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11 December 2020

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

Email: ec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary,

Re: Inquiry into media diversity in Australia

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (the Academy) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Senate Environment and Communications References Committees inquiry into *Media diversity in Australia*.

The Academy is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that draws on the expertise of over 700 elected Fellows to provide practical, evidence-based advice to governments, businesses, and the community on important social policy issues.

The Academy strongly supports this inquiry into the state of media diversity, independence and reliability in Australia and the impact that this has on public interest journalism and democracy. The inquiry relates directly to the Academy's strategic priority of supporting and enhancing independence and balance in reporting and communication of research.¹

We note there have been several recent inquiries covering similar themes identified in the Terms of Reference including the *Future of Public Interest Journalism* (2017). The Academy suggests the current inquiry builds on this substantial body of past work and provides practical directions to address the issues raised.

The importance of media diversity in Australia

The Australian public places significant value on good quality journalism, and the majority of Australians consider independent journalism to be very or extremely important for society to function properly.^{2,3} Australians particularly value public interest journalism during times of crisis;⁴ exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic where high-quality factual reporting of the health, social and economic impacts and implications became a staple part of mainstream coverage across print and broadcast media.

¹ Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, [Strategic Plan 2019-22](#)

² University of Canberra, [Digital News Report: Australia 2020](#)

³ Public Interest Journalism Initiative, [Community Value of Public Interest Journalism, October 2020](#)

⁴ Public Interest Journalism Initiative, [Community Value of Public Interest Journalism, October 2020](#)

Diversity of media interests is also critical to ensuring the mainstream representation of diverse voices and perspectives in public discourse and debate.

Reports and inquiries over the past decades have consistently found that diversity of media, and in particular the presence of small, independent outlets, is related to increases in both employment opportunities and representation of Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse communities. While content regulations offer no quotas or requirement regarding diversity, charters and policies at ABC and SBS that ensure such culturally and linguistically diverse content is commissioned and appears on Australian screens and radio.

Media diversity in Australia has declined

Despite the importance of media diversity, a landmark study in 2016 found Australia has an unusually high concentrated media ownership compared to other liberal democracies, particularly in traditional media ownership, which has been getting steadily more concentrated over time.^{5,6} It also found Australia had the most concentrated newspaper industry of all countries studied with the exception of China and Egypt. The Academy is unaware of any similar comparative studies that have been undertaken since 2016.

However, data from the PIJI Australian Newsroom Mapping Project identified a net reduction in Australian newsrooms and news services of 136 between January 2019 and December 2020.⁷ This reflects decreases in broadcast services, newsroom or masthead/station closures, mergers and end of print editions. The findings indicate media diversity is continuing to decline. Highly concentrated media ownership can reduce the diversity of opinions which have a chance to be aired in public and, in the worst cases, can make it less likely that representative views on public interest news stories will be published or broadcast.

Fewer owners and services have led to fewer jobs a significant loss in journalistic capacity in Australia. As many as 3,000 journalism jobs are estimated to have been lost in the decade to 2018,⁸ and further significant cuts have been reported due to the financial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.^{9 10} Sustainable media diversity requires a viable workforce.

The reduction in diversity coincides with a decline in public trust in traditional and digital media over the past five years, attributed to increasing concern about false information or 'fake news' and doubts about media outlets' intentions.^{11,12}

The near closure of the AAP and its newswire and fact-checking service in early 2020 prior to its acquisition and new management arrangements in June highlighted the value of such specialised media services in a balanced and diverse media ecosystem.

⁵ The Conversation: FactCheck: is Australia's level of media ownership concentration one of the highest in the world?

⁶ [Who Owns the World's Media?](#)

⁷ Public Interest Journalism Initiative: [The Australian Newsroom Mapping Project](#) [Accessed 9 December 2020]

⁸ The Conversation: [New research reveals how Australian journalists are faring four years after redundancy](#)

⁹ Australian Financial Review: [Hundreds more jobs to go at News Corp, ABC](#)

¹⁰ The Guardian: [News Corp Australia cuts more jobs at end of brutal year for media](#)

¹¹ Ipsos: [Trust in the Media, 2019](#)

¹² Edelman, [2020 Edelman Trust Barometer](#)

Supporting a viable and diverse public interest journalism sector in Australia

Given the importance of viable and diverse public interest journalism to public understanding and discourse on all aspects of our society – in health, community, business, economics and our democratic political system – there is a strong case for public policies and funding aimed at safeguarding and enhancing the diversity of media services, perspectives and representation in Australia.

Several studies indicate that a significant proportion of Australians would be willing to pay more through taxes to support this need.¹³ The Academy also notes previous proposals for favourable tax treatment for producers of public interest journalism, which present clear avenues for further investigation.¹⁴

The Academy recommends accordingly that the Committee provide its support for the development and implementation of policy measures that efficiently direct resources to enhance media diversity and public interest journalism in Australia.

The Academy and its Fellows would welcome the opportunity to discuss any of the matters raised in this submission. Please contact Andi Horsburgh, Policy Manager on 0466 123 178, or andrea.horsburgh@socialsciences.org.au

Yours sincerely,



Professor Jane Hall FASSA FAHMS
President

¹³ Professor Glenn Withers: [Journalism's New Normal](#)

¹⁴The Centre for International Economics: [Tax concessions for Public Interest Journalism](#)