



**The National Ethnic
and Multicultural
Broadcasters'
Council**

December 2020

NEMBC Submission

Media Diversity in Australia

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Introduction

The National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters' Council (NEMBC) is a national peak body that advocates for multiculturalism and supports multilingual community broadcasting around Australia. The NEMBC contributes to media diversity in Australia by maintaining and connecting people to their language, culture and identity. The NEMBC has been active for more than forty years.

Ethnic community broadcasting is an incredibly diverse sector, serving the needs of hundreds of thousands of Australians of all ages in urban and regional areas right across the country. It is also highly cost-effective, harnessing the skills, expertise and time of more than 4000 volunteers from 125 distinct cultural groups who create over 2,000 hours of content every week in over 108 languages, which are broadcast across 90 radio stations.

Community broadcasting but particularly multilingual and multicultural community broadcasting provides a voice for marginalise communities, enabling diverse communities to have a strong voice to make a safer and more inclusive society.

In this submission, we will address the questions posed from the perspective of multicultural and ethnic broadcasters. Diversity in our opinion means a media that encourages opinions and voices in languages other than English and provides access to older and newly arrived migrants for broader media representation, not just in community and public radio.

The NEMBC response to questions:

- a. *the current state of public interest journalism in Australia and any barriers to Australian voters' ability to access reliable, accurate and independent news;*
- b. *the effect of media concentration on democracy in Australia;*
- c. *the impact of Australia's media ownership laws on media concentration in Australia;*
- d. *the impact of significant changes to media business models since the advent of online news and the barriers to viability and profitability of public interest news services;*
- e. *the impact of online global platforms such as Facebook, Google and Twitter on the media industry and sharing of news in Australia;*

The current state of public interest journalism is facing massive challenges not only in Australia but also globally. The most notable reasons for this are:

- Pressure on journalists to keep up with fast passed media cycle brought about by the speed with which information is circulated – generally a continuous 24-hour cycle.
- With the advent of online media services, the traditional media have had to resort to more extreme and opinion-driven news in order to attract and maintain audiences.

- Commercial and mainstream media outlets have had to diversify and move to online digital media, and with declining sales and audiences, they have been under financial strain resulting in the dismissal of many qualified journalists.
- There has been a decline in audiences believing in fact-based journalism along with a rise in deliberately fostered ‘fake news’ that has been able to attract large audiences (mostly online and in Social Media). This means that people get their news in confirming and prejudiced ‘echo chambers’, and daily fact-based news is questioned for relevancy.
- The volatility of contemporary politics has created a polarised media. These divisions are reflected in the media, with some outlets obviously taking sides, as seen in America with President Donald Trump and FOX News and the Murdoch Press here in Australia.
- The ownership laws for mainstream media in Australia means that there is a lack of diversity of news and opinion. The commercial media is a profit-making machine, and owners and shareholders want direct returns on investment. Ethical and independent journalism is over-ridden by the opinions and directions of the media owners, which, as most print media is owned by one person (Murdoch), it denies a plurality of voices and access.

In Australia this new media posture is most obvious on Rupert Murdoch’s Sky News Channel. The News on Sky doesn’t strive for balance, impartiality or diverse views; instead it merely provides opinions, most notably by people such as Andrew Bolt, Rowen Dean, Rita Panahi and more recently Peta Credlin and Alan Bond.

Paul Whittaker Sky News Chief Executive, when responding to criticism that Sky News was reporting Donald Trump winning the US election, said it was because their station runs ‘opinion-based news programming that often shines a light on areas that our competitors either refuse to discuss or worse pretend don’t exist, this is our brand value proposition that separates us from the dominance of voices on the left of Australian media. “¹

The style of journalism on Murdoch’s media channels is skewed to extreme right-wing views. In a democracy diverse views are important; however, their ‘opinions’ are so extreme and biased that it creates a heightened sensationalism of ‘fake news’ or a sense of unreality that’s stokes division and undermines democratic values and in some cases, democracy itself.

In this regard, the media deliberating dividing the audiences into pro and con positions around any issue (e.g. climate change, the pandemic, inequality, refugees, etc) politically divides the communities’ abilities to make decisive and clear-headed decisions based on (scientific) facts and not biased opinions.

This has added challenges when the audiences are from different ethnic backgrounds where English is often a second language. The extreme media undermines their confidence in knowing what to believe or not believe when the news stories often contradict their life experiences.

¹ Zoe Samios, *News Corp editors claim Rudd and Turnbull 'exploited' Murdoch papers during political ascent*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 December, 2020.

In addition to this, some commercial media is hostile to the reality of multiculturalism and is ever ready to highlight stories that show migrant communities in a bad light – especially where violence or theft is involved. Instances of this is characterised as “Asian”, “Muslim” or “African”, and the whole community is blamed for the actions of one or two people.

Under representation and mis-representation in the media of marginalisation minorities will contribute to the fragmentation of social cohesion.² By comparison, the NEMBC works with its members, radio stations and training groups and organisations to develop employment pathways to improve media representation, which in turn improves coverage of fact-based news content and creates a more inclusive society.

Responses to the following questions:

- f. the barriers faced by small, independent and community news outlets in Australia;*
- g. the role that a newswire service plays in supporting diverse public interest journalism in Australia;*
- h. the state of local, regional and rural media outlets in Australia;*
- i. the role of government in supporting a viable and diverse public interest journalism sector in Australia;*
and
- j. any other related matters.*

The main barriers to small, independent and community news outlets is financial viability, changes to traditional broadcasting and uptake to digital and online platform, resources and training.

Most community radio stations rely substantially on the financial support of their communities – through membership, subscription, donations and sponsorship. Most community stations, especially in rural and regional centres, are operated by volunteers. Broadcasters are generally always volunteers. This is both a benefit and a challenge. It keeps the costs down, but on the other hand, the income derived only just covers the costs of standard operation: rent, transmission, licences, power, etc.

Broadcasters at many community stations do report on local news, but this is often irregular and limited by time to track down sources and news stories. Credible news services that emanate from state or national sources are expensive to operate and need a full time dedicated and trained staff to source and develop the news bulletins and translate / produce and distribute. This becomes even more complex when dealing with multiple languages.

During the COVID pandemic, the NEMBC took it upon itself to fund and organise a national Multicultural News Service. This demonstrates the pathway forward, but it requires substantial funds to engage and train journalists, editors and producers to conduct the service.

While media departments and newspapers closed and journalists lost jobs, the NEMBC started a Multilingual Radio News Service (MNS). This was to ensure there was a consistent flow of reliable information for multicultural communities in different languages about coronavirus and means to stay safe.

² Jakubowicz, A., 'New groups and social cohesion in Australia', in Higley, J., Nieuwenhuysen, J., & Neerup, S. (eds.), Nations of Immigrants: Australia and the USA Compared, 2009.

The idea was conceived in March 2020 (at the beginning of the pandemic) and launched on the 1st of May. It started with 7 languages; Spanish, Greek, Hindi, Arabic, Punjabi, Pacific Islander English and Mandarin, and expanded to 18 languages.

Within two months, the news was distributed and played over 170 times a week across Australia. There were 29 stations involved in the on-air plays, from every State and Territory, including 12 regional stations.

The English news scripts were written in the morning with translators and producers stationed in Brisbane, Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne. The English scripts were used by other language programs including Samoan, Tongan and Cantonese. The news was even read-out on radio in the Pilbara WA, every morning at 8am by the First Nations people Ngaarda Media.

The ethnic community broadcasting sector proved that it can be agile, innovative and lead the way in a time of crisis.

During to the 'second wave' COVID outbreak in Melbourne in September, the NEMBC received Victoria Government support to produce a daily news bulletin in 7 different languages and this was further expanded to 22 languages in October.

The daily news bulletins are currently distributed across 12 radio stations in Victoria with over 80 play outs a week.

The daily news focuses on main stories on COVID 19, health and safety issues and multicultural stories. The news was directed to culturally diverse communities and vulnerable language groups in Melbourne and Victoria.

Due to the ability to respond quickly and create radio-ready audio files, the Victorian Government engaged the NEMBC to respond to COVID 19 outbreak emergencies and provide Explainers in different languages. The NEMBC provided same-day in language warnings for the Shepperton and Northern suburbs outbreaks in October.

The Northern Suburbs outbreaks occurred because of a miscommunication in a family about staying at home in Isolation or Quarantine. The NEMBC provided an explainer in relevant languages for communities in that area of Melbourne.

The NEMBC is also using multiple digital platforms, social media and local networks to distribute the daily news and is reaching thousands of people each week through these channels. Most notably is the sharing of the news on a Victorian Government Community Leaders WhatsApp group that re-shares the news to their social media networks. The NEMBC has an online media player using Soundcloud and distributes via Facebook, Instagram and emails to its membership network.

During the emergency warnings, additional channels for distribution have been established such as an email distribution network set up by the Ethnic Council of Shepperton to quickly disseminate messages during the towns outbreak.

When the hard-lock-down occurred for the residents in the nine housing estate towers, the NEMBC established a communications media system that could provide a quick response and were contacted by a number of organisations for assistance.

The Federation of Community Legal Centres (FCLC) and the Human Rights Commission requested assistance to produce language audio files inside the housing estates. These were quickly produced as audio MP3's literally over overnight for the organisations in 16 different languages.

Both organisations through their networks distributed the audio podcasts into the towers via email, WhatsApp, SMS, sent it to community leaders for distribution and made it available on their websites.

The audio messages explained what the government was doing, what's required of the residents, health and safety issues and 'know your rights' and a police complaints process.

The Multilingual News Service (MNS) is a program about connecting and enabling diverse communities to be better informed, to make good decisions and feel safer during these difficult times.

This example shows the power of a news service that is in various ethnic languages, so that these communities can make informed decisions about the pandemic and ultimately keep communities safe and save lives.

However, it is obvious that without the support of Governments, such as Victoria, this service cannot be sustained. To be viable and national, it needs the funding and training support of the Commonwealth Government.

The Commonwealth Government needs to recognise the special attention required by multicultural and multilingual community broadcasting because of its sheer number of languages and cultural differences it caters for.

Recommendation 1

The Commonwealth Government fund and support a Multilingual News Service so that culturally and linguistically diverse communities can play a more coordinated and substantial role nationally in public interest journalism over the long term

Recommendation 2

The NEMBC is seeking collaboration and support from the Commonwealth Government to:

- 2.1 Support a Multilingual News Service as a training ground to develop employment pathways so that mainstream media in Australia can become more diverse and truly represent the cultural make up of Australian society.
- 2.2 Use a national Multilingual News Service to enhance and develop digital online and multiplatform distribution channels that can prepare ethnic and multicultural community broadcasting for the challenges of the digital disruption.

Recommendation 3

The NEMBC is seeking a commitment to increase funding to multilingual and multicultural community broadcasting so that community radio stations are able to respond to the present challenges, and can continue to make a major contribution for access to migrants and new arrivals to a viable media option and create social cohesion.

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National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters' Council (NEMBC)
Enabling diverse communities to have a strong voice to make a safer and more inclusive society