



Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts

Inquiry into Australia's regional newspapers

- Today News Group Supplementary Submission

Thank you for the opportunity for a further submission to respond to the Mayor of Bundaberg Regional Council, Jack Dempsey's submission to the Committee.

Bundaberg Regional Council (BRC) funds and operates a controversial 'news' media division, *Bundaberg Now*. (See www.bundabergnow.com.au)

The Bundaberg Regional Council is the only known council in Australia that owns and directly operates its own large scale multi-media 'news' division. *Bundaberg Now* publishes several well-resourced and professionally produced 'news' stories per day across multiple media platforms covering everything from local sport and community news to business profiles. (Only a very small number of the stories published are Council related)

Bundaberg Now presents itself publicly as an independent local news service and concerningly is now the largest and best resourced 'news' publisher in Bundaberg. BRC employs more people to produce 'news' for *Bundaberg Now* than the ABC does in Bundaberg to produce independent news for the entire Wide Bay region!

However, unlike the ABC that has its own board of directors and a fiercely protected Charter of Independence to ensure journalists can ask tough questions of politicians, *Bundaberg Now* journalists have no independence at all, and the editorial content is directly controlled by Council itself. Despite presenting as an independent source of local news, there has never been one story published on *Bundaberg Now* that critically questions anything about the conduct of Council and/or Councillors.

Bundaberg Now has understandably attracted a large audience as it provides useful, interesting and professionally produced local 'news' content for 'free', and the *Bundaberg Now* Facebook page has more than 31,000 followers.

This makes Bundaberg Now a very powerful tool for BRC, and we believe that power is dangerous.

Freedom of the press, the Fourth Estate, is democracy's correcting mechanism against corruption, and *Bundaberg Now* is undermining freedom of the press, and democracy in Bundaberg, and its existence sets a dangerous precedent.

Bundaberg Council is not the first to try this. It is on the public record that the idea for *Bundaberg Now* came from Ipswich, when disgraced former Mayor Paul Pisasale (since jailed for corruption) established a similar 'news' service called *Ipswich First*. Importantly, *Bundaberg Now* operates on a much larger scale than *Ipswich First* ever did, and pleasingly *Ipswich First* has since been reduced to reporting council updates, and its entire existence is the subject of review by the new Mayor and Council.

Specific concerns include:

1. Abandonment of Freedom of Press principles

- Unlike other councils, BRC no longer follows typical government media protocols.
- BRC now bypasses the analysis and scrutiny of local independent journalists by directly publishing their one-sided and self-serving media releases as 'news' to an unsuspecting public via their mass audience on Bundaberg Now.
- The local independent news media (ABC, News-Mail, Bundaberg Today and others) are now relegated to trying to correct the public record when important Council announcements are made.
- ABC Media Watch and ABC Wide Bay have labelled Bundaberg Now a 'propaganda machine'.

2. Secrecy around editorial control

- Despite repeated questions from local independent media about who makes editorial decisions for Bundaberg Now, and on what basis, BRC refuses to provide answers.
- ABC Wide Bay requested the Mayor appear on local radio to discuss/debate the editorial processes (and other matters relating to Bundaberg Now) but he refused to appear.
- The former Director of Communications of BRC, who was directly responsible for Bundaberg Now, is now the 'Chief of Staff' to the Mayor. A private email exchange (published under FOI) between a BRC Councillor (May Mitchell) and the CEO of BRC (Stephen Johnson) shows that Councillor Mitchell has serious concerns about the Mayor's Chief of Staff still being an administrator of the Bundaberg Now Facebook page. The published emails show that Cr Mitchell raised her concerns with the Department of Local Government, who confirmed her concerns were well founded and recommended that the Chief of Staff to the Mayor should have that access removed. When Cr Mitchell passed that advice on to the CEO, it was quickly dismissed.

3. Electoral interference risk

- The current Mayor is regularly featured positively in the 'news' on Bundaberg Now, but very few Councillors are.
- While it is common for incumbent Mayors to be the highest profile member of Council, Bundaberg Now publishes an artificially high number of stories featuring the Mayor and they are all positive. This biased media coverage is a significant distortion of the public reportage of his performance and gives him an unfair electoral advantage.

4. Corruption risk

- Bundaberg Now regularly publishes local 'business' stories and profiles.
- BRC has repeatedly refused to provide answers to questions about who decides which businesses are featured (and enjoy invaluable local promotion for free) and on what basis.

5. Refusal to provide operating costs of Bundaberg Now

- Bundaberg Now is the largest news service in Bundaberg, with more staff than the ABC.
- Despite repeated requests from local media and the public, BRC refuses to disclose the operating cost of Bundaberg Now, despite the fact it is clearly a major project.
- In 2019, the ABC estimated the cost at \$1.4million per year. Based on the output published by Bundaberg Now, \$1.4million would seem conservative.

Bundaberg Today has been consistently reporting on the above issues. BRC has regularly refused to answer questions and instead gone on to attack anyone who asks questions. An example of this tactic is Bundaberg Regional Council's late submission to this inquiry and request to have elements of Today News Group's and other submissions redacted until BRC's submission was provided. Bundaberg Council only this week has placed a full page advertisement in Local Government Focus to promote their "news" site to other councils (see Appendix A).

BRC has carried FOI requests on letters to Ministers about Bundaberg Now and various publishers and industry groups. They have made complaints to the Press Council on articles where they have refused to answer questions.

Their own submission to this enquiry encourages media diversity yet they do everything within their power to suffocate independent diverse media. Their recommendations are very clearly focused against anyone who holds them to account, and this form of power abuse is clearly dangerous and a great concern.

We believe these concerns we've outlined regarding Bundaberg Now are a 'canary in the coal mine' type warning for the issues facing Local Government and the impact on the fundamentals of democracy at a community level if this type of service is duplicated elsewhere.

Appendix A

ADVERTORIAL

Bundaberg Regional Council focus: Innovative communications

Innovative Council news platform fills good news void

Communication has always been a critical tool for local government to remain connected to its community, but now, more than ever before, innovation is playing a vital role in the way Councils operate.

Bundaberg Now is Bundaberg Regional Council's successful community news platform and its stories are free to read.

It's as innovative as its concept is simple: Councils have important, relevant information to share and the community wants unrestricted access to it.

The platform has been well received by the community and is allowing Council to get important messages direct to residents.

With more than 50 Council business units from rates, roads and rubbish to galleries, a zoo and museum, Bundaberg Now brings a diverse range of Council news under one banner.

As a community service, the platform has also been opened to the community to share good news.

It's given not-for-profit groups and volunteers an engaging space to share their news and events.

Residents can read about new businesses opening and economic growth, helping to meet Council's charter to promote a positive image of the region.

And when compared with more traditional Council communications tools – like paid advertising or hardcopy newsletters – it's also cost effective.

Bundaberg Regional Council covers an area of 6431 square kilometres, stretching across the picture-perfect coastal strip where the Great

Barrier Reef begins to hinterland areas steeped in rich history from agricultural heritage to the Boolboonda Tunnel.

With a population of almost 100,000 and encompassing five major urban centres, a medium like Bundaberg Now is a great way to communicate across such a widespread and diverse community.

Bundaberg Regional Council CEO Steve Johnston said Bundaberg Now was launched in January 2019 in response to ongoing media fragmentation.

"Regional communities are constantly being asked to do more with less," Mr Johnston said.

"Councils are not immune. We're being asked to communicate better and spend less in a climate where regional media is declining.

"Free community newspapers across the region have stopped printing, as has the daily edition, and online news is now placed behind a paywall, forcing media organisations to shift their focus to the stories which get 'clicks'.

"Bundaberg Now doesn't aim to replace these traditional news outlets but rather fill the gaps left behind by this change in direction."

Since its launch, Bundaberg Now has helped to highlight hundreds of local businesses, community groups and community events.

Community engagement remains high with more than 34,000 followers on Facebook and an average of about 80,000 website visits per month.



"We have received a positive and appreciative response from many individuals and organisations who have had their stories shared through Bundaberg Now," Mr Johnston said.

"The success of Bundaberg Now is evidence that communities still want to know what their local Council is doing."

In terms of innovation and success, Mr Johnston said Council certainly wasn't the first organisation to launch its own news platform.

The difference with Bundaberg Now is that Council made it available for community use.

"Many large organisations operate their own news platforms including sporting codes and universities.

"By offering community news we've developed a platform which is engaging and which our community likes to interact with.

"At the same time, we're helping community groups and small businesses share good news and events.

"It's a win-win-win for Council, the community and the groups and residents featured in the articles."

One example of this is the platform's coverage of the launch of Nardoo Nursery, a not-for-profit enterprise supporting people with a disability within the region.

"From the very start Bundaberg Now has been so supportive and has written marvellous stories that have showcased our nursery and what we do," the nursery's Anne Davies said.

"Without Bundaberg Now we would never have achieved the wonderful customer base we have now and have the ability to help support our clients with disability."

From a Council perspective, Mr Johnston said it had been a useful tool to place greater emphasis on the less "newsworthy" services offered to the community.

"The services we offer to our community are so varied.

"For instance, many residents don't realise the work that takes place behind the scenes in local government in areas like community and economic development.

"Bundaberg Now is an engaging platform where all of this information can be accessed by residents."

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