



**JOURNALISM EDUCATION
& RESEARCH ASSOCIATION
OF AUSTRALIA**

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Submission to the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional
Development, Communication and the Arts on the News Bargaining Incentive
Revenue Distribution—Statutory Payment Scheme - consultation

<https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/department/media/publications/consultation-paper-news-bargaining-incentive-revenue-distribution-statutory-payment-scheme>

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The Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia Incorporated (JERAA) is the peak body of Australian journalism educators and researchers from tertiary education and industry organisations and includes representatives from New Zealand. JERAA's primary aim is to raise the standard of teaching of journalism and to foster excellence and integrity in current and future generations of journalism practitioners. JERAA also supports research, knowing that good research seeks out new information, identifies issues and resolves problems for the benefit of the news media industry specifically and society more broadly. JERAA advocates for and celebrates excellence in journalism and in journalism education. JERAA provides annual awards and grants for journalism researchers and journalism students.

This submission has been written on behalf of JERAA's executive by the authors listed above and informed by members of the JERAA executive.

This submission concerns the government's draft legislation to introduce a News Bargaining Incentive as part of reforms to the current News Media Bargaining Code legislation which aimed to address the market imbalance between news publishers and digital platforms so as to protect

the provision of quality public interest journalism in the Australian marketplace. JERAA believes that the government has rightly identified the danger of digital platforms withdrawing from the process by claiming not to carry news; this can never be truly achieved as the information created by journalists permeates the information ecosystem repurposed into a myriad of forms. Therefore the legislation is right to be applied to “significant social media or search services, irrespective of whether they carry news content”.

Such a holistic approach also aligns with the current reality of information disorder which has been recognised as a clear and urgent danger by the UN and ‘the biggest short term risk’ by the World Economic Forum (The Parliamentary Library of Australia, 2026, p. 7). This approach recognises the importance of safeguarding the provision of quality journalism as necessary for the health of the entire information ecosystem. Leading political economists from around the globe, including two Nobel prize winning economists, have joined forces to highlight the political and economic imperative underpinning the need to safeguard public interest media in this ecosystem (Acemoğlu, et.al., 2025).

The distribution of the NBI is relevant to JERAA’s mission of fostering excellence in future practitioners as that excellence can not be achieved in an industry in crisis.

Overview

As journalism educators and researchers we are responsible for preparing the next generation of journalists around the nation. We aim to prepare graduates who know how to produce quality journalism across a range of media forms in all parts of the news media. As such the responses here should be read with the understanding that they are informed by a wish to foster the best possible opportunities for our graduates, so they can move into an industry allowing them to practise the best version of their profession in organisations large or small, city or country, in a newsroom or freelance. In preparing our students for the difficult transition to the workforce it is important to stay abreast of the latest industry developments and this response is informed by that research. This response is further informed by an understanding of the urgent need to future-proof the profession through strengthening access and engagement to news and cementing the important role of original, quality journalism in civil society.

This consultation comes at a point where the news industry has been struggling for many years with the term ‘crisis’. Quality newsrooms are needed to usher in the next generation of quality journalists. Yet the twin impact of digital platform disruption and COVID-19 showed us the fragility of the industry. Overseas, profit and job losses in key bastions of the profession have led to claims we are witnessing a “mass media extinction event”, in Australia the collapse of advertising revenue continues, as do resultant job losses (Saeed, 2024). As opportunities for training in newsrooms dwindle it is still not clear what business models can support the next generation of professionals producing quality public interest journalism. What is clear is the urgency of this support.

In our response to the questions posed we have focused on those questions where we have most knowledge and experience. All answers should be understood in light of attempts to strengthen

Australia's information ecosystem and journalism industry. Detailed explanations - which have also been included in our submission to the NBI and NMBC legislation amendments consultation to treasury, are below, but in short our key responses to the consultation are:

Eligibility Q1 and 3.

We strongly recommend removing the \$150,000 revenue requirement. This is a change that we are also suggesting for the NMBC legislation. The revenue requirement does not recognise the actually existing nature of much public interest journalism in Australia, with this journalism carried out by multiple small news organisations and is thus counterproductive in terms of a government intervention to grow and broaden the ecosystem of public interest journalism. The revenue eligibility criteria is not fit-for-purpose in ensuring that the scheme supports continued investment in public interest news, diversity of media voices, and quality journalism.

Payment Allocation Formula Q5.

We are in favour of the FTE allocation formula however we urge consideration of internships. We would suggest that hosting **formal internships which are organised for credit with journalism programs** be included in masthead employment numbers. This could be allocated as a 0.25 employee so if four interns were hosted over the year this equals 1 FTE. However, if it were a paid internship this should count as 0.5 so as to recognise the extra equity provided by paid interns and the diversity benefits this brings to the sector.

We also urge that payments are linked to mastheads and not corporations (see below).

Weightings Q8 and 9.

We are in favour of weightings for the identified categories as this will support sustainability and diversity in the sector. However, so as to properly reward good faith actors, regional payments for weightings must ensure that they are not supporting zombie papers (Media Watch, 2024). News organisations must guarantee that the news journalist is spending the majority of their time producing core news for a specific masthead. So as not to impose onerous reporting requirements on organisations this can be something which is spot-audited by the department - perhaps as an addition to its News Mapping program.

What follows is detailed rationale for our answers rooted in our research and practice as journalism educators.

These key issues and recommendations have also been submitted to the Treasury.

Supporting diversity and localism

We recognise that the NBI would operate as a distinct policy mechanism from existing government initiatives such as the News Media Assistance Program (News MAP). However,

there is a clear opportunity to better align these complementary policy frameworks to ensure they collectively achieve their intended outcomes. The recommendations in this section reflect the rapidly evolving media landscape and acknowledge the diverse ways in which the production of core news is now supported. Any funds raised through an NBI levy should be directed in a manner that strengthens emerging areas of public-interest journalism, while also advancing key government priorities, including media diversity and localism. In this context, Treasury's approach to disbursement should be coordinated with, and informed by, the ongoing work of ACMA under News MAP. Addressing a system-wide crisis in news production requires a holistic policy response; isolated interventions targeting only one part of the ecosystem will be insufficient to drive meaningful or sustained change.

A second critical issue is the risk of applying a one-size-fits-all model for distributing funds, particularly where allocations are tied primarily to journalist headcount. Such an approach risks entrenching existing advantages held by large, established media organisations and may inadvertently exacerbate the decline in media diversity. Current evidence demonstrates substantial gaps in local news provision, with more than 5% of Local Government Areas lacking any local news outlet and many others significantly underserved (PIJI, 2023). To address these inequities, policy settings must prioritise support for regional, independent, and smaller publishers that serve communities with limited or no access to local journalism. As such, JERAA's recommendations are directed toward meeting policy priorities to achieve a healthier, more diverse media ecosystem.

“The Australian legislation considers whether a digital platform ‘has made a significant contribution to the sustainability of the Australian news industry’ (Treasury Act, 2021), whereas in contrast the Canadian Act specifically notes that the CTRC should account for whether deals in the open market have ‘diversity with respect to language, racialized groups, Indigenous communities, local news and business models’ and ‘ensure a significant portion of independent local news businesses benefit’ before considering arbitration (Act C-18, 2022). Table 2 provides an overview of differences in regulatory approach in Australia and Canada, highlighting how the former has taken a market approach to commercial news media sustainability, while the latter is gearing towards the ongoing viability of public interest journalism within a commercial marketplace” (Flew, et al., 2024).

Key Issue 1.1: Link payment to policy priorities

The ACMA is currently undertaking a substantial program of work through its News MAP project to better understand and support Australia's news media ecosystem. The insights generated through this research should inform the prioritisation of NBI fund disbursement, with priorities reviewed and updated periodically to reflect emerging needs and gaps in the market. A defined portion of NBI funding should be directed toward organisations that demonstrably address current policy priorities. This includes, for example, mastheads that strengthen public-interest journalism through expanded council and court reporting; local start-ups serving underserved or regional communities; and organisations that invest in diversity and inclusion through targeted internships and cadetships for people from marginalised groups. We recommend that 25 per cent of all funds collected through the NBI be allocated on this basis, with distribution tied to clear evidence of contribution to identified policy priorities.

Key Issue 1.2: Growing and broadening the ecosystem of quality news

The NBI disbursement framework should explicitly recognise the current challenges within the information landscape, particularly in regional and suburban Australia. In these areas, large media companies increasingly operate so-called “ghost” or “zombie” mastheads—publications that lack local staff, reporters, or functioning newsrooms (Media Watch, 2024). Such outlets weaken the information ecosystem by undermining audience confidence, as they “threaten to complicate audiences’ perceptions of news credibility and trust” (Assmann, 2023).

In light of this, we recommend that any payments linked to journalism workforce numbers be allocated at the level of individual mastheads rather than parent organisations. This approach would more accurately reflect the production of genuine local journalism and discourage the maintenance of nominal or inactive publications. We also recommend targeted support for hyper-local news organisations led by professional journalists. These outlets play a critical role in sustaining public interest journalism, particularly in under-served communities.

Any funding distributed on the basis of journalist numbers should be explicitly tied to journalists employed by individual mastheads rather than aggregated at the organisational level. While the funds themselves may be allocated to a parent company for administrative purposes, this requirement can still be effectively implemented through straightforward reporting mechanisms that attribute staffing to specific titles. It is important to emphasise the need for simplicity in these processes. News organisations, particularly in the current media environment, are already operating under significant resource constraints, and any additional compliance requirements must avoid imposing unnecessary administrative burden.

At the same time, the withdrawal of larger media companies from regional markets has created an opportunity for smaller, locally focused news operations to emerge. Many of these new entrants are driven by a strong commitment to producing high-quality public interest journalism tailored to their communities. These independent mastheads play a critical role in filling information gaps left by larger organisations, and policy frameworks should actively support their growth and long-term sustainability.

Drawing on our experience as journalism educators working closely with these emerging news businesses, we recommend that internship programs be formally recognised as part of overall journalism staffing numbers. Recognising internships in this way would not only acknowledge their contribution to newsroom output, but also incentivise organisations to invest in future talent pipelines. If internships were included as part of a FTE count this could incentivise organisations to pay for intern placements. Non-paid internships are one of the biggest obstacles for students from diverse backgrounds or from lower SOE backgrounds wishing to become journalists.

Well-structured and properly supported student internship programs, especially those overseen by journalism schools, offer a relatively low-risk pathway for startup and small news organisations to expand their reporting capacity without directly impacting revenue. However, these programs still demand significant time and effort from editors, who are responsible for mentoring and training early-career journalists in the fundamentals of quality reporting. By

enabling the production of additional public interest journalism, internships deliver clear public value. Accordingly, incorporating intern numbers into funding or incentive schemes would help reward this investment, while also contributing to greater financial stability for participating news organisations and, ultimately, supporting pathways to sustainable employment.

Summary of recommendations in this section

- 1) 25% of any funds collected by the NBI be distributed to mastheads based on their ability to address current policy priorities
- 2) payments based on journalism numbers should be linked directly to mastheads and not to parent organisations.
- 3) that formal internships which are organised for credit with journalism programs be included in masthead employment numbers.

Robust Transparency Requirements for Platforms and Funding Recipients

The News Bargaining Incentive (NBI) should incorporate robust transparency provisions to address the structural imbalance created by platforms' infrastructural power over news distribution. Search engines and social media platforms possess unprecedented access to user data and attention, which enables them to shape the terms of engagement with news publishers and, at times, resist regulation through tactics such as threats or service bans (Heylen, 2024, p. 7287). Moreover, when platforms offer “free” access to software, analytics tools, or content management infrastructure, news organisations can become locked into asymmetrical dependencies that deepen platform power by embedding essential operational functions within proprietary systems. In this context, opaque financial and in-kind agreements risk reinforcing asymmetries of power and obscuring the true value exchange between platforms and media organisations. Strong transparency requirements would mitigate these dynamics by ensuring that regulators and the public can scrutinise how platform power is exercised and monetised in news ecosystems.

Key Issue 2.1: Transparency of Deals

The experience of the Australian News Media Bargaining Code (NMBC) demonstrates the consequences of insufficient transparency. Deals between platforms and publishers have largely been treated as commercial-in-confidence, despite being shaped by significant government intervention to secure value transfer (Flew et al., 2024, p. 2736). This lack of disclosure has led to widespread uncertainty about the actual monetary and non-monetary value of agreements, undermining accountability and limiting evidence-based policy evaluation. The NBI should therefore mandate full disclosure of both financial payments and in-kind contributions—such as data access, product integration, or preferential algorithmic treatment—to provide a comprehensive understanding of how value is distributed across the sector.

Key Issue 2.2: Transparency for News Organisations

Stakeholders have already identified transparency as a critical deficiency in existing frameworks. The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) criticised the 2022 review process for failing to compel platforms and media companies to share key data, describing the absence of requirements on how funds are used as a “serious deficiency” (Neilson & Heylen, 2023, p. 116).

This critique highlights the need for the NBI not only to require disclosure of deal terms but also to track how funds are allocated within news organisations. Transparency provisions should therefore extend to reporting obligations on expenditure, ensuring that funds contribute to public interest journalism rather than being absorbed into general corporate revenues without scrutiny.

Comparative policy models further reinforce the case for strong transparency mechanisms. Canada's Online News Act (Act C-18) requires annual reporting on the total commercial value of agreements, their distribution, and their impact on news production, providing a clear template for accountability (Flew et al., 2024, p. 2736). The NBI should adopt similar or stronger measures, including independent audits and public reporting on outcomes such as employment levels, diversity in newsrooms, and coverage of underserved communities. By linking transparency not only to financial flows but also to measurable social benefits, the NBI can ensure that platform–publisher agreements deliver demonstrable public value and align with broader democratic objectives.

Summary of recommendations in this section

- 1) The NBI should mandate full public disclosure of all financial and in-kind agreements between platforms and news organisations, including payments, data access, software provision, and algorithmic advantages. Disclosures should be in a standardised form that is accessible to the public.
- 2) News organisations receiving NBI-related funding or entering platform agreements should be obligated to disclose how funds are spent, with clear reporting on investments in public interest journalism.
- 3) The NBI should establish clear public reporting and periodic auditing requirements that assess both financial flows and measurable social outcomes, including employment levels, diversity, and coverage of underserved communities.

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