefits of public interest journalism to democratic society. However, the provision of news can be a vehicle to reproduce the uneven power within society and availability, accessibility, quality, engagement, ownership are moderating factors that can lead to marginalisation. Government must take these factors into account in its News MAP framework.

Market failure in news industry needs government intervention

Evidence from the ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry and ongoing research by the N&MRC and Public Interest Journalism Initiative (PIJI) confirms that the provision of public interest journalism, particularly in regional Australia, requires government intervention in the news media market to address market failure. The commercial agreements struck in the shadow of the News Media Bargaining Code have provided significant funds for many news businesses, but the uncertainty around future deals and the vulnerability of certain sections of the news market mean government financial assistance and other support will still be needed.

Further nuance is required around the policy objectives and definitions of access, quality, diversity and engagement

Our submission focuses most closely on the policy objectives of access, quality, diversity and engagement. We provide evidence from our research that offer a nuanced examination of these objectives, concluding that they are worthy objectives, but must be refined and examined together.

We need a more complete evidence base of changing news audiences and producers

The nature of news provision and consumption is rapidly changing in the digital environment. Audiences access news from a variety of sources, both traditional and non-traditional. About 7% of the adult Australians do not access any traditional forms of news and the number is growing[1]. It is necessary to establish ongoing research into who are the producers of news as well as where and how audiences access public interest journalism. The *Digital News Report: Australia* provides a longitudinal lens to the changing habits of Australian news audiences. However, there are research gaps in relation to First Nations, culturally and linguistically diverse Australians, remote communities and other minority groups. Currently, there are no longitudinal studies on the changing nature of the journalism workforce. To ensure the four policy objectives are met, establishing an evidence-base of both producers and consumers of news is critical.

Informed citizens are the foundation of democracy

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[1] Park, S., McGuinness, K., Fisher, C., Lee, J., McCallum, K., Cai, X., Chatskin, M., Mardjianto, L. & Yao, P. (2023). *Digital News Report: Australia 2023.* Canberra: News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. https://doi.org/10.25916/v0mt-9k87

For Australian citizens to be adequately informed, they need to be equipped with media literacy. However, research shows low confidence in media literacy among Australian adults and very little support available to address it. Older people, people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, culturally and linguistically diverse people, Indigenous communities and people with disability have different media literacy education needs. The N&MRC contends that Australia needs a national media literacy framework and accompanying media literacy programs tailored to audiences' needs.

Recommendations

To implement the four policy objectives, we propose the following:

1. Establish long-term evidence-base

There is a need to regularly assess whether the news industry is equipped to deliver high quality public interest journalism. Are news producers able to deliver news under current market conditions and are audiences getting sufficient choice and access to quality news? To monitor the news market, the government will need to:

1.1. Collect longitudinal data of the whole of the news industry that includes mainstream and non-mainstream news producers. This should include data on supply (news organisations, independent journalists) and their ability to represent all Australians.
1.2. Track the level of diversity and representation in news content and the workforce.
1.3. In addition to longitudinal surveys such as the *Digital News Report: Australia*, collect additional data on marginalised communities that are difficult to capture in national surveys, and qualitative data on news consumption and attitudes.

2. Develop focused support programs

There are many areas that will need government support but, in this submission, we focus on providing audiences with an opportunity to gain confidence in navigating this fragmented news environment, and to ensure that journalists are adequately trained and supported.

2.1. Provide educational and support opportunities for all Australians to improve their media literacy.
2.2. Support smaller publishers to ensure a diverse news ecosystem, including regional news media, ethnic media and other niche publications.
2.3. Invest in future and existing journalism workforce.

Responses to News MAP Consultation Questions

Part 1: Framework and Objectives

1. Access

In a western liberal democracy such as Australia, the role of public interest journalism is to act as a 'watchdog' and hold government, along with other public and commercial institutions, to account. The availability of news is therefore fundamental to the functioning of democracy. Therefore, in the case of market failure, it is the role of government to ensure the public continues to have access to an adequate supply of reliable news.

However, we find that 'access' as a policy objective needs further clarification in both its definition and its relationship to the objectives of quality, diversity, and engagement.

Definition of access
In the News MAP consultation paper, the term 'access' appears to mainly reflect the supply and ownership of news. We argue this is a narrow view of access. The term 'access' in the *Digital News Report* relates to the quantum and type of news people are using. The term access should reflect the demand for news (what news consumers are using, what news they want), rather than solely focusing on supply (availability).

As the *Digital News Report: Australia* continues to show, the supply of news does not mean the public will access it or use it. On the contrary, the data show that consumption of news is falling as the number of information outlets increases (see figure 1). Furthermore, 7% of the respondents say they have not accessed any of these news sources in the past week.

Figure 1: General sources of news (%)
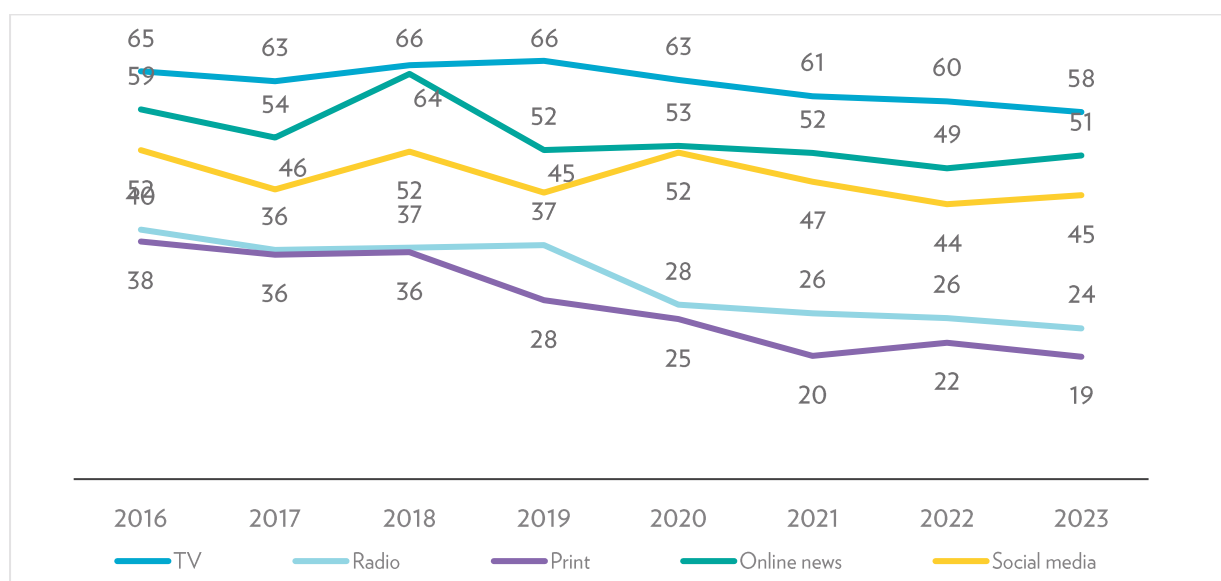
Source: *Digital News Report: Australia 2023*

Further, local news availability has declined[2] but local news is the most preferred type of news among Australians[3]. This means the supply is not meeting demand and consumers are not able to access the relevant local news they need. In addition, there are different ways in which news is accessed by consumers, via a range of devices, platforms and brands, and for some there are barriers to access. For instance, young women and low socio-economic groups access news less often than more affluent, educated and male groups.

The current proposed access objective also fails to include minority suppliers and consumers such as CALD and Indigenous peoples. However, we know from our research that representation in the news gives citizens confidence to participate in society and to feel they belong. Ensuring all Australians are reflected in the news is an important component of the access objective (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Sense of belonging by fair representation in Australian news (%)
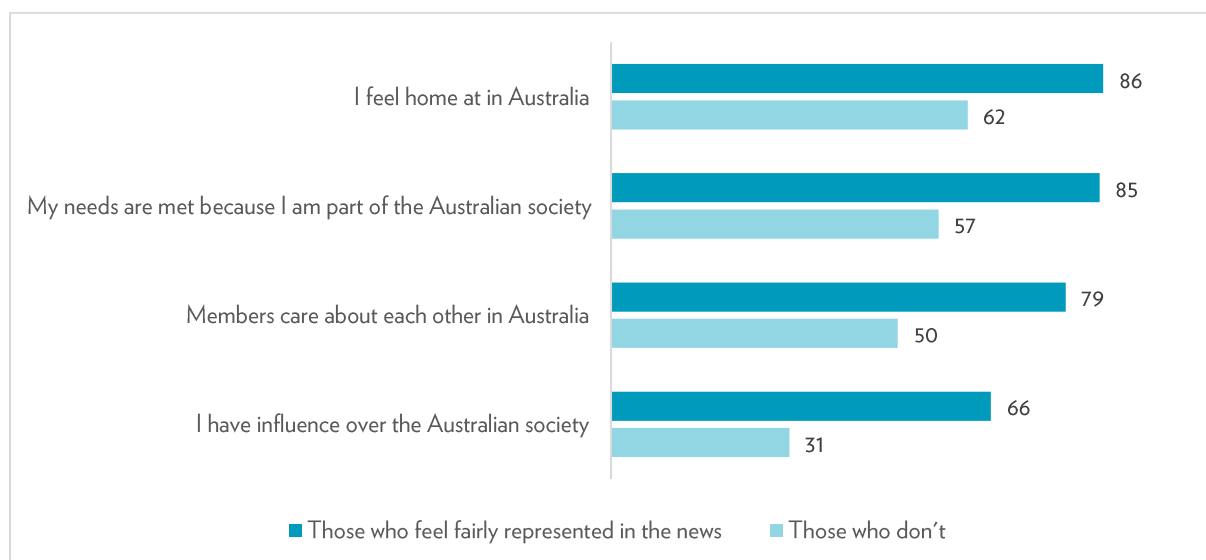
Source: Sense of Belonging Among Multilingual Audiences in Australia (2023).

In response, the N&MRC proposes a definition of access to public interest journalism as the *'adequate supply and consumption of relevant accountability news for all Australians to make informed decisions in daily life'.* This includes access to devices and platforms as well as to relevant public interest journalism news content.

Access is not an isolated objective

[2] https://piji.com.au/news-mapping/australian-news-data-project/
[3] Park, S., McGuinness, K., Fisher, C., Lee, J., K., McCallum, K. & Nolan, D. (2022). *Digital News Report: Australia 2022.* Canberra: News & Media Research Centre. https://doi.org/10.25916/1xkk-jb37

The N&MRC also recommends there needs to be acknowledgment that access, quality, diversity and engagement are shared objectives. The capacity to engage with and think critically about news media is a key component of accessing news. Trustworthy, quality news and news that reflects the diversity in society are necessary conditions of engagement. While they are each independently important concepts they cannot be treated in isolation, as they have direct impact on a consumer's ability to consume news and interpret it appropriately in the context of their life. Therefore, it's not just the provision of news, but also the capacity and willingness to engage with it that is essential in terms of accessing news.

2. Quality

2.1	**Is quality the right objective?**
2.2:	**How should the access objective be understood?**
2.3	**What are the appropriate roles for government and industry in pursuing this objective?**

The news media form a powerful institution that both construct and reproduce public understanding of key social issues. When done well, reporting can inform public understanding, increase community awareness, provide accurate information, and convey a diversity of views. We agree that ensuring the quality of journalism and news is an important policy objective.

However, the term 'quality' is difficult to define and harder to measure and can be a divisive term among news businesses. Generally, quality news content is produced under a certain range of conditions. Those include adequate resourcing, time, editorial leadership and commitment, strong ethical practice, and accountability to the audience through complaints processes, and transparency in the production of news.

Therefore, alternative terminology such as 'accountability' or 'integrity' journalism may be more useful than 'quality'. Not only do these terms refer to the journalism content being in the public interest by holding those in power to account, they also refer to the way it was produced.

It is well established that a lack of financial stability and falling revenues is reducing the ability of news outlets to produce journalism of a high standard. Well-researched reporting is expensive, time consuming and requires specific training. Therefore, to increase the ability of news outlets to produce quality journalism, the government does have a role in supporting the training of journalists, the development of best practice media guides, and oversight of codes of practice.

In relation to 'quality' we examine two aspects: the quality of news content; and the training of journalists in newsrooms who are tasked with producing that content.

Ensuring quality news content and preventing misinformation

Our experience developing the Media Guides for Reporting on Child Sexual Abuse[4] for the National Office of Child Safety provided some valuable lessons. Close consultation with media professionals, and those impacted by the content of the journalism they produce, is essential to reach a common understanding of which content is in the public interest. Identifying media content that causes harm and providing *guidance* about both best practice and problematic journalism, is a constructive way to improve the standards of news reporting.

Research conducted by the N&MRC highlights that measuring 'trust' in news is a useful proxy for quality. Globally trust in news has been falling and in Australia around 40% of consumers say they can trust most news most of the time. While trust is a multifaceted concept, research[5] shows the reasons consumers give for these low levels of trust are strongly related to poor standards of journalism practice, such as sensationalism, bias, political and commercial interests. To lift perceptions of trust, the government needs to help news businesses invest in the journalism workforce, current and future. This is even more pressing given Meta's recent announcement that it will not be renewing its commercial deals with Australian news businesses.

The N&MRC's Covid-19 News and Misinformation study (2020; 2022) examined how and where Australians accessed information, which sources they find trustworthy and their experiences with misinformation during a global pandemic. While information is abundant online, there are data deficits for critical information, such as during a rapidly evolving environment such as the pandemic. These voids are quickly filled with misinformation. In fact, Australians frequently encounter misinformation online and low-quality journalism is the most frequently encountered type of false information[6]. Just over half (56%) of Australians are confident they can find information they need online and only 39% of adult Australians say they can check if information found online is true[7]. If social media platforms such as Facebook reduce or remove news from their platforms, it will potentially leave the space to be filled by more misinformation.

Investing in our future workforce

The news sector is becoming more precarious with an increase in the number of journalists taking freelance jobs because it is harder to land permanent positions. Employment data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) show a steep decline in the overall number of those classified as journalists; there was an overall decline in the number of journalists between 2011 and 2021 by 19 percentage points[8].

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[4] McCallum, K., Holland, K., Fulton, J., Walsh, B., Deas, M., Sutherland, G., John, E. & Rickwood, D. (2023). Media reporting of child sexual abuse in Australia: 2020-22: Research Report, University of Canberra. https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/centres/nmrc/media-guides-project.

[5] Park, S., Fisher, F., Fletcher, R., Tandoc, E., Dulleck, U., Fulton, J., Stepnik, A. & Yao, P. (forthcoming). Exploring responses to mainstream news among heavy and non-news users: From high-effort pragmatic scepticism to low effort cynical disengagement. *News Media & Society.;* Flew, T., Dulleck, U., Park, S., Fisher, C. & Isler, O. (2020). Trust and Mistrust in Australian News Media. Brisbane: Digital Media Research Centre. https://research.qut.edu.au/best/wp-content/uploads/sites/244/2020/03/Trust-and-Mistrust-in-News-Media.pdf;

[6] Park, S., Fisher, C., Fuller, G. & Lee, J. (2018). *Digital News Report: Australia 2018.* Canberra: News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. http://apo.org.au/node/174861

[7] Notley, T., Chambers, S., Park, S., Dezuanni, M. (2021). *Adult Media Literacy in Australia: Attitudes, Experiences and Needs.* Western Sydney University, Queensland University of Technology and University of Canberra. https://westernsydney.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1824640/Australian_adult_media_literacy_report_2021.pdf

[8] Park, S., Lee, J. & Fisher, C. (forthcoming). Changing journalists' occupations: An analysis of Australian Census 2021. *Australian Journalism Review*

Data from a recent survey of journalists[9] reveal high levels of satisfaction in their professional work but low satisfaction in their pay and workload. Growing demand for news has led to more work falling on the shoulders of fewer journalists. We counted the number of different topics individual journalists say they reported on. Almost half of all respondents (48%) said they report on seven or more different topics in the course of their work. Half of the respondents were working in two, three, or four or more different positions, meaning they could be a reporter while also doing video journalism and hosting or presenting news. With these shifts in the industry, journalists recognised the need for training but simply did not have time.

In 2019, we completed national research into the training needs of regional Australian journalists.[10] It found there was still a high demand for digital skills, especially among older reporters, but that there was also need for basic court and council reporting skills among younger journalists. Younger regional journalists also felt isolated, overworked and wanted more mentorship. This was due to geographic distance and a lack of staff and resourcing, all of which took a toll on their mental health.

Despite the loss of thousands of journalism jobs over more than a decade, Australia lacks longitudinal research on the core of the business – the journalism workforce. The only longitudinal data is provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics occupation category. However, the current classification (which is under consultation for revision) is outdated and 36% of the workforce are placed in the 'not further defined' or 'not elsewhere classified' categories, which means we don't actually know their exact job description and what work they are doing. Not only does the government need to track the working conditions of journalists but also support training initiatives of news organisations that are going through digital transformation. This is especially important in an age where artificial intelligence is assisting and/or taking up a growing portion of journalistic tasks.

3. Diversity

3.1	Is diversity the right objective?
3.2:	How should the access objective be understood?
3.3	What are the appropriate roles for government and industry in pursuing this objective?

[9] McGuinness, K., Park, S., Lee, J. Y., Fulton, J. and Lukamto, W. (2023). *Valuing Diversity in News and Newsrooms.* Canberra: News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2023-03/apo-nid321582.pdf

[10] Fisher, C., Nolan, D., McGuinness, K., & Park, S. (2022). Australian regional journalists' role perceptions at a time of upheaval. *Media International Australia*, *184*(1), 92-105.; Fisher, C., Park, S., Howden, S., Lee, J. Y., & McGuinness, K. (2020). *Australian regional journalists: what they need and how they see the future* (1740884957). U. o. C. News and Media Research Centre.

Australia's news media is one of the most concentrated in the world[11]. A 2021 report found that News Corp (59%) and Nine Entertainment (23%) owned more than 80% of the metropolitan and national print media markets[12]. The top 4 media companies control 95% of revenue among daily newspapers, over 75% of total revenue in free-to-air television, and almost 70% of revenue in the radio broadcasting sector[13].

In a highly concentrated ownership environment, ensuring plurality of ownership is difficult and must be a top priority. However, the concept of diversity in the context of the news media is much broader than considerations of pluralism in ownership.

From the perspective of the audience, it must reflect what audiences consume and what they prefer. It has been demonstrated empirically that an increased number of outlets or channels does not automatically lead to greater diversity in content provision or consumption. And an increase in available programming choices does not necessarily create access to a more diverse range of ideas[1].

More importantly, there are marginalised groups in the population that are not adequately and fairly represented in the media. These marginalised groups are typically found in **gender, sexual identity, ability, race & ethnicity, Indigeneity, national origin, religion, language, age, class (SES), or geography**. To correct this situation the objective of diversity should also include consideration of diversity of representation in content and in staffing of newsrooms. However, according to Census 2021 data, only 9% of journalists are from a non-Anglo/European background and 1% is Indigenous, severely underrepresenting the actual population. As noted in the previous section, newsrooms are struggling to meet the day-to-day needs of publishing stories and do not have the capacity to invest in the future or plan the workforce strategically.

In the long run, this poses a threat to democracy and social cohesion. Failure to represent certain groups in the community is linked to lower trust in news, lower news consumption and disengagement[14].

Research conducted by the N&MRC into the diversity of Australian newsrooms found that audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds and Indigenous Australians have very low trust in mainstream news and think their interests are not reflected in the news (see figure 3).

[11] The Senate Environment and Communications References Committee. (2021). *Media diversity in Australia.* Commonwealth of Australia.
https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Environment_and_Communications/Mediadiversity/Report
[12] Brevini, B. & Ward, M. (2021). *Who controls our Media.* GetUp! https://d68ej2dhhub09.cloudfront.net/2810-GetUp_-_Who_Controls_Our_Media_.pdf.
[13] Stanford, J. (2021). *The Future of Work in Journalism.* Australia Institute. https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Future-of-Journalism-WEB.pdf
[14] Park, S., Fisher, C., McGuinness, K., Lee, J., K. & McCallum, K. (2021). *Digital News Report: Australia 2021.* Canberra: News & Media Research Centre. https://apo.org.au/node/312650

Figure 3: News attitudes by ethnic background (%)
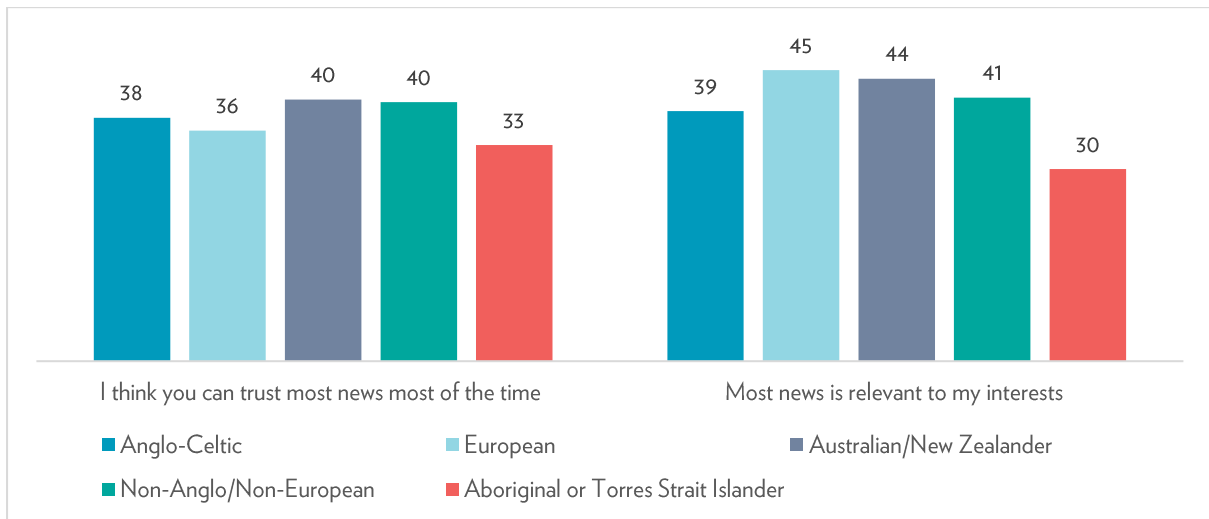
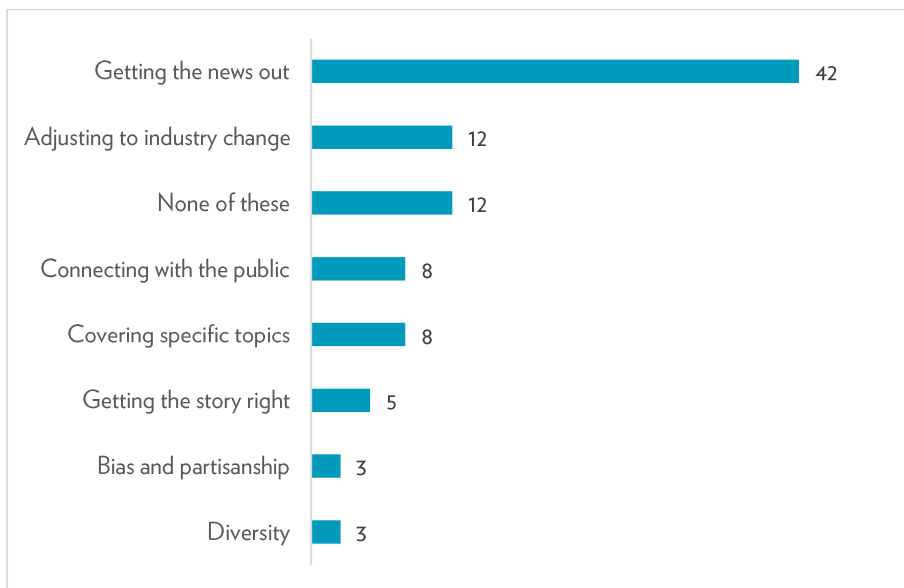Source: Valuing Diversity in News and Newsrooms (2023).

However, journalists lack confidence in their ability to address the issue of diversity. We asked respondents to nominate the one thing the news industry was doing best (see figure 4). Around two in five agreed the industry is doing well at getting the news out (42%), only 3% said they were doing a good job with regards to diversity. One in five (19%) thought diversity was one of the worst things the industry was doing. We asked respondents whether they had undergone training in the past year. About half say they have undergone training on diversity and inclusion issues in the workplace, but only 39% say they have been trained on how to cover issues of diversity and inclusion in the news.[15]

Therefore, the employment of CALD and First Nations journalists in mainstream news organisations is important. This must complement the production of news and journalism by CALD and First Nations journalists working for community-controlled media organisations.

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[15] 15 McGuinness, K., Park, S., Lee, J. Y., Fulton, J. and Lukamto, W. (2023). *Valuing Diversity in News and Newsrooms.* Canberra: News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2023-03/apo-nid321582.pdf

Figure 4: Journalists' view on what the news industry is doing the best job of (%)

Category	Value
Getting the news out	42
Adjusting to industry change	12
None of these	12
Connecting with the public	8
Covering specific topics	8
Getting the story right	5
Bias and partisanship	3
Diversity	3

Source: Valuing Diversity in News and Newsrooms (2023).

The N&MRC recommends the concept of diversity be broadened to be inclusive of all audiences, especially those who are from culturally and linguistically diverse and Indigenous communities. This is not just a solution to improve inclusivity and representation, it is also central strategy to increase news audiences and therefore improve the financial standing of news.

However, in a highly concentrated media market, diversity in its broader sense cannot be realised with market dynamics alone. Government intervention is necessary to encourage diversity in staffing and representation in journalism content. Consideration could be given to government funding and training programs for news media tied to increasing diversity of their staffing and content. We also recommend the government expand on the work already being done by the ACMA in relation to developing a media diversity framework for Australia.

4. Engagement

4.1	**Is engagement the right objective?**
4.2:	**How should the access objective be understood?**
4.3	**What are the appropriate roles for government and industry in pursuing this objective?**

Government has responsibility to ensure citizens have access to public interest journalism and the ability to critically engage with it in order to participate in democracy. In communication scholarship, the term 'participation' is used to describe citizen civic involvement.[16] Whereas 'engagement' is more commonly used to describe people's use of media, such as sharing and liking

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[16] Lee, S., & Xenos, M. (2022). Incidental news exposure via social media and political participation: Evidence of reciprocal effects. *New Media & Society, 24*(1), 178-201.

digital content.[17] For clarity, the N&MRC recommends the government use the term 'participation' to better reflect its goals in relation to civic activity and the term 'engagement' in relation to audience interaction with news.

Beyond online news engagement, audience engagement can be defined as both cognitive and emotional experiences that users have with public interest journalism. We cannot assume audiences are primarily seeking information on news sites. Decades of audience studies show audiences' motivations are broader and include the need to belong, to connect, to feel pleasure, or to escape one's problems. Providing news that resonates with the audience is essential to encouraging audience participation in matters important to society.

In a constantly evolving media environment audiences now want access to news that is important to them, rather than passively accepting what they are given. They also want to be able to interact with journalists online and express their own opinion, all while being entertained.[18]

As mentioned earlier in this submission, the objectives of news access, diversity engagement and media literacy are closely intertwined, and any policy framework must acknowledge this.

Part 2: Potential Measures

In this section, we provide suggestions around the broad principles of implementing funding programs and other support measures. We believe a range of interventions can be adopted based on the context and the needs of the industry and audiences, knowing that most of these programs are rarely effective in the longer term. However, in supporting an industry in crisis, multiple measures will need to be developed and implemented to sustain the industry while longer term solutions are being explored and experimented with.

The most influential factor in the current crisis of the news industry derives from fierce competition with global digital platforms in relation to advertising and audience markets. As the ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry explained, this made the playing field uneven between news businesses and platforms.

In an ideal world, markets operate through supply and demand. However, in reality, that is rarely the case. In media markets, this is even harder as we are concerned with products that are prone to market failure. There is an active role to be played by the government through regulation, policy interventions, and direct and indirect subsidy programs.

The questions we should be asking are:
- Is there sufficient supply to meet demand?
- Are there efficiencies in the distribution of resources?
- Do new players have equal opportunities?

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[17] Dvir-Gvirsman, S. (2022). Understanding news engagement on social media: A media repertoire approach. *new media & society, 24*(8), 1791-1812.

[18] Banjac, S., & Hanusch, F. (2020). A question of perspective: Exploring audiences' views of journalistic boundaries. New Media & Society 20(7), 2450–2468.

- Are consumers informed?

By 2020-21, more than half of Australian advertising expenditure went to global search and social media platforms[19]. The transition of advertising from offline media to online has made news businesses compete with international companies that can micro target audiences at scale. Regional newspapers have been hit the hardest as their business model was primarily based on local advertising and classified ads. In 2002, newspapers had 96% of classified revenues. This dropped to 12% in 2018[20]. News businesses have proactively made efforts to diversify their revenue stream and in part have succeeded in growing their paid subscribers. In 2023, one in five Australians were paying for online news[21]. However, this is not sufficient to overcome the decline in advertising.

Regional news outlets are further experiencing financial shortfalls as the governments (federal, state and local) have reduced the overall advertising expenditure in recent years. Only 1% of federal, 2% of state and 9% of local government advertising are spent on regional news outlets. In contrast, 15% of federal, 12% of state and 8% of local government advertising go to social media platforms, which are all international companies[22]. Adjusting this imbalance alone would be a positive measure in assisting news organisations in Australia.

A longer-term strategy of government support is needed to ensure public interest journalism is provided to all Australians. In the short term, tax-based incentives, support through government advertising and grants would all be useful measures.

We suggest that the government review and evaluate these stop gap measures and devise a consistent longer term support strategy for certain types of news that will be harder to provide within the market; news that serves minority groups such as culturally diverse communities, and local news in regional and remote Australia.

10. Support for media literacy

10.1	**What groups most need support from government for media literacy?**
10.2:	**In what areas is media literacy education most needed?**
10.4	**What further research and evidence is required?**
10.5	**What metrics and data should be considered?**

Groups most in need of support

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[19] Based on an internal analysis conducted by Dr Marion McCutcheon at N&MRC based on ABS data. https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/national-accounts/australian-national-accounts-input-output-tables-product-detail
[20] Alphabeta. (2020). Australian Media Landscape Trends.
[21] Park, S., McGuinness, K., Fisher, C., Lee, J., McCallum, K., Cai, X., Chatskin, M., Mardjianto, L. & Yao, P. (2023). *Digital News Report: Australia 2023*. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. https://doi.org/10.25916/v0mt-9k87
[22] Nielsen AdEx

Well-informed citizens are the foundation of democracy. To be informed means not only having access to quality information but also the skills and capabilities required to utilise the information in their everyday decision-making. However, Australian adults have low confidence in their ability to discern misinformation and they are saying they need support in trying to find quality information online. Furthermore, one in three Australians have never had any form of media literacy support throughout their lifetime[23].

The Australian Media Literacy Alliance defines media literacy as: "the ability to critically engage with media in all aspects of life. It is a form of lifelong literacy that is essential for full participation in society."[24] People usually learn about national and international events through a diverse range of media. The ability to critically reflect on the media they engage with is an important skill to thrive in the digital environment. But as technologies evolve, this skill also needs to be updated. That is why media literacy is often regarded as a lifelong skill[25].

The *Adult Media Literacy in Australia 2021* study found that many Australians lack confidence in their media abilities, some more than others. Older Australians, those living in rural and remote Australia, people living with a disability or living in a low-income household are the most vulnerable groups in the population[26].

Areas of media literacy education

We conducted a national study of the perceptions of 536 libraries and information services (LIS) professionals about media literacy[27]. Libraries, including school and public libraries, play a critical role in supporting life-long literacy. Respondents who work in public libraries felt the most responsible to educate the adult public, maybe reflecting the fact that older adults and family/parents are most likely to ask for help. The most common type of assistance citizens need is to find information online. However, the types of assistance the public requests are diverse and differs by the type of library they visit (see table 1). To develop effective media literacy programs, a targeted approach suited to the needs of different communities is needed.

Table 1: Experience in helping others by type of library (%)

	School	Public	Other
Find resources from the library catalogue	36	21	22
General internet use	27	47	29
Use the devices provided at the library	16	15	7
Use a laptop or computer	28	46	27
Use library e-resources at home	32	26	29

[23] Notley, T., Chambers, S., Park, S., Dezuanni, M. (2021). *Adult Media Literacy in Australia: Attitudes, Experiences and Needs.* Western Sydney University, Queensland University of Technology and University of Canberra. https://westernsydney.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1824640/Australian_adult_media_literacy_report_2021.pdf

[24] https://medialiteracy.org.au/media-literacy-framework/

[25] N&MRC Media Literacy Education Evaluation Framework

[26] Park, S., Lee, J., Atkinson, S. & Su, J. (2021). *Media Literacy in Australia: A Qualitative Study.* Canberra: News & Media Research Centre. https://apo.org.au/node/313350

[27] Park, S., Walsh, B. & Su, J. (2023). *Libraries and Media Literacy Education.* Canberra: News & Media Research Centre. https://doi.org/10.25916/kahm-zr94

Find information they need online	51	51	48
Use a smartphone	5	56	27
Access the internet at the library	2	5	13
Media and copyright	21	0	10
Choose apps for a smartphone	4	6	8
Edit photos or videos	1	4	4
Find information and resources to support training others in media literacy	6	2	11
Change privacy settings on social media (e.g. Facebook)	12	10	16
Make a decision about what information to share online	21	9	18
Understand the terms of service of online sites	16	1	7
Find an online community	3	1	1
Help people to deal with online harassment	9	2	8
Help people to deal with online bullying	5	1	7

Source: Libraries and Media Literacy Education (2023).

There has been an increase in the demand for help or advice with media literacy. We asked if there had been a change in the community's demand for help or advice in the past five years; 45% of LIS professionals felt more people were asking for help. This was particularly noticeable in the public library sector, and with adult members of the community.

Figure 5: Change in the community's demand for help or advice
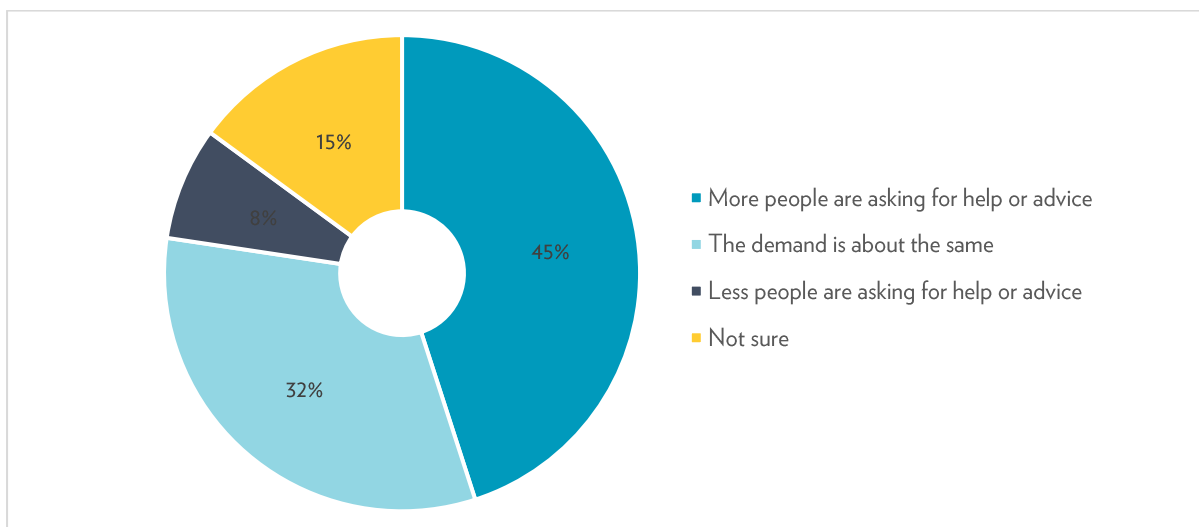
Source: Libraries and Media Literacy Education (2023).

Further research and evidence

The N&MRC, in collaboration with the Institute for Culture & Society, Western Sydney University and Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology is currently undertaking the *Adult Media Literacy in Australia 2024* wave 2 survey. This study is a longitudinal study started in 2021 and will provide the baseline adult media literacy levels but it also covers a range of new questions that links news engagement, mistrust in news, misinformation and media literacy.

Another activity-based misinformation survey[28] will assess the ability of adult Australians to identify misinformation and assess the quality of information sources. These studies will reveal those who are in urgent need of media literacy education and what types of learning they prefer.

Part 3: Establishing the Evidence Base

The N&MRC provided input into the development of the Media Diversity Measurement Framework released in December 2023. We support the outcome of the MDMF delegation of overall responsibility for ACMA to 'build or take carriage of key datasets on the news market. This could also include commissioning new research projects to address identified data gaps and expand the framework over time.'

The N&MRC reiterates its position that there is an urgent need for robust, publicly available, longitudinal datasets on news supply and consumption. A networked, collaborative approach between government, academia, industry and non-government organisations is required to provide this evidence base. Existing datasets, including the *Digital News Report: Australia* (2015-24) and PIJI's Australian News Data Project must be considered as central to building the body of evidence about news consumption and supply in Australia. We welcome the opportunity for the ACMA to '...consult further with academic and other research organisations on their capacity to undertake content diversity assessments'.

In addition, we acknowledge that the News MAP Consultation Paper recommends the ongoing evaluation of the ACMA's MDMF (p. 32). Independent organisations such as the N&MRC are well placed to contribute to these evaluation exercises.

The N&MRC can expand its existing research to address some of the issues raised in the News MAP consultation paper. For example,

- DNR interactive visualisation dashboard for an industry-wide use of the global data
- Expanding 'Valuing Diversity in News and Newsrooms' to capture ethnically diverse news production and consumption study
- Contributing to an Indigenous-led First Nations journalism workforce study
- Contributing to an Indigenous-led First Nations audience study

There are four areas of new research that N&MRC believes are underserved but urgently needed.

Culturally and linguistically diverse audiences and news businesses

To complement the work done by ACMA on news media ownership and the Australian News Data Project by PIJI, research is needed to map the CALD news landscape. There is no centralised database of ethnic media in Australia. CALD audiences rely on news produced in their language or news produced by their community, and are important sources of critical information.

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[28] This study is a part of the Australian Research Council Linkage Project *LP220100208 Addressing Misinformation with Media Literacy through Cultural Institutions led by Associate Professor Tanya Notley.*

Studies on CALD audiences are also lacking. Research is needed into CALD audiences' news consumption and attitudes to ascertain the gaps.

First Nations audiences and news businesses

Research conducted by the N&MRC and colleagues demonstrates that First Nations audiences are disadvantaged in terms of journalism in their interest[29] . There is a well-documented enduring history of news content that privileges perspectives of the settler-colonial majority and excludes and negatively represents First Nations peoples. Interventions, often driven by First Nations Media Australia, include the funding of a vibrant Indigenous-controlled media sector, philanthropic funding of Indigenous journalists in mainstream news outlets, and direct government funding through the public broadcasters.[30]

The 2020 Closing the Gap Agreement includes a suite of targets to improve First Nations access to relevant media, to boost the capacity of the community-controlled media sector, and to improve First Nations representation – but urgent research is needed to develop ways to measure these targets. A program of Indigenous-led research is required to evaluate gaps in the supply of relevant news to Indigenous Australians, in terms of digital access, Indigenous voice and content representation. Mapping of First Nations news provision, newsroom diversity, access to news and the identification of Indigenous peoples' news needs should be a priority for government. A comprehensive survey of the Indigenous news audiences, supported by robust qualitative research, is well overdue

Journalists in Australia longitudinal study

The contraction of news services, particularly in regional Australia over the past decade, has led to increasing concern about the future of journalism. This has been heightened by the economic impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak. However, to date Australia does not collect data on the composition of the workforce, their changing practices and training needs. At the organisation level, we lack information about the diversity in the workforce. An annual or biannual study that tracks journalists' workforce that includes both mainstream and non-mainstream outlets and journalists can inform the government about the needs of intervention, both direct and indirect.

The state of media literacy and evaluation framework

To date, we do not have any nationwide media literacy programs. There are ad hoc, sporadic efforts in the library sector and through public institutions. We strongly suggest a national media literacy framework driven by the government and developing media literacy programs tailored to audiences' needs. To effectively roll out programs, we need to establish a baseline evidence base of

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[29] Thomas, A., Nolan, D., McCallum, K., Waller, L. J., & McDuffie, M. (2023). First Nations media in the Closing the Gap era: Navigating the new self-determination. *Media International Australia* https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X231209599.

[30] First Nations Media Australia (2019) Communications—A Key Element of Closing the Gap. Alice Springs: First Nations Media Australia. https://firstnationsmedia.org.au/sites/default/files/files/Submissions/Communications%20%26%20Closing%20the%20Gap.pdf.

how Australians (both children and adults) are faring in their media literacy and monitor the trends over time. The Adult Media Literacy in Australia survey (2021, 2024) will provide this evidence base. However, to continue with this work, sustained funding is needed, and additional work is needed to reach marginalised communities using more costly booster samples and qualitative research. Establishing a baseline evidence base and developing an evaluation framework are core elements of an effective implementation of a national media literacy program.

Appendix: Relevant Research

Digital News Report: Australia 2015-2023. https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/faculty-research-centres/nmrc/digital-news-report-australia

FNMA. First Nations Media Australia (2019) Communications—A Key Element of Closing the Gap. Alice Springs: First Nations Media Australia.

Hugh Watson Consulting (2021) Renewing a Vital Indigenous Voice and Community Asset—The Indigenous Broadcasting and Media Sector. Canberra: National Indigenous Australians Agency.

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Park, S., Walsh, B. & Su, J. (2023). Libraries and Media Literacy Education. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre. https://doi.org/10.25916/kahm-zr94

Park, S., McGuinness, K., Fisher, C., Lee, J., McCallum, K., Cai, X., Chatskin, M., Mardjianto, L. & Yao, P. (2023). Digital News Report: Australia 2023. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. https://doi.org/10.25916/v0mt-9k87

Park, S., Griffiths, R., McGuinness, K., Nguyen, T. & Lee, J. (2023). Sense of Belonging Among Multilingual Audiences in Australia. Canberra: University of Canberra & Special Broadcasting Service. https://doi.org/10.25916/6359-2y65

McCallum, K., Holland, K., Fulton, J., Walsh, B., Deas, M., Sutherland, G., John, E. & Rickwood, D. (2023). Media reporting of child sexual abuse in Australia: 2020-22: Research Report, University of Canberra. https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/centres/nmrc/media-guides-project.

McGuinness, K., Park, S., Lee, J. Y., Fulton, J. and Lukamto, W. (2023). Valuing Diversity in News and Newsrooms. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2023-03/apo-nid321582.pdf

Park, S., McCallum, K., Holland, K., McGuinness, K., Lee, J., Fisher, C. & John, E. (2022). COVID-19: Australian News & Misinformation Longitudinal Study. Canberra: News Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. doi:10.25916/0673-7f38

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Sang, Y., Lee, J. & Park, S. (2020). Podcast Trends and Issues in Australia and Beyond: Global Perspectives. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre. https://apo.org.au/node/308947

Fisher, C., Park, S., Lee, J., Holland, K. & John, E. (2020). News and wellbeing: older generations and news consumption. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre. https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2020-09/apo-nid308154.pdf

Park, S., Fisher, C. & Lee, J. (2020). Local News Consumers. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre. https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/faculty-research-centres/nmrc/research/local-news-consumers

Fisher, C., Park, S., Howden, S., Lee, J. & McGuinness, K. (2020). Australian Regional Journalists: What They Need and How They See the Future. Canberra. News & Media Research

Centre. https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/faculty-research-centres/nmrc/research/regional-journalists-what-do-they-need

Park, S., Fisher, C., Lee, J. & McGuinness, K. (2020). COVID-19: Australian news and misinformation. Canberra: News & Media Research Centre. https://www.canberra.edu.au/research/faculty-research-centres/nmrc/publications/documents/COVID-19-Australian-news-and-misinformation.pdf

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