

SUBMISSION ON THE PROPOSED NEWS BARGAINING INCENTIVE REVENUE DISTRIBUTION SCHEME

This is a personal submission by Alan Sunderland. It represents my views and **not** the views of any organisation I once was or am currently associated with.

In the interests of full disclosure, those relevant organisations are:

- Australian Press Council (I am a current Independent Journalist Member)
- Walkley Foundation (I am a former member of the Public Fund Committee Member)
- Local and Independent News Association (I am a former board member)
- ABC Alumni (I am a former board member)
- ABC (I am a former Editorial Director)

Responses to questions in the consultation paper:

Q1: Do you have any concerns with the proposed registration and application process?

Q3: Is the proposed eligibility criteria fit-for-purpose in ensuring that the scheme supports continued investment in public interest news, diversity of media voices, and quality journalism?

The existing ACMA register of eligible news organisations currently requires a minimum annual revenue of \$150,000 a year. This commercial requirement already excludes a number of small, independent news organisations that have sprung up around the country in the last decade due to the closure, networking or gutting of many local and regional newspapers. In response to these news deserts, locally-based journalists, former journalists and community journalists (who are operating ethically and bound by a [solid editorial code](#)) have filled the gap in providing trusted, relevant local news. Many of these start-ups operate on a shoestring budget, and a significant proportion of them would be unable to demonstrate regular annual revenue of more than \$150,000. This limit should be abolished or substantially lowered in order to acknowledge the existence of these vital sources of trusted news for the community, and to enable them to participate in the scheme.

The 'professional standards' requirement is also, in my view, too loose and informal. A number of news organisations pay little more than lip service to this requirement. Some newspaper groups, for example, have departed from or declined to participate in the Australian Press Council, and in its place have either set up no meaningful standards of their own or created ones that lack independence, transparency and rigour. More work needs to be done to ensure that this requirement - which is fundamental to public trust - is strengthened and made more meaningful.

I have a final concern about the language used in defining a 'news source':

- a newspaper masthead
- a magazine
- a television program or channel
- a radio program or channel
- a website or part of a website
- a program of audio or video content designed to be distributed over the internet.

Many small, local, independent news sources rely on other means of digital distribution than a website for their text-based news service. For example, some outlets rely heavily on newsletters, email-based distribution, Facebook pages, etc... For the sake of clarity, any confusion around this could be cleared up by changing the last point in that list in the following manner:

'A program of news content designed to be distributed digitally'

Q5: Is FTE journalists a good approximation for investment in news and journalism, and an appropriate basis for determining payments to the sector?

I support in principle the notion of connecting payments with the number of FTE journalists employed, but there is a specific issue in relation to small, independent news organisations that may rely on a mix of paid and unpaid journalists.

Volunteer journalism is a vital part of community-based news delivery models across Australia, and in many cases it is the only way in which news can be viably produced. If funding becomes available to support more and better public interest journalism, a model needs to be developed which does not disadvantage news organisations that rely on at least some volunteer or unpaid journalism.

Q8: Are the above weighting categories an appropriate and effective means of accounting for the economies of scale and resourcing differences across the sector; and meeting the objectives of the Statutory Payment Scheme?

I generally support these weighting categories, but I would invite the Minister and the Department to consider how support for small, local, independent news outlets that might be suburban rather than regional or remote might be incorporated in the weightings.

This sector represents a significant and important growing part of the news landscape in Australia, as commercially produced local papers increasingly become token efforts filled with real estate advertising and little local news. It became apparent during covid that there was a need for relevant, reliable and independent local news in the suburbs of large cities as well as in regional areas, and the news sources that grew up to meet this need are equally deserving of consideration in the weighting process.

FINAL COMMENT: As far as I can see, it is not explicitly mentioned anywhere in the consultation paper that eligibility under the scheme would only be for news sources that have NOT already negotiated a deal directly with the digital companies. I assume this is the case, but of course if it is not, it should be.

Alan Sunderland
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