

Perspective

# Converging crises: public interest journalism, the pandemic and public health

Melissa A Sweet<sup>a,b,f</sup>, Megan Williams<sup>c</sup>, Ruth Armstrong<sup>a</sup>, Janine Mohamed<sup>d</sup>, Summer May Finlay<sup>e</sup> and Amy Coopes<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Croakey Health Media, Cygnet, Tasmania, Australia

<sup>b</sup> School of Public Health, University of Sydney, NSW, Australia

<sup>c</sup> National Centre for Cultural Competence, University of Sydney, NSW, Australia

<sup>d</sup> Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

<sup>e</sup> School of Health and Society, University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia

<sup>f</sup> Corresponding author: [melissa@croakey.org](mailto:melissa@croakey.org)

## Article history

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## Key points

- The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically heightened a longstanding crisis in public interest journalism, with wide-ranging implications for public health
- The public health sector can help support a sustainable public interest journalism sector by contributing through research, practice, policy and advocacy, and working to develop new models for public interest journalism

## Abstract

Public interest journalism has faced a longstanding funding crisis, cutbacks of staff and resources, and closures of newsrooms. This crisis is a critical public health concern, and it has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the pandemic has highlighted the important roles played by public interest journalism – including in addressing health equity issues. The pandemic has also highlighted the need to address structural weaknesses in the media industry, with concentration of media ownership and underfunding of public broadcasters leading to many communities being under-served and under-represented. The public health sector can make important contributions to developing and sustaining a robust, public interest journalism sector. Public health professionals and organisations can advocate for policy reform to support public interest journalism, and incorporate consideration of public interest journalism into advocacy, education, research and practice.

## Background

In Australia and other countries, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has dramatically heightened a longstanding crisis in public interest journalism.<sup>1</sup> This type of journalism gives people the information they need to take part in the democratic process. It informs and contributes to policy and practice, holds power to account, and amplifies the voices of those who are not well served by the current distribution of power.<sup>2</sup> The migration of advertising to digital platforms such as Facebook and Google has undermined the business model that traditionally supported much public interest journalism in corporate media, while public broadcasters have also been under funding pressure. During the pandemic, the roles of public interest journalism have included investigating the practices of powerful media organisations and others actively involved in disseminating disinformation, misinformation, racism and partisan agendas in relation to COVID-19.<sup>3</sup>

Many newsrooms have closed and shed staff at the same time as demand for news and information has increased. The pandemic has further undermined a media business model already devastated by the global market dominance of digital platforms such as Facebook and Google, and has also been associated with attacks on press freedom and other manifestations of rising authoritarianism.<sup>4,5</sup> The right of communities to have access to reliable news and information is even more important during times of crisis, and journalists play a critical frontline role in providing this information.<sup>6</sup> Access to relevant news and information is particularly important for communities not well served by mainstream media and health organisations.<sup>7</sup>

As has occurred in so many areas across society, the pandemic has exposed longstanding structural weaknesses in the Australian media sector. These include concentration of media ownership, underfunding of public broadcasters and a lack of pluralism and diversity<sup>8</sup>, with many communities under-served and under-represented. There has also been diminished media capacity to provide oversight of policy and abuses of power.<sup>9,10</sup> In recent years, a range of inquiries and reports have documented the decline in public interest journalism capacity, and made recommendations for reform.<sup>11,12</sup> However, policy responses have been inadequate<sup>13</sup>, and the sector itself has been slow to innovate and better meet the needs of communities.

There may, however, be a growing mood for change. In late 2020, more than 500 000 Australians signed a petition established by former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd calling for a Royal Commission to ensure a strong, diverse Australian news media.<sup>14,15</sup> The petition notes the importance of “diverse sources of reliable, accurate and independent news” for democracy, and raises wide-ranging concerns, including the concentration of media ownership, the influence of News Corporation, and the market power of online monopolies.

## Decline of newsrooms

In 2019, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) provided a comprehensive overview of the decline of Australian newsrooms, with particular implications for local news and specialist reporting, such as health coverage.<sup>11</sup> Across Australia, 106 local and regional newspaper titles closed between 2008 and 2018, a 15% decrease in the total number of such publications. As a result, 21 local government areas were left without coverage from a single local newspaper (in either print or online formats), including 16 local government areas in regional Australia.

The ACCC also undertook an analysis of print articles published in all metropolitan and national daily newspapers by the three largest Australian news publisher groups over the past 15 years. The analysis found a significant fall in the number of articles published

covering issues relating to local government, local court, health and science. The reduction was for both the absolute number of articles published in each of these categories and the percentage of total articles published in these categories.

From 2006 to 2016, the number of Australians working in journalism-related occupations fell by 9% overall, and by 26% for traditional print journalists (including those working for print/online media), according to Census data cited by the ACCC. Meanwhile, media companies provided data to the ACCC showing that the number of journalists in traditional print media businesses fell by 20% between 2014 and 2018. This was at a time when Australia’s population and economy were growing strongly, and when it was important for public interest journalism to investigate and report on global crises – such as climate change, the rise of populism and authoritarianism, and geopolitical instability – and their implications for nations and local communities. The pandemic has further exacerbated this crisis, with ongoing newsroom contractions and closures being documented by the Public Interest Journalism Initiative, via the Australian Newsroom Mapping Project.<sup>16</sup>

## Implications for health

The crisis in public interest journalism merits attention from those concerned with addressing health inequities and improving population health more generally. Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated profound social inequities, with poverty, poor access to healthcare and inadequate incomes implicated in the highest rates of infection among disadvantaged communities.<sup>17</sup> During the pandemic, the #BlackLivesMatter campaign has highlighted longstanding concerns about deaths in police and prison custody, and concerns about racial violence in healthcare systems.<sup>18</sup> Public interest journalism has helped bring wider attention to these issues among the public, policy makers and health professionals.

Although a robust public interest journalism sector is rarely named in models outlining the social determinants of health, its significance can clearly be inferred from the 2008 report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health.<sup>19</sup> The report notes that health equity is affected by global economic and social systems, and that action on the social determinants of health must involve the whole of government, civil societies, local communities and business. One of the principles listed as underpinning the Commission’s recommendations is: “tackle the inequitable distribution of power, money and resources”. However, the capacity of public interest journalism to investigate these health equity concerns and other health-related issues, including the climate crisis, was already greatly diminished before the COVID-19 pandemic.

As well as causing journalism job losses and insecurity, the pandemic has contributed to mental health distress and occupational health risks for journalists, who

are also grappling with a tide of disinformation. A global survey of more than 1400 journalists identified political leaders, elected officials, government agencies and their representatives, and State-linked troll networks as top sources of disinformation, together with Facebook and digital platforms.<sup>20</sup> The report suggests that the findings paint “an unsettling picture of burnt-out journalists in the grip of a mental health crisis, who are increasingly living in fear of unemployment ... exposed to great risk by neglectful employers who have failed to provide essential safety equipment ....”

## Public health responses

We urge public health practitioners and organisations to engage with news and developments in public interest journalism because the media both reflects and shapes the health sector, as well as populations’ opportunities for being healthy. The health sector’s engagement with public interest journalism has often focused on issues such as journalistic practices; for example, how journalists cover research, healthcare interventions, public health and communications about health risks. However, the pandemic has created an impetus for public health advocates, researchers, educators, practitioners and organisations to engage with the causes of a weakened public interest journalism sector – its upstream determinants. These include neoliberalism and colonialism, pervasive ideologies that profoundly affect the capacity of journalism to represent the public interest.<sup>21</sup> Not only do these ideologies shape the landscape in which journalists practise, but so often media practices are replicating and perpetuating these worldviews rather than interrogating them. This is particularly important during times when evidence-based policy and science are under sustained attack.<sup>22</sup>

Public interest journalism should be explicitly incorporated as a determinant of health in public health advocacy, research, education and practice. Public health practitioners and organisations can and have advocated for media policy focused on the public interest, and can engage with opportunities for reform through making submissions and using the strategies and tools of public health advocacy. In particular, they could advocate for reforms that better support public broadcasters and independent, community-based media representing diversity.<sup>23</sup> They can also advocate for clear pathways for the establishment of non-profit public interest journalism organisations, including having Deductible Gift Recipient status, enabling them to receive donations which are tax deductible. They can also support recommendations for regulation of digital platforms with objectives that include strengthening the financial and operating environment for public interest journalism.<sup>11,12</sup> A current Senate inquiry into media diversity in Australia offers an important opportunity for advocacy and engagement.<sup>24</sup> Other strategies for

engagement include following and contributing to discussions on Twitter, including through the hashtag #PIJmatters.

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.<sup>25</sup> Public health research could contribute to a better understanding of the impact of Facebook, Google and other digital platforms on the upstream determinants of both health and public interest journalism, including their influence on elections, policy, public opinion and the political economy of health.

Media reform has often focused on the interests of corporate media organisations; bringing a health equity lens to media reform has the potential to be transformative by prioritising the needs of communities and supporting them to engage with media development and reform to ensure it is responsive to their needs. It would mean engaging with Indigenous knowledges and methodologies, and embedding decolonising practices including cultural safety across public interest journalism and the wider media sector.<sup>26,27</sup> The public health sector could work with communities to develop new and innovative models for public interest journalism. The development of pathways to support non-profit public interest journalism organisations would help to enable and support such innovation.

The public health sector is already demonstrating its instrumental role in innovation in public interest journalism and its organisations and practitioners. One example is Croakey Health Media, a non-profit health charity that provides public interest journalism services and is funded in part by a consortium of public health organisations.<sup>2</sup> The authors of this paper contributed to its establishment. Public health practitioners are valued members of Croakey Health Media’s social journalism team and governance structure. In addition to its existing activities, Croakey Health Media has proposed a model for embedding public interest journalism in research projects as an independent discipline.<sup>28</sup> Under this model, public interest journalism would be produced as part of research projects, with an editorially independent governance process. This model aims to develop new knowledge about the theory and practice of research translation and journalism, as well as supporting the production of significant, editorially independent works of journalism on matters of public interest relating to research context, questions and outcomes. Health and medical journals are also well placed to support public interest journalism, through their roles in research translation and conveying research results, as well as through funding and

publishing public interest journalism that spans all the spheres that influence health, including politics.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

Times of radical disruption, such as that now being experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, bring threats and opportunities. On one hand, the pandemic has further weakened an already struggling public interest journalism sector, in Australia and globally. However, COVID-19 is focusing unprecedented public and policy attention on the importance of public interest journalism, as well as on the critical determinants of health and health equity, creating imperatives for cross-sectoral reform and innovation. For the sake of the community's health, the public health sector has a responsibility to engage with reforms and innovation to ensure the public interest journalism sector is strengthened at this critical time for health.

## Peer review and provenance

Externally peer reviewed, invited.

## Competing interests

MS works as a public health journalist and is a founding member, director and managing editor of Croakey Health Media, a non-profit public interest journalism organisation. MW is a founding member and director of Croakey Health Media and a contributing editor. RA is a founding member of Croakey Health Media and an editor. JM is founding chair of Croakey Health Media. SMF is a founding member of Croakey Health Media, and a contributing editor. AC is a founding member and an editor of Croakey Health Media. All have a professional interest in the issues covered by the article.

## Author contributions

MS was responsible for the conceptual design, research, drafting, coordination, review and editing of the manuscript. MW and RA contributed to the conceptual design, reviewing and editing of the manuscript. JM contributed to the conceptual design and reviewed the manuscript. SMF and AC reviewed the manuscript.

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