

Submission

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts

Inquiry into Australia's regional newspapers

from Croakey Health Media

4 February, 2022

CROAKEY HEALTH MEDIA

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1. Overview of Croakey Health Media

Croakey Health Media is an innovative non-profit public interest journalism organisation with a focus on public health, health equity, and the social determinants of health. We focus on communities and health issues that are under-served by mainstream media and policy, including rural, regional and remote communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people provide leadership for our work, including through our governance. Our board is chaired by a leading Aboriginal health academic, Professor Megan Williams, who is Wiradjuri through paternal family and Head of Girra Maa, the Indigenous Health Discipline in the School of Public Health, Faculty of Health at UTS. Details on our board members can be seen [here](#).

Croakey Health Media's membership is based on our social journalism team, a multi-disciplinary network of journalism and health practitioners located across Australia. The members of our social journalism team can be seen [here](#), and include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous members. Croakey Health Media is a national organisation, headquartered in regional Tasmania and is a registered health charity.

We provide a range of social journalism and professional services to 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, and bring a health-in-all-policies lens to our reporting. This is particularly relevant for regional communities, whose health outcomes are disadvantaged by inequitable access to timely, effective healthcare as well as by wide-ranging social determinants of health such as social and economic inequities and, as this inquiry is highlighting, lack of access to the essential service of public interest journalism. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in regional, rural and remote communities, the ongoing impacts of colonisation and systemic racism are powerful structural determinants of health. However, the cultural determinants of health, including connection to Country, culture and kinship networks, are powerfully protective of health for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in regional, rural and remote communities.

Croakey Health Media's public interest journalism activities are supported by a blended funding model, including sponsorship, donations, subscriptions, the provision of professional services, advertising, and paid journalism activities, including the [Croakey Conference News Service](#). Our funders and supporters include rural and regional health

organisations and academics, and many of our readers and social media followers live in rural, regional and remote areas. Several members of our social journalism team are based in regional locations, and many of our members and directors have close personal and professional connections to regional communities.

As an organisation, one of our [five strategic priorities](#) is to create a sustainable environment for public interest journalism, acknowledging its importance for contributing to [our 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”. As an organisation, we advocate for policy reform to support a sustainable public interest journalism sector, through making submissions to inquiries like this, and through journal and book publications, research, and presentations to conferences. We are also proactive in engaging with other public interest journalism publishers and organisations to help build momentum for better policy. We work to increase public awareness of the challenges facing public interest journalism and its important roles for the health of communities, policies and democracy. Journalistically, we cover public interest journalism as a critical determinant of health.

See our archives on journalism as a determinant of health:

<https://www.croakey.org/category/public-health-and-population-health/public-interest-journalism/>

Included in this archive is a report on submissions to this inquiry into regional newspapers:

<https://www.croakey.org/the-crisis-in-regional-journalism-why-its-a-big-health-concern-and-some-suggested-solutions/>

See our archives on rural, regional and remote health issues:

<https://www.croakey.org/category/healthcare-and-health-reform/rural-and-remote-health/>

See our submissions to various inquiries on media policy and related:

<https://www.croakey.org/about-croakey-health-media/croakey-submissions/>

See a selection of our academic publications and presentations:

Sweet MA, Williams M, Armstrong R, Mohamed J, Finlay SM, Coopes A. Converging crises: public interest journalism, the pandemic and public health. *Public Health Res Pract.* 2020;30(4):e3042029.

<https://www.phrp.com.au/issues/december-2020-volume-30-issue-4/crisis-in-public-interest-journalism/>

[This article](#) is based upon a presentation to the [Preventive Health Conference 2021](#), which was prepared by Dr Melissa Sweet, Dr Summer May Finlay and Professor Megan Williams, with input from other members of Croakey Health Media.

Croakey Health Media is highlighted as a case study in this report: Public Interest Journalism Initiative, 2021. Understanding the role that philanthropy can play in supporting public interest journalism and how to enable it. Access link to the report at this story:

<https://www.croakey.org/philanthropic-support-for-public-interest-journalism-what-are-the-roadblocks/>

We would like to thank the Committee and the Secretariat for granting a short extension to the deadline to enable Croakey Health Media to contribute this submission. Like many organisations working in the health sector, we have a disrupted workforce and constrained capacity due to COVID. Like others who have made submissions we would like to put on the record our concern that the short timeframe for this inquiry has not enabled time for many interested parties to provide input. In particular, the health sector has relevant expertise to provide to this inquiry, especially considering the context of the COVID pandemic and the importance of reliable information at a time when misinformation and disinformation are prolonging the pandemic. Many health organisations and experts with a concern for the health and wellbeing of regional communities have not been able to make submissions to this inquiry due to this short timeline.

2. Introductory statement

Many previous inquiries and reports have documented that public interest journalism is an under-served public good in Australia. This is due to market failure arising from structural change over recent decades that has undermined the business model that once underpinned corporate media. Public broadcasters like the ABC have also suffered from successive funding cuts. The sector itself has also been slow to adapt to changed circumstances and new opportunities and to become more representative of the diverse communities it serves. Regional, rural and remote communities have been particularly hard hit by the changes, as many local newsrooms have contracted, closed or been replaced by syndicated services – what some submissions to this inquiry have termed as “zombie local newspapers”.

The implications for the health and wellbeing of rural, regional and remote communities are profound. This is especially so in a time of public health crisis where public interest journalism has important roles in countering the spread of misinformation and disinformation, providing a platform for local communities to highlight both their needs and solutions, and also as a mechanism for accountability for decision-makers at all levels of government and service provision.

These roles will only become more important as the impacts of climate change upon regional communities become more pressing, including through restructuring of local economies, heatwaves, flooding, bushfires and other extreme weather events. All of these climate-related impacts have wide-ranging consequences for the health and wellbeing of communities, as well as for health service delivery. Croakey Health Media member Alison Barrett states that rural/regional media are critically important during and after public health crises: “For example, The Stock Journal is publishing a series of stories about recoveries and rebuild from the Kangaroo Island bushfires 2019-2020, highlighting that many are only just getting back on their feet, and that for some, the recovery and rebuild is still continuing (recent rain has destroyed some of the new fences rebuilt after the fires) and will be for a while to come. I think it’s important to share stories such as these, and rural/regional/local media outlets are best placed to do it. [This story](#) is about my cousin and her family’s recovery.”

It is in this context that we place on the record our serious concern about the limited scope of this inquiry’s terms of reference: “the provision of newspapers (print and digital) in regional and remote Australia”. It is not helpful to take this siloed approach to examining the provision of public interest journalism to regional communities. Instead,

in this multi-media, multi-platformed era, it is far more useful to consider public interest journalism as an ecosystem – operating across multiple, interconnected platforms and contexts. It would be far more useful to examine how the needs of rural, regional and remote communities for public interest journalism are currently being met, gaps in this provision, and strategies for supporting efforts to ensure more equitable and innovative provision of public interest journalism services to these communities.

Considering the status of regional newspapers in isolation from wider media ecosystems excludes, for example, the important role that many First Nations media organisations play in local communities and economies, both as employers, and as an essential service in meeting communities' needs for reliable, culturally appropriate news and information, as demonstrated by [this study](#) (Stuchbery, C., Gosper, B., Dodd, A., Huebner, S., Ormond- Parker, L., Buller B., (2022) Above and Beyond Broadcasting: A study of first nations media and the COVID-19 pandemic. First Nations Media Australia, Alice Springs, Australia). As previously [reported by Croakey](#), the First Nations media sector produces economic benefits, including employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote, regional and urban locations to undertake meaningful work in a culturally safe environment.

The narrow terms of reference also excludes consideration of the important role that ABC and SBS/NITV play in providing a vital services to regional, rural and remote communities. It also excludes the role of public interest publishers, such as The Conversation and Croakey Health Media, that contribute significantly to investigation and discussion of regional issues by regional contributors and authors.

3. Terms of reference

3.1. The impact of decisions in a number of markets in regional and remote Australia by large publishers such as News Corp and Australian Community Media to suspend publication of print editions.

Croakey notes that many inquiries and reports, by the Parliament, researchers and organisations such as the Public Interest Journalism Initiative, have previously examined the impact of these decisions on communities' access to local news. To these findings, we add the following observations:

- This is another example of market failure to provide an essential public good. Policy innovation is needed to help address this market failure through supporting existing and innovative new models for public interest journalism that are focused on meeting communities' needs, rather than the returns to the owners and shareholders of large, corporate media organisations.
- Regional, rural and remote communities would benefit from a more diverse media ecosystem that also includes diverse business models. The experience in the United States and many European countries is that not-for-profit public interest journalism organisations provide an important public service and often meet market gaps.

3.2. The extent to which there has been entry into these or other markets by new operators, particularly small businesses

- Submissions to this inquiry identify a number of new operators in regional markets, and the immense financial challenges they face. Many express concerns that so much of Government policy has benefitted big, corporate media organisations, such as News Corp, rather than smaller, community-based organisations whose primary motivation is service-provision rather than returns to shareholders.
- Some submissions from under-served communities, such as Alice Springs, have indicated an interest in establishing not-for-profit models. However, Croakey Health Media's experience is that there is not a clear, equitable, transparent pathway for setting up as a non profit public interest journalism organisation. For example, we had to register as a health charity, and have to been unable to obtain Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR status), although this would greatly help our precarious financial situation.

As we noted in our February 2020 submission to the ACCC:

“... we are concerned that the ACCC’s preliminary report has omitted any significant consideration of the potential for supporting the development of non-profit journalism models. Our experience with Croakey Health Media is that the current policy environment is not supportive of such models, despite their potential to contribute significantly to the public interest and to compensate for market failure in the provision of public interest journalism services. We encourage the inquiry to engage with the literature around non-profit journalism and how it is supported in other countries. See, for example, Dr Bill Birnbauer’s [recent book](#), ‘The rise of nonprofit investigative journalism in the United States’. Clearly defined, low-cost pathways are needed to enable the development of innovative non-profit models for journalism in Australia, supported by measures such as enabling access to Deductible Gift Recipient status, and providing incentives for philanthropists, communities and others to support non-profit models of public interest journalism and to engage with the development of new models of public interest journalism.”

3.3. The impact of the News Media Bargaining Code for regional and remote newspapers

Despite our limited resources, Croakey Health Media seeks to contribute to media policy development. We have made [submissions](#) to many related inquiries and have also sought to participate in the News Media Bargaining Code, despite reservations about this process and the underpinning policy.

We are listed on the ACMA register as an eligible business under the Code; however, we do not expect it will result in any revenue. On 21 December 2021, Meta (Facebook) executives directly advised us they would not enter into a contract with us under the Code. Google has not officially replied to our correspondence, but we have heard indirectly that they do not intend to enter into a deal with us.

We share concerns raised by many others – including researchers and the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance – about the lack of transparency around the initiative’s outcomes, including whether the deals will be used to fund journalism. We note that similar concerns have also been raised in recent reports, including by the [Reuters Institute](#) and the [Columbia Journalism Review](#)). Serious issues around conflict of interest and related public interest concerns are raised in this 2021 Croakey article, [Media deals behind closed doors: public interest or private benefit?](#)

Our June 2020 [submission](#) to the Code's development argued that it should be based upon the principles of equity, diversity, transparency and accountability. This has not been the outcome. Our experience with the Code – that it is an untransparent, inequitable process that is most likely to result in extra income for big media companies rather than independent and community-based organisations – was also observed in our experience as a recipient of a Public Interest News Gathering (PING) grant, which we used to fund an investigation of a regional health justice issue. The grant application process made clear that the funding allocation was on the basis of an organisation's revenue and number of journalists employed rather than the public interest merit of the journalism project pitched. The grants process and the Code were not designed to support innovative, not for profit models such as ours – or to encourage innovation and support other start up models.

Future policy development should be based around the needs of communities rather than the interests of corporate media organisations and should draw upon the many useful policy recommendations from previous inquiries, including:

- An ongoing grants program for public interest journalism, including a specific focus on areas of market failure (whether geographic or other communities, or issues-based). As Croakey noted in our [2017 submission](#) to a Senate inquiry into the future of journalism: “Funding mechanisms could include tax offsets for investors, direct government support, incentives for philanthropists and a levy on Google, Facebook or other companies that profit from the advertising revenue that used to fund mainstream media, but pay little tax.”
- A clear, transparent pathway for establishing as a non profit public interest journalism organisation with DGR status. Governments and other stakeholders should support the growth and development of the non profit sector through the development of a peak body representing the sector. This would also increase our capacity to contribute usefully to policy and to support other organisations seeking to meet community needs in the face of market failure (such as is outlined in the submissions to your inquiry from Alice Springs).
- Regulation of digital platforms should be approached holistically. At present it is very siloed. Efforts to regulate monopoly power, the dissemination of misinformation, disinformation and hate speech, the dissemination of unhealthy marketing and sales practices, breaches of privacy and other forms of exploitation should be approached in tandem with efforts to support and sustain a more vigorous, innovative and diverse public interest journalism sector.

3.4 The degree to which there has been economic recovery in regional and remote markets from the impacts of COVID, and whether this has led to advertising revenue improving.

Again this ToR shows a very limited understanding of the benefits of a diverse media ecosystem. There are many revenue streams that could support regional newspapers and other regional media apart from advertising – and some which could be developed significantly with supportive media reform, including the recommendations suggested above. In the era of digital platforms dominating advertising markets, advertising alone can rarely pay for quality, independent public interest journalism.

Around the world, not for profit models have been at the forefront of innovation, both in developing diverse business models and developing more diverse, representative newsrooms. A peak body to represent not for profit public interest journalism organisations could provide a useful service to regional and rural communities, by providing support to grow more local not for profit models, based upon public interest journalism principles of providing an independent useful service.

We thank Committee members for your attention to our submission and urge you to support innovation and growth in non profit public interest journalism, as an important part of the solution for regional communities.

For more information about this submission, please contact Croakey Health Media Editor in Chief, Dr Melissa Sweet.