

CROAKEY HEALTH MEDIA

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Submission to

**The Senate Environment and Communications
Legislation Committee**

Inquiry into the Murdoch Media Inquiry Bill 2023.

Submission from Croakey Health Media

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1. Key points

Supportive of an inquiry

Croakey Health Media, an independent not-for-profit public interest journalism organisation, strongly supports the recommendations for an inquiry into the Murdoch media and media diversity in Australia. We are writing this submission as journalism, health policy and public health professionals who care deeply about the importance of public interest journalism for the health and wellbeing of communities, policy and democracy.

Public health concerns

The market dominance of Murdoch media and the company's long history of exerting power to pursue particular political or economic objectives weakens Australian democracy and the health and wellbeing of Australian communities, institutions and civil society. To use public health framing, this company is a powerful commercial determinant of health that undermines Australia's capacity for health-promoting policies and healthy communities in many ways. A standout example is how Murdoch media has blocked and undermined effective climate action in Australia over some decades. It has done this directly, through its editorial focus and coverage, and indirectly through supporting the election of particular political parties and candidates while undermining the prospects of candidates and parties supporting effective climate action.

Public interest journalism matters

The highly concentrated nature of Australia's news media landscape, with Murdoch's News Corp owning over two-thirds of print media outlets, has restricted the ability of the public to become informed and engage with pressing public policy issues, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate change crisis. The dominance of the Murdoch media, the rise of digital platforms and overall media concentration has weakened the public interest journalism sector and resulted in a narrowly focused and biased media environment and an increase in misinformation and disinformation from digital platforms and corporate media.

Accountability

Croakey supports the emphasis of the Bill on the importance of a reliable news journalism that holds both government and corporations accountable. Media diversity and local news are crucial components for an informed and engaged public. Public interest journalism is also vital in promoting health, wellbeing, and informed decision-making and a strong and diverse public interest journalism sector is vital for democracy and community cohesion.

Reform needed

Croakey has long advocated for policy reform to support a more diverse media landscape and to support innovation, growth and development, especially in the not-for-profit sector. Access to trustworthy, independent public interest journalism is a cornerstone of a transparent, honest, and resilient democracy. This is especially important for communities who are under-served, poorly served or harmed by the current media landscape. Croakey supports media policies that promote innovative models and initiatives that serve communities' specific needs, such as those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people with disabilities, and LGBTQI communities.

Regulations out-of-date

Current media regulations in Australia are outdated and unable to address the rapidly evolving media landscape, allowing monopolies to thrive in traditional and online media platforms. The current regulatory environment for media in Australia is insufficient, resulting in media concentration and lack of diversity in the mainstream media sector, which hampers the functioning of democracy and is unresponsive to community interests.

Caveat

The only significant caveat that we raise about the proposed inquiry is *that more productive policy outcomes* may be achieved by bringing a systems approach to this analysis. The news and information system is toxic and spectacularly failing to meet the needs of diverse communities. However, this is not only due to the market power of Murdoch media. It also reflects the market power of other corporations whose models are designed to make profit, such as Meta, Google and Twitter. These models have been found in research and court cases to minimise or invisibilise issues of public interest and public health. The dissemination of misinformation and disinformation does not occur within silos, but is part of a toxic system underpinned by the interests and imperatives of powerful corporations.

While it is important to hold the Murdoch media to account and develop a clearer understanding of their influence, impact and operations, it is also important to focus on solutions: to examine what is needed to develop and support a news and information system that is safe, reliable and relevant for communities' needs.

Concerted efforts are needed to end the market dominance of powerful corporations such as Google, Meta and News Corp, and to ensure that all communities – geographic and interest-based – have access to safe, reliable and relevant news and information. This is particularly critical in a time of escalating climate crises and growing community polarisation.

It is also important to acknowledge that in Australia, Murdoch, Meta, Google, Twitter et al are operating upon the Country of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and therefore have a particular responsibility to ensure their cultural safety and wellbeing. Further, policymakers have a particular responsibility to ensure that First Nations peoples' needs for safe, reliable and relevant news and information are being met.

We recommend that efforts to hold Murdoch media to account and to develop safer, more reliable and relevant news and information systems build on the expertise of First Nations peoples and organisations, public health people and organisations and wider civil society. We encourage the inquiry to be proactive in reaching out to these sectors and groups.

Finally, we ask that the community's right to a safe, reliable and relevant news and information environment be explicitly acknowledged in this legislation, together with the importance of supporting public interest journalism and greater media diversity.

Due to our limited resources, we have not answered the inquiry terms of reference in detail. Rather, we encourage the inquiry to read and use our resources provided in section three, giving an overview of our submissions to previous inquiries. These are extremely relevant for this inquiry.

2. Introduction: about Croakey Health Media

Croakey Health Media (Croakey) is widely recognised as an innovator and leader in the emerging not-for-profit public interest journalism sector in Australia ([Public Interest Journalism Initiative, 2021](#)). We are innovative in our organisational structure, blended funding model and development of the practice of social journalism ([Sweet et al, 2017](#)), as well as our approach to health journalism. We focus on health equity, and the [social, cultural, commercial](#) and [environmental](#) determinants of health, and bring a health-in-all-policies approach to our work. We privilege the voices and expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through our work, including through [our governance](#). Our board is chaired by a leading Aboriginal health researcher, Professor Megan Williams, who is Wiradjuri through paternal family. Croakey Health Media is a member of the Local and Independent News Association (LINA). Our members belong to various professional organisations, including the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance. Croakey undertakes many activities relevant to this consultation, through our journalism, community engagement and policy submissions.

We publish regularly on the importance of a diverse, sustainable and robust public interest journalism sector as a fundamental determinant of health, including for addressing concerns such as misinformation and disinformation and the commercial determinants of health, such as the power of the fossil fuel industries. See these articles [here](#).

We have also published an extensive archive of articles on the market power of digital platforms as powerful commercial determinants of health, examining the many way that this undermines public health. See these articles [here](#).

Croakey has also published extensively on the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation as threats to the health of individuals, communities, Country, democracies and planetary health. See these articles [here](#).

3. Relevant materials

Since 2017 Croakey Health Media has contributed to many previous inquiries on matters related to this consultation, with some submissions summarised below. We encourage committee members and secretariat to read these submissions in full as they are directly relevant for your inquiry.

Submission to Senate Select Committee inquiring into the future of public interest journalism (June, 2017).

This outlined some of the ways that Croakey was then contributing to public debate and public policy and stated: “However, Croakey does not provide any of us with a living wage, and our ongoing financial sustainability is precarious. As well, we are all acutely conscious that we could do much more to serve our readers, the community and policymaking processes with the benefit of proper funding to support journalistic investigations into important health and related accountability concerns.”

Five years later, our financial situation remains precarious, reflecting a lack of policy support for independent media.

Response to ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry (February, 2019).

We welcomed “the ACCC’s focus on the importance of public interest journalism as a public good that is currently under-provided. We agree that this is a particular concern in specialist beats, such as health. However, 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.... 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.”

Four years later, and Australia still has no pathways to support not-for-profit journalism models. Croakey’s inability to attain DGR status has constrained our financial security.

Submission to Digital Industry Group Inc (DIGI) consultation on Disinformation Industry Code (24 November, 2020).

This submission urged the Federal Government to appoint an independent committee of appropriately qualified public health experts to report on the public health impacts of disinformation and misinformation and to make evidence-based recommendations for policy reform, drawing upon the public health literature. This committee should include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and organisations. It should include specific consideration of policies and strategies for addressing the spread of racism, hate speech and white supremacy as part of the tide of disinformation. The submission also urged that the

capacity of the public interest journalism sector to investigate disinformation and misinformation should be strengthened through policy reform.

Submission to the Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety ([17 January, 2022](#)).

This submission identified eight key themes from our relevant coverage:

1. that the undermining of democracy and democratic institutions due to an unsafe online environment is a global problem and is not limited solely to Australia.
2. the online environment is unsafe, especially during a global pandemic, because it is disseminating and amplifying misinformation and disinformation, undermining public health measures and pandemic control.
3. The monopoly power of these corporations makes them unresponsive to the concerns of businesses, governments and communities because of power imbalances. Australia witnessed these companies' preparedness to exercise their market power – reducing communities' access to information and services even in the midst of a global public health crisis [as has now happened in Canada with Meta blocking access to news on Facebook during a bushfire crisis].
4. Mental health is being harmed by the impact of the digital platforms in disseminating and amplifying hate speech, racism, White Supremacy, extremist far right views, and bullying.
5. The online environment is particularly dangerous for children. As well as the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation, there is the impact of marketing by predatory companies – notably alcohol, gambling and junk food.
6. Many health and public interest organisations have raised concerns that Australian Government regulatory responses to date have been inadequate and piecemeal, in relation to a range of related public health concerns, including harmful marketing practices, and misinformation and disinformation.
7. Regulation of digital platforms should be encompassing of all the public health and public interest concerns involved (including media policy, monopoly-busting, public health) – rather than focusing on single issues and self-regulatory approaches.
8. Global issues demand multilateral solutions. The power and reach of the Big Tech companies requires multilateral regulatory reform.

Submission to Review by The Treasury of News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code (the Code) ([2022](#)).

This submission raised many concerns and questions about the processes and outcomes of the Code. In our view, it does not represent successful policymaking that is in the public interest.

Submission to Review by the industry group DIGI of The Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation ([July, 2022](#)).

In this submission, we argued that misinformation and disinformation are such profound, pervasive and growing public health concerns that governments must take far more wide-ranging action than simply leaving the matter to a voluntary, industry, self-regulatory code. Health departments and other areas of governments, public health experts, First Nations health and community representatives, the community sector, and community leaders must also be involved in whole-of-government and whole-of-community responses

Pre-Budget submission 2023-24, to the Australian Treasury ([2023](#)).

Our Pre-Budget submission highlighted that the not-for-profit public interest journalism sector is under-developed in Australia despite its potential to address many policy and public interest concerns. The Government has an opportunity to support innovation and growth in this sector by developing a comprehensive policy framework and funding an implementation strategy over the next five years. This has the potential to address multiple areas of concern across a number of portfolios, and would align with Government objectives through:

- Contributing to greater media diversity and innovation that better serves communities' needs
- Developing more diverse economies
- Supporting a more informed public and policy debate
- Counteracting misinformation and disinformation
- Helping to address the dominant market power of digital platforms
- Supporting engaged, participatory communities.

A stronger and more sustainable not-for-profit public interest journalism sector would thus help to strengthen Australian democracy at a time when democracies globally face significant challenges and at a time of escalating crises, including climate disruption, where equitable access to reliable news and the accountability roles of public interest journalism will become ever-more important.

Submission to ACMA Consultation: A new framework for measuring media diversity in Australia ([March 2023](#)).

In this submission, Croakey Health Media welcomed the interest shown by the Australian Government and the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) in renewing policy efforts to develop and support a more diverse media landscape.

Determined and urgent efforts to support media diversity are needed in view of continuing contractions in news rooms and news coverage, as highlighted most recently by the announced closure of Pro Bono News.

Improving Australia's poor record on media diversity will help address some of our most pressing social, health and economic challenges such as racism, justice for First Nations peoples and combatting the COVID-19 pandemic. A stronger and more sustainable not-for-profit public interest journalism sector would help to strengthen Australian democracy at a time when democracies globally face significant challenges and at a time of escalating crises, including

climate disruption, where equitable access to reliable news and the accountability roles of public interest journalism will become ever-more important.

Media diversity needs to be understood through many lenses; the proposed framework is a useful start but needs further development. Efforts to develop and support increased media diversity should privilege the needs of communities (geographic, interest-based) whose needs are not well served by current media dynamics.

Significant policy measures to date, such as the News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code, have undermined media diversity. It is disappointing that the Treasury review of the News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code, released on 2 December, 2022, showed so little concern for the impact of the code on media diversity.

We propose some immediate measures to strengthen media diversity, including the development of a clear, transparent and equitable pathway for establishment of not-for-profit public interest journalism organisations with Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status, and allocation of a proportion of governments' advertising budgets to independent media and not-for-profit public interest journalism organisations.

Submission to Productivity Commission Review of Philanthropy (2023)

Croakey Health Media warmly welcomed the Australian Government's commitment to doubling philanthropic giving by 2030. This is an important opportunity for addressing many public health concerns, including the crisis in public interest journalism, and the unsafe and often toxic news and information ecosystem experienced by Australians. It also would help to address health inequities by increasing investment in the social and cultural determinants of health and wellbeing. There is also potential for health gains to flow from the increased social cohesion and civic participation that could be expected as an outcome of increased philanthropic giving.

We also acknowledge the Productivity Commission's recognition of the importance of consulting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait people in this work, and the acknowledgement of the strong cultural traditions of reciprocity, helping and supporting communities and informal volunteering in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

In this submission, we focus on the potential benefits for developing and growing the not-for-profit public interest journalism sector, which is under-developed in Australia despite its potential to address many policy and public interest concerns. In our 2023-2024 Pre-Budget submission to the Australian Treasurer, we argued that the Government has an opportunity to support innovation and growth in this sector by developing a comprehensive policy framework and funding an implementation strategy over the next five years. This has the potential to address multiple areas of concern across a number of portfolios, and would align with Government objectives through:

- Contributing to greater media diversity and innovation that better serves communities' needs
- Developing more diverse economies
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A stronger and more sustainable not-for-profit public interest journalism sector would thus help to strengthen Australian democracy at a time when democracies globally face significant challenges and at a time of escalating crises, including climate disruption, where equitable access to reliable news and the accountability roles of public interest journalism will become ever-more important.

The philanthropic sector has much to contribute to achieving these goals and we welcome reforms to enable and support the growth and development of philanthropy. Although we are a small, under-resourced organisation, we hope to contribute to the development of this reform agenda, and are also available to participate in any related consultations.

Submission to Department of Health and Aged Care consultation for a National Health and Climate Strategy (24 July, 2023)

In our submission, Croakey highlighted an important omission from that stated objectives, which is central for achieving all other objectives: informed and engaged communities. We suggest adding an additional objective: ***Objective 5: Informed and engaged communities.***

Communities need to be informed and engaged in mitigation and adaptation efforts, and especially in relation to their health and wellbeing. When communities are informed and engaged, policy development and implementation is more likely to be relevant, equitable, effective and useful. This is particularly relevant for health and aged care services and providers that are trying to engage with climate mitigation and adaptation.

The news and information ecosystem currently does not support communities to be informed about and engaged with climate mitigation and adaptation. The prevalence of climate misinformation and disinformation, the dominance of corporate interests with a vested interest in undermining climate literacy and climate action (including fossil fuel companies and corporate media organisations such as News Corp), the power of digital platforms such as Meta and Google (which are major vectors of climate misinformation and disinformation) and a weakening of the public interest journalism sector (leaving many communities without access to reliable local news) all have contributed to harmful delays in the implementation of effective climate action.

As a result of these delays, communities will increasingly bear the burden of climate disruption affecting wide-ranging determinants of health, including access to food, housing, and safe living conditions. Communities will have less capacity for responding to the increasing intensity and prevalence of extreme weather events if they are not supported by reliable, relevant and safe news and information systems. (An additional note not included in our submission is that technology infrastructure for media is lacking in many regional and remote communities, severely limiting capacities for information sharing, whether for news and information or for managing climate emergencies.)

A whole-of-government approach is required to enable policies that support development of a news and information ecosystem that is reliable, relevant and safe for communities engaging with climate mitigation and adaptation.

It requires policies to tackle misinformation, disinformation, racism, and polarisation, as well as the market dominance of digital platforms such as Meta and Google. It also requires policies that support social cohesion, equity, digital inclusion, media literacy, health literacy and climate literacy. It means developing media policies that support a more diverse and sustainable news and information ecosystem, including through the development of philanthropy and reforms to support the growth and development of not-for-profit media organisations.

It also involves concerted efforts to tackle the problem of ‘news deserts’ – communities (whether geographic or other forms) that currently do not have access to reliable, local news and information. Many more communities are under-served in this respect; they may have a local newspaper or a local Facebook group, for example, but these news and information sources are under-resourced and ill-equipped to cope with communities’ needs for reliable news and information during an era of escalating climate disruption.

These and other Croakey submissions that may be of use for this consultation can be seen [here](#).