



Submission to the Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism

From: John Wallace, Director **Asia Pacific Journalism Centre**

Key points

This submission makes two key points, both related to the first term of reference.

- International experience with systems to provide direct and indirect support to news media demonstrates that where proper safeguards are in place, media independence from government influence is not threatened.
- Amongst indirect support options is that of establishing a national journalism institute to promote quality journalism through high level professional development programs for journalists in Australia and the region.

1. About the Asia Pacific Journalism Centre

Established in 2003, the Asia Pacific Journalism Centre works with journalists and communities across the region to strengthen news media, share professional knowledge and promote dialogue. Underpinning the centre's mission is the belief that programs to advance journalism bring benefits to all communities through gains in international development and international understanding.

More than 1000 people from established and developing media have benefited from APJC programs aimed at empowering them for more effective roles in the public communication sphere. The centre is supported by a network of alumni and media partners across the region. A key theme for development work has been economic literacy and the role of women the economy. The centre also runs international exchange programs, such as the China Australia Journalist Exchange.

The APJC board is chaired by Canberra Times former editor-in-chief and now columnist Jack Waterford. CEO is John Wallace, formerly associate professor of journalism at the University of Queensland. The centre's board of advisors comprises representatives from news media and communications industries, the development sector, and former fellows of APJC programs.

APJC is an independent not-for-profit organisation and an auxiliary member of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID).

2. Public funding of private media to support journalism

The breakdown of advertising support for traditional news media, which has been covered in other submissions, invites exploration of alternative support systems, including direct subsidies, for existing and new media.

This submission commends to the committee the research carried out by the London School of Economics Media Policy Project: Public Funding of Private Media – Media Policy Brief 11 (Schweizer et al. 2014, p. 3). This work lays out the various mechanisms of support – direct and indirect, targeted and general – that have been employed variously in 14 European countries, the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

The project explores the merits of direct support over indirect support mechanisms, explores mechanism for allocating public funding that do not compromise media freedom, and surveys various sources of funding for direct funding support.

Research conclusions

The project policy brief concludes (p. 14), in part, that:

- 1) Direct production support to selected economically struggling media based on clear criteria is most suitable to help maintaining plurality and editorial competition.
- 2) Direct production support measures should be extended to online news organisations.
- 3) Project funds can be offered to help news organisations to compete in a digital market.
- 4) The organisation allocating subsidies must be devoid of governmental or party-political influence. Moreover, a clear definition of eligibility criteria helps in limiting discretionary power.

The policy brief notes (p. 14): “many countries use indirect general measures to support their media – probably because the implementation of such instruments is less controversial” (than direct support), but adds that direct measures are more suitable to prevent ownership concentration and maintain editorial competition and pluralism.

Positive experience of subsidies

The research recognises the concerns that might be raised by this conclusion: “Even though many scholars, journalists and politicians in the UK and elsewhere are sceptical about subsidising private media, some countries with the freest press systems have long and successful traditions of supporting the press.” (p. 5)

The research project surveys particular mechanisms used to ensure that funding allocations can take place following clear and transparent criteria and without fear of government influence.

These points have particular relevance in an Australian context, where submissions to public inquiries in Australia over the years have shown that media industry leaders generally accept the idea of indirect support (eg tax exemptions) but see direct support as a return to a dark period in English history when direct subsidies were a tool used by manipulating governments. This view tends to prevail in Anglosphere countries, where there is less contemporary experience of direct subsidies for media.

By contrast, the more recent and more comprehensive international experience documented in the LSE research (and in other publications) shows that, with proper safeguards, direct subsidies as a

tool for sustaining journalism are no threat to media freedom. The report notes that: “Countries with a long tradition of direct subsidies offer guidance as to prevent political influence and discretionary power.”

The LSE research also gives an account (p. 10) of how several countries have “changed their subsidy systems so that both legacy media trying to develop online and new exclusively online media can benefit from direct production subsidies”. It notes that Denmark, Sweden and Italy have reformed and extended existing press subsidy schemes so that online publications are also eligible.

Need for on-going monitoring

Given the on-going and unresolved nature of the economic challenge facing news media at this juncture, there is a clear need for a mechanism to be set up to monitor the situation and make further recommendations in future. This could be part of the brief of any agency established to carry out support activity or could be supported independently as has been suggested in submissions.

3. Indirect measures to support journalism: a national institute

Indirect measures to support public interest journalism include support for journalism education, journalism research and the on-going professional development of journalists.

This submission looks at how professional development opportunities for journalists in Australia are limited compared with those in many other developed societies. It proposes that a national institute for journalism would rectify this deficiency and would support more quality journalism both in Australia and in the region.

The current situation

Professional development programs play an extremely useful role in helping working journalists keep abreast of changes in the workplace, changes brought about by technology and other change in society in Australia and globally. Courses and training, where they are offered, typically are provided in-house. While programs offered can be of a high standard in themselves, courses generally serve immediate industry and organisation needs.

The MEAA and Walkley Foundation make useful but relatively small contributions here in offering programs across the news media sector. Some of these are directed at the growing number of freelance journalists, others have a union education objective. University journalism programs offer professional development courses from time to time. One provider, the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism at UTS, closed earlier this year.

Some organisations also offer programs for journalists in Australia’s region. The ABC, in addition to its in-house programs, has managed initiatives to support public broadcasting in the southwest Pacific and other countries. The Pacific region office of the MEAA’s peak body, the IFJ, offers programs in the Asia Pacific region, many with union strengthening objectives.

The APJC, with its focus on sharing professional knowledge internationally, has successfully mounted a suite of professional development programs for Australian and international journalists over the past 14 years (see below), but is limited in scope by being dependent on program funding and not having specific support for core operations.

Professional development in other countries

Many other developed nations have used either public or private funding to grow professional development institutions that serve public interest journalism at home and abroad.

Most European countries have training institutes that provide programs for journalists from any news organisation, with tuition costs covered by a mix of user pay (individual or news organisation) and support from the relevant education ministry.

Some institutes get support from their respective national foreign ministries to enable them to run programs for journalists internationally, mainly for professionals in developing countries. These include FOJO in Sweden and International Media Support (IMS) in Denmark. The European Journalism Centre provides courses to journalists on a similar basis, with core support provided by the European Commission. The United States has various journalism institutes/centres serving variously domestic, international and development needs, with philanthropic, corporate and government funding. Foremost among those is the International Center for Journalists and the Poynter Institute, both of which run programs for US and international media.

An Australian institute of journalism

This submission recognises the pattern and tradition of largely in-house professional development that has developed in Australia and envisages that this will continue. At the same time, it sees the opportunity and need for another “layer” of professional development engagement that would be good for journalists, good for news media, good for promoting diverse media voices, good for Australia’s international engagement, good for regional development and good generally for nurturing the ideal of public interest journalism.

It proposes a national institute of journalism whose key elements would be leadership, innovation, and international engagement. The institute would carry out professional development programs for journalists in Australia and the Asia Pacific region aimed at promoting the highest standards of public interest journalism.

The institute would seek to strengthen, celebrate and share Australia’s well-established tradition of independent news media. Its establishment would be a clear statement of the importance attached to the role played by quality news media in public life. Institute programs would complement existing in-house industry training programs.

The institute would run:

- advanced workshops to prepare journalists for change in professional practice
- seminars dealing with change affecting media and society, including technological change and globalisation
- leadership and management programs
- professional development programs for Indigenous and minority journalists
- exchange programs for Australian and international journalists
- international media development programs to strengthen journalism in the region (funded in part under DFAT’s development assistance budget)

The institute would be established as an independent not-for-profit entity or attached to a university or institution with a demonstrated interest in journalism professional development and international engagement. While not a research centre, the institute would assist journalism and news media researchers in university research centres.

The institute's governing body would include representation on behalf of news media organisations, journalists, academics and international development specialists.

The work of the institute, providing leadership in support of high standards in journalism, would provide a bulwark against the impact of fake news.

References:

Schweizer, C., Puppis, M., Künzler, M. & Studer, S. (2014) Media Policy Brief 11: Public Funding of Private Media, London: London School of Economics. Available at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/documents/MPP/LSE-MPP-Policy-Brief-11-Public-Funding-Private-Media.pdf>