Submission to Senate Environment and Communications References Committee Inquiry into the state of media diversity, independence and reliability in Australia

from Croakey Health Media

11 December, 2020

We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians of the country where we live, work and travel upon, and to Elders, past, present and future.
Introductory statement

This inquiry is taking place at a time when two global crises – COVID-19 and climate change – are revealing the fundamental importance of a well-informed public and an accountable, informed policy-making process.

This underscores the critical importance of public interest journalism, especially at a time of misinformation and disinformation spread by powerful digital platforms and other actors, including partisan corporate media.

These dual crises are also revealing the fragility of the public interest journalism sector, in Australia and globally. This is because of the collapsed business model for public interest journalism amid a generally unsupportive policy environment, as well as wider trends, such as increasing authoritarianism and suppression of media and whistleblowers.

Our key recommendation to this inquiry is that policies should develop, support and sustain the non-profit public interest journalism sector as a critical part of a diverse media ecosystem, for the benefit of communities. In particular, policies should support the development of innovative new models, especially in communities that are poorly served or under-served by mainstream media, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people with disabilities, and LGBTQI communities. Communities should be supported to identify and meet their needs for public interest journalism.

We urge the inquiry to take a visionary, horizon-scanning approach to your work. Do not be constrained by the limitations of the present media landscape; present us with a vision for a healthy, diverse media and information ecosystem 10 or 20 years into the future, when we might expect that the impacts of the climate crisis are being experienced more harshly. Also present us with some clear pathways for how communities might help achieve this.

Representatives of Croakey Health Media would welcome the opportunity to present to the committee, and to provide any further information.
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*pdf attached to this document*
1. Background on Croakey Health Media

Croakey Health Media is a non-profit public interest journalism organisation with a vision that: “A vigorous and sustainable public interest journalism sector contributes to the health and wellbeing of people, families, communities, policies, societies and the environment.” Our purpose is to provide a range of social journalism and professional services to help enable communities, policy-makers and practitioners to improve health and wellbeing, with a determined focus on improving health equity. We take a local, regional, national and global focus.

Our five strategic priorities are:

1. Create a sustainable environment for public interest journalism
2. Privilege Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ expertise and voices
3. Inform, engage and empower communities
4. Scrutinise and disrupt power constructively
5. Provide leadership through innovation.


We are registered as a health charity, primarily because there is no clear pathway in Australia for public interest journalism organisations to set up as a non-profit public interest journalism organisation. We have been unsuccessful in an application for Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status, although we intend to continue trying.

Members of our social journalism team provide the membership of Croakey Health Media with organisational governance provided by an elected board of directors (including non-members), chaired by Dr Janine Mohamed, a Narrunga Kaurna woman who is CEO of the Lowitja Institute. The social journalism membership is responsible for editorial independence. While we are an extremely innovative, nimble and productive organisation, our business model is fragile and underpinned by a large pro bono contribution from our social journalism network, reflecting the absence of a strong business model to support public interest journalism.
Public interest journalism gives people the information they need to take part in the democratic process. It informs and contributes to policy and practice. It holds power to account, and amplifies the voices of those who are not well served by the current distribution of power.

Social journalism is a collaborative form of public interest journalism that seeks to provide services to help meet community needs. It can encompass services beyond traditional journalistic content production, including community organising and education.

Activities

1.1. Regular publication at Croakey.org of news and analysis articles about health matters, with a focus on health equity including Indigenous health, the social determinants of health, health promotion, disease prevention, rural and remote health, primary healthcare, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, and climate change and health. We aim to cover health matters that are under-served by the mainstream media, either because they are often poorly covered or under-covered relative to their importance. Croakey’s articles are freely available online, and there is a paid subscription to a weekly compilation news bulletin. The articles are disseminated via Croakey.org, Twitter, Facebook, AppleNews, LinkedIn, and email.

1.2. Special series and publications, such as:

- **#JusticeCOVID** – an investigation of the health issues for prisoners and their families during the pandemic. This series of articles, podcasts and other editorial content was funded by the Judith Neilson Institute for Journalism and Ideas.

- **The Health Wrap** – a regular compilation of evidence-based health policy and research news, with a global, national and local focus. See: [https://www.croakey.org/category/croakey-projects/the-health-wrap/](https://www.croakey.org/category/croakey-projects/the-health-wrap/)

• **#JustJustice** – an extensive series of articles compiled into an e-book, investigating ways to reduce the overincarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a public health priority (#JustJustice); and

• **#WonkyHealth** – a series of articles exploring the social determinants of health.

These publications can be freely downloaded here: [https://croakey.org/croakey-publications/](https://croakey.org/croakey-publications/)

1.3. We are among a handful of media outlets in Australia involved in the global Covering Climate Now initiative, an unprecedented collaboration involving hundreds of media outlets around the world. It is co-founded by The Nation and the Columbia Journalism Review (CJR), in partnership with The Guardian. This has allowed us to cross-publish articles from other media organisations around the world, whilst also contributing our coverage of climate and health matters to the collaboration. A summary of our work on this project was presented virtually to the 16th World Congress on Public Health in October 2020. The poster below can be seen [here](#) in more detail.

1.4. We have also developed a number of innovations in journalism, including:

**Croakey Conference News Service** provides editorially independent, multimedia news coverage from health and medical conferences likely to be of interest or use to our readers and social media followers. During COVID-19, this social journalism service adapted to provide coverage of online conferences, webinars and events.

See examples of coverage here: [https://www.croakey.org/conference-reporting/](https://www.croakey.org/conference-reporting/)
#CroakeyGO is walking journalism, which brings communities together to share knowledge on health matters and collaboratively produce journalism. A summary of our work on this project was presented virtually to the 16th World Congress on Public Health in October 2020 as per the poster below. During COVID-19 we adapted this concept to a virtual #CroakeyGO. The poster below can be seen in more detail here.

1.5. We report on public interest journalism as an important determinant of health, and also advocate for its development and sustainability.

We do this through:


- **Making submissions to relevant inquiries.** We encourage the Committee members to read these submissions as they are relevant to your inquiry: [https://www.croakey.org/about-croakey-health-media/croakey-submissions/](https://www.croakey.org/about-croakey-health-media/croakey-submissions/)
  - Submission to Digital Industry Group Inc (DIGI) consultation on Disinformation Industry Code (**24 November, 2020**) - **Download**
  - Submission to ACCC consultation Mandatory bargaining code (**28 August, 2020**) - **Download**
- ACCC consultation Mandatory bargaining code (5 June, 2020) – Download
- Response to ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry (19 February, 2019) – Download
- Submission to Senate Select Committee inquiring into the future of public interest journalism (15 June, 2017) – Download

**Advocacy.** We advocate to our networks, and meet with politicians and other stakeholders to encourage wider understanding of the role of public interest journalism for healthy populations, communities and societies.

**Presenting to conferences etc, and publishing in journals.**


The conceptualisation below of the upstream determinants of public interest journalism and public health was presented virtually to the 16th World Congress on Public Health in October 2020. The poster below can be seen here in more detail.

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**Save Public Interest Journalism – for health**

Public interest journalism is an important determinant of health, due to its roles in accountability and scrutinising power, contributing to health literacy, and empowering communities. A strong public interest journalism sector contributes to planetary health and health equity, as well as healthier people, communities, societies, and systems of governance.

- Collapse of the underpinning business model
- Market power of digital platforms
- Rediffusion
- Rise of authoritarianism
- Attacks on press freedom and safety
- Journalists’ future to innovate, adapt and represent communities.

In Australia, from 2006 to 2016 the number of payable journalists in journalism and written field fell by more than 30% and by 40% for traditional print media.

Between 2013 and 2017, an estimated 3,000 journalists lost their jobs through redundancies alone. This was before the COVID-19 pandemic – it is much worse now.

Calls to public health action

1. Include public interest journalism in models of the social determinants of health – in practice, research, advocacy and education
2. Advocate for policy reform to support public interest journalists, including non-profit and community-based models
3. Advocate for regulation of the digital platforms
2. Addressing the terms of reference

2.1. The current state of public interest journalism in Australia and any barriers to Australian voters’ ability to access reliable, accurate and independent news

As outlined in a variety of publications cited by Sweet et al (2020) – see pdf attachment - the pandemic has exacerbated a crisis in public interest journalism in Australia and more widely. This has drastically reduced access to reliable and diverse sources of local, national and global news sources at the same time as communities are awash with information disseminated by digital platforms, much of which is unreliable and unaccountable. This has clear implications for the health of populations, as well as of democracy. The policy response has not been commensurate with the need or urgency of the problem, and has tended to be dominated by the interests of major corporates rather than the wider public interest (see our submissions to previous inquiries, as mentioned above). Innovative models like The Conversation, IndigenousX, Inside Story, Renew Economy, Pearls and Irritations, Michael West Media and other independent media outlets provide valuable and popular public service. We also note the value of non-profit models like The Conversation and Croakey Health Media in providing platforms for scientific, medical and social experts to present issues and counter misinformation in a way that is readable, understandable, thoughtful, and timely. However, far more is needed to support and sustain such outlets, as well as wider innovation.

2.2. The effect of media concentration on democracy in Australia

The Australian media landscape is toxic, reflecting the market and political power of News Corporation, and its partisan agendas, including a long history of actively undermining effective climate policy. During a critical time for pandemic control, News Corporation was actively undermining public health through commentary marked by racism, ridiculing of science and ideological warfare, according to a leading scholar in media ethics, Dr Denis Muller (https://www.croakey.org/whether-a-ratings-chase-or-ideological-war-news-corps-coronavirus-coverage-is-dangerous/). At the same time as these concerns were being raised, the Federal Government announced a $10 million grant to New Corp’s Fox Sports, for coverage of women’s, niche and other under-represented sports. The Opposition said this brought taxpayer funding of Fox Sports to $40 million over six years, and flagged concerns about transparency and process. The country’s most trusted media outlet, the ABC, was meanwhile slashing staff, services and programs to offset an $84 million budget shortfall resulting from successive cutbacks by the Coalition Government.
The concentrated nature of corporate media in Australia is not healthy for democracy. The lack of diversity in the mainstream media sector, which also refers to representation in organisational and editorial governance, is also unhealthy for democracy, and disadvantages the sector, the public and the policy process.

Clearly, this is not a media landscape conducive to healthy, accountable democracy and evidence-informed, community-centred policy making.

2.3. 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

Many reports and inquiries, in Australia and more widely, have documented how the migration of advertising online has devastated the business model that once supported public interest journalism in the corporate sector. The focus must move beyond this well-understood history to examine what policy responses can help develop and sustain public interest journalism going forward. We encourage the inquiry to look not only to the recommendations of organisations such as the Judith Neilson Institute for Journalism and Ideas and the Public Interest Journalism Initiative, but more widely to how the European Union and other countries are sustaining public interest journalism.

2.4. The impact of online global platforms such as Facebook, Google and Twitter on the media industry and sharing of news in Australia

We urge this committee to consider not only the impact of these platforms on the media industry but also their wider impact upon the economy and public health.

For example, a recent US House of Representatives inquiry into the market power of Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google outlined potential benefits of systemic reform and regulation of the digital platforms that are important for both public interest journalism and public health. The inquiry found companies were using their dominant market power in ways that weaken democracy; erode diversity, entrepreneurship and innovation; degrade privacy online; and undermine the vibrancy of the free and diverse press. It is important that efforts to regulate digital platform move beyond a siloed approach - to ensure that regulation drives multiple agendas, including a safe, accountable information environment as well as media reform.
We were finalising this submission before the Federal Government released the full details of its mandatory code governing relations between the digital platforms and media publishers. It is imperative that the implementation of this code be transparent and accountable through an open, public review process.

We concur with others that the code alone is not a panacea for the challenges facing public interest journalism.


2.5. The barriers faced by small, independent and community news outlets in Australia

Small, independent and community news outlets face many barriers to operation, including lack of funding and structural support.

The development of a healthy non-profit public interest journalism sector could help many communities have better access to the roles of public interest journalism.

Policies could:

- Enable innovation in the development of new models to better meet the needs of discrete communities, whether these be geographical communities or communities of interest.
- Provide a clear, affordable pathway for the set-up of non-partisan, non-profit journalism models, including access to DGR status.
- Support and fund the development of a voice for the sector through funding for an organisation to advocate for non-profit journalism and to help educate the community, philanthropists and other funders about the sector’s role.

The Aboriginal Community Controlled Health sector offers a useful example for developing new models for journalism that is accountable to communities.
2.6. The role that a newswire service plays in supporting diverse public interest journalism in Australia.

A newswire such as AAP plays a critical role in covering news events that are part of a functioning democracy, such as courts, politics, finance, and other general news rounds. However, many important institutions and topics are beyond the scope of a national newswire - such as local governments. A national wire service in itself does not solve the issue of a lack of diversity in the Australian media. Nor does it address the disconnect between communities' needs and media organisations' imperatives. Its clients are generally media companies, rather than communities. We note that a number of Croakey journalists and editors have previously worked for AAP.

2.7. The state of local, regional and rural media outlets in Australia.

Again, the ACCC and many other reports and inquiries have documented the demise of local, regional and rural media outlets. This is particularly important during times of many crisis. The bushfire season of 2019/20 and COVID-19 have shown that access to locally tailored, reliable information can be literally life-saving. The importance of public interest journalism during times of crisis will become only more important as climate change and associated events such as bushfires and heatwaves become more intense and more frequent. Public and community broadcasters have an essential role during times of crisis, in particular, and this is being undermined by funding cuts. Newspapers and other media in rural, regional communities provide employment for rural, regional communities - the loss of these outlets is devastating for communities in many respects. Limited internet access in rural areas means that some rural individuals/populations rely on local newspapers for their news. Local newspapers help rural communities feel connected and also provide local accountability roles - such as reporting on local services, council and other institutions - that otherwise would not be covered by media. We also acknowledge that many media organisations enact institutional racism and do not always represent the interests of all communities.

2.8. The role of government in supporting a viable and diverse public interest journalism sector in Australia

The American economist and Nobel Laureate Professor Joseph Stiglitz told an Australia Institute webinar on 3 December 2020 (https://youtu.be/hKLCAozlujg), it is impossible to build a robust business model for public interest journalism in the current environment. Instead, he suggested that societies may have to face the reality that the public purse
has to pay for public interest journalism, given its importance for well-functioning democracies, just as basic research is funded. He and others have suggested taxing the digital giants like Google, Facebook and Apple as a way of funding public interest journalism and other services.

Government should provide sufficient funding to public and community broadcasters to ensure their operations can be sustained and developed. This is particularly critical in an environment where we face escalating impacts from the climate crisis. Local knowledge and context are vital in emergency and disaster preparation, planning, response and recovery efforts. For example, see: [https://www.croakey.org/landmark-report-presents-wide-ranging-calls-to-action-on-climate-and-health/](https://www.croakey.org/landmark-report-presents-wide-ranging-calls-to-action-on-climate-and-health/)

As has been previously suggested, governments should also establish funding pools for public interest journalism, drawing on best-practice governance from other fields (for example, research funding allocation). All levels of government should contribute to this funding pool: federal, state/territory and local on the understanding that all communities would benefit from disbursements.

We suggest the following principles to underpin public investment in media organisations:

1. Investment should be driven by communities’ needs with a focus on equity, meaning that those communities who are now most under-served should receive special attention. An equitable process ensures that support is commensurate with need.

2. Investment should support a diverse media landscape but this means more than supporting a variety of models of organisations and ownership. It also means ensuring there is diversity in representation, not only in editorial operations, but also in governance.

3. Institutional racism must be addressed, and an organisation’s cultural safety should be considered as a criteria for funding.

4. Organisations should be non-partisan and have a clear commitment to transparency and journalistic ethics and principles.