

Response to News Media Assistance Program Consultation Paper

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I apologize for the brevity of this response; the inquiry catches me at a time of overwhelming workload.

Objectives

Beginning with objectives is crucial and an excellent move for guiding policy development. It is necessary to also identify the relative priority of the objectives as they will often conflict.

- Access is a second-level issue; it assumes the existence of an adequate amount of public-interest journalism (PIJ) and the current Australian situation is one of profound PIJ absence.
 - Citizens need access to PIJ broader than coverage about government; the most pressing absence is the lack of PIJ about community issues.
 - Public-service media (PSM, meaning the ABC and SBS) are very accessible, well established, and experienced in providing a breadth of PIJ and can be resourced with funding for local PIJ development. Additional resourcing could support greater accessibility in further translating existing PIJ content developed by PSM through distribution channels widely used by Australians (social media). This risks diminishing the audience measurable by these organizations (number of clicks, views at ABC.net.au), but the gain in accessibility makes this worthwhile.
 - Libraries have long played an important role in accessibility but many born-digital and non-profit PIJ publications are unavailable through libraries. Government intervention to ensure paywalled PIJ can be accessed through libraries (in ways that don't compromise their business model) could remedy this.
- Quality is not the right terminology. 'Relevant and contextualised PIJ' is a more effective categorisation of what quality intends.

- The overwhelming failure of Australian ‘news’ content right now is the *insignificance* of issues covered; abundant death, misfortune, and mayhem, little that actually matters to the daily concerns of most Australians.
- Another major problem with current content is how much is verbatim corporate press releases that lack any investigation, development, or effort to unpack corporate spin. ‘Contextualised’ addresses this need.
- Diversity is an important objective, but a second-stage goal. Policymaking must first support more expansive existence of PIJ.
 - Past approaches to diversity are dated. It is no longer just a world of a few gatekeepers and in many cases those who *make* news are not the same companies who have considerable control over its *distribution*. The change in business conditions make a diversity of PIJ creators unlikely.
 - Ensuring diversity of business models—co-existence of PSM, consumer-funded PIJ, and advertiser-funded PIJ is a useful approach because the different pressures of these models yield different strengths and limitations on their journalism. The commercial broadcast space may provide three different voices, but they face the same goals and metrics and thus largely reproduce each other rather than offering meaningful diversity.
 - The government should continue to manage ownership but also be attentive to conditions that limit PIJ circulation, for instance, social media content policies risk elevating the version of news chosen by social media owners or their priority of attracting attention through outrage.
- Engagement is better replaced with literacy as an objective. The abilities to evaluate information and information sources and to find valid information are necessary skills to achieve the pro-social and democratic goals the paper outlines.

Measures

The paper fails to acknowledge the extent to which commercial media content now *rarely* aligns with the public interest and regularly works contrary to it. This is the core of the problem.¹ The commercial business of attracting attention using current events is significantly diminished, and what remains is inadequately resourced. But providing resources to commercial and for-profit providers is not a solution in the public interest.²

Expanding the support and mission of Australian PSM the best (efficient and effective) tool to solve the concerns highlighted in this paper.

¹ See Amanda D. Lotz, ‘Information Wants to Be Free,’ *Media disrupted: Surviving pirates, cannibals and streaming wars*, MIT Press, 2022. I’m happy to provide a copy of the chapter.

² Victor Pickard, *Democracy without journalism?: Confronting the misinformation society*. Oxford University Press, 2019. Pickard is the global expert and has published many more relevant articles, most recently <https://theconversation.com/saving-the-news-media-means-moving-beyond-the-benevolence-of-billionaires-222677>

Direct funding questions

- Infrastructure (technology; legal; business operations) for local entrepreneurs developing sustainable (non-investor grade) enterprises is a support that avoids concerns with editorial interference. These organisations lack scale that government could provide/subsidise that would leave editorial in their hands, conditioned on their offering 'relevant and contextualized community PIJ' and that they take measures to ensure accessibility.
- Competitive impacts should not be a central concern in the contemporary media economy. Commercial providers offer minimal PIJ and aren't incentivised to offer more. The government is stepping in in their absence.

Business models

- There really aren't other models; public funding is the most effective globally; this isn't an innovation issue – advertisers now have better ways to buy attention.

Tax based incentives

- At best a partial solution, that is likely most effective at the local level. Places where this is effective (US National Public Radio a leading case) rely on a culture of support that would likely take time to develop in Australia. Incentives need to be limited to non-profit enterprises.

Government advertising

- Unlikely as a single solution; could work with others; priority at local level

Diversity

- The government should respond quickly to situations of concern. Diversity is more complicated in the current ecosystem. There are currently massive gaps in production of PIJ, and many of the most important distributors do not create any PIJ but remain relevant to availability. Any entity that has capacity to limit the circulation of PIJ is relevant to diversity considerations.
- Regulation of social media advertising is a relevant adjacent issue (Meta/Google market control) that fuels these organisations to prioritise the outrageous over contextualised and relevant content.

Engagement

- Evaluating information needs a place in prep-12 curriculum; also support in public service campaigns.
- A culture of critical engagement is lacking in Australia, for instance the university degrees most relevant have been made the most expensive by the previous government; the social conversation consistently disregards HASS skills like those central to evaluating and finding valid information.
- Literacy includes the instinct for information consumers to ask how or why stories are relevant; to seek context; to know where to go for confirmation (and the availability of those resources).