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The Walkley Foundation's Senate Submission Regarding the Communications Legislation Amendment (Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund) Bill 2017

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Introduction

The Walkley Foundation would like to express sincere enthusiasm at the prospect of the Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund, as well as our willingness to serve on the Australian Communications and Media Authority Advisory Committee, as suggested in the Department of Communications and the Arts [release of October last year](#). The following submission outlines the reasons we believe that the Foundation is ideal for this role.

The Walkley Foundation is at the heart of the Australian media. We recognise and promote excellence in our craft. We advocate for great journalism. The Walkleys is a well-regarded and respected brand within both the industry and the public mind. The Foundation has celebrated the best in Australian journalism since 1956, through awards that showcase all that journalism can achieve: work that prompts legal and social change, political transparency, and real human impact. The Walkley Foundation stands with all Australian media organisations and journalists. The Awards are aspirational, but peer-driven. They serve as a platform for discussion and reflection both within the industry and among the public.

Australia has a proud history of groundbreaking, world-class journalism and despite unprecedented challenges to the media industry, we believe that the Australian media is rich with potential for a proud future, too. Our [submission to the senate inquiry into Australian Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism](#) outlined the need for and benefits of government funding for the production of journalism.

At the heart of the industry

The Walkley Foundation is uniquely placed to work with the Department of the Communications and the Arts to help give advice on the distribution of grants, especially as these grants seek to help media organisations to “transition, compete and innovate more successfully in a changing media environment,” as per the bill’s explanatory memorandum.

Ten years ago, the Foundation launched the Future of Journalism Project. We held the first summit of Australian editors and publishers to discuss the issues emerging as a result of the digital revolution. There, Emily Bell, then *Guardian* digital director, told the conference, “We are on the brink of two years of carnage for western media.” Two years have now become ten.

Since those discussions, the Foundation has continued to deepen and inform the industry’s conversation about its future. The Walkley Awards are an example of this conversation. They reflect the evolving ways journalists work while continuing to recognise and reward the core skills and achievements that define excellence in the craft. The awards are reviewed regularly.

As part of that review process we consult widely within the industry, building upon old relationships and fostering new ones.

We work with many of the country's leading universities and journalism schools, including QUT Creative Industries, The University of Sydney, Monash University, RMIT, Curtin University, Western Sydney University, Macleay College, The University of Queensland and University of New South Wales, supporting industry research and encouraging the next generation of young journalists. Our annual program of events which includes training, masterclasses, conferences and panel discussion at public institutions encourages not only journalists but members of the public to be actively involved in this conversation.

We specifically recognise regional and small publishers and newsrooms through events and initiatives including the Walkley Award for Coverage of Community or Regional Affairs and the Young Journalist Award category for Coverage of Community/Regional Affairs.

Digital journalism is eligible for every Walkley Awards category. We have introduced an award for innovation and another that celebrates the production teams adapting content for multiple platforms. The 2017 awards saw the first ever finalist nomination for a blog post, a podcast won in the Innovation category, and smaller publications like *The Monthly* walked away with some of the night's most prestigious awards.

Our flagship innovation program, the Walkley Incubator and Innovation Fund, identifies the most promising new journalistic startups and projects, and helps them thrive with training, mentorship and funding. Around 30 percent of the projects in the 2017 Walkley incubator addressed fake news, one of the most disquieting developments to emerge from social media algorithms and click-driven revenues.

We also work with the Global Editors Network to bring their newsroom hackathons to Australia, encouraging journalists to collaborate and experiment with technology. This year's hackathon, which will take place in March, focuses expressly on how newsrooms can better understand and serve the needs of local and hyperlocal audiences and communities.

Each of these initiatives involves thorough, fair review processes, assessing of applications and the awarding of grants and rewards. Each of these processes is carried out according to a strict code of ethics and at all times in line with the goal of furthering quality journalism.

Integrity and Independence

As we wrote in our submission to the Australian Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism in August 2017, "The three challenges of changing business models, changing technologies and disinformation require a multi-faceted approach from all players. This approach needs to be led by journalists themselves and demands active commitment from government, public institutions, and media organisations."

Quality journalism underpins democracy. It is vital therefore that the fund is administered independently of government. As indicated by the bill, grants will be administered by the ACMA, and may be advised by a committee constituted by the Minister.

The Walkley Foundation is essential to the committee, the members of which must themselves demonstrate independence as well as experience. The Foundation remains an independent umbrella industry body that works with all media organisations including Fairfax, News Corp, Sky, Channel Ten, Nine Network, SBS, Seven West Media, the ABC, The Conversation, The Guardian, The New York Times Australia, BuzzFeed Australia, Crikey, Mamamia, Schwartz Media, Junkee, Vice, Pedestrian TV, Mumbrella, Broadsheet, Griffith Review, The Newcastle Herald, the Community Broadcasters Association of Australia and The Weekly Times.

As a company limited by guarantee the Foundation is represented by independent directors who, governed by corporations law, serve and act in the best interests of the Foundation. Therefore, media organisations or publishers have no influence with regard to Walkley processes. We have decades of experience maintaining the independence of the awards – under the scrutiny of the country’s best journalists – while working with media organisations. That integrity is recognised by the industry, and this recognition and trust is a key part of what makes the awards so successful.

Conclusion

We would like to reiterate our enthusiasm for the Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund and our willingness to be involved in advising the ACMA on the distribution of grants. We are experienced in the assessment of applications, especially with regards to publishing and media, and the distribution of grants. We have led conversations about adapting to the significant transition faced by Australian publishers and news organisations, as well as instituting change. There is no influence by media organisations or publishers on Walkley processes, and board representatives from these entities are obliged, as governed by corporations law, to act in the best interests of the Foundation. As an independent organisation at the heart of the Australian media, the Walkley Foundation is uniquely placed to serve on the advisory committee.

Louisa Graham
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