



**JOURNALISM EDUCATION
& RESEARCH ASSOCIATION
OF AUSTRALIA**

ABN 15 600 195 857 Inc in SA A39791

Submission to the Senate Environment and Communications Legislation
Committee following the senate's referral of the Murdoch Media Inquiry Bill
2023 for inquiry and report by 12 December 2023

[Murdoch Media Inquiry Bill 2023 – Parliament of Australia \(aph.gov.au\)](https://aph.gov.au)

Submission prepared by:
Professor Matthew Ricketson, Deakin University
Dr T.J. Thomson, Senior Lecturer, RMIT University

On behalf of the Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia

Thursday 31 August 2023 at 5:00pm AEST.

The Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia Incorporated (JERAA) is the peak body of Australian journalism educators and researchers from tertiary education and industry organisations. JERAA's primary aim is to raise the standard of teaching of journalism and to foster excellence and integrity in current and future generations of journalism practitioners. JERAA also supports research, knowing that good research seeks out new information, identifies issues and resolves problems for the benefit of the news media industry specifically and society more broadly. JERAA advocates for and celebrates excellence in journalism and in journalism education. JERAA provides annual awards and grants for journalism researchers and journalism students.

This submission has been written on behalf of JERAA's executive by a co-editor of the association's academic journal, *Australian Journalism Review*, Professor Matthew Ricketson, and informed by the work of Dr T.J. Thomson, a senior lecturer at RMIT University.

This submission concerns a "Bill for an Act to establish an inquiry into the Murdoch media and media diversity in Australia, and for related purposes". The bill proposes setting up a commission of inquiry into the Murdoch media that would then examine the terms of reference. All of them are issues of relevance to JERAA's mission but in this submission we will focus on the following terms of reference:

- (a) Whether the existing system of media regulation in Australia is fit-for-purpose;

- (e) The need for a single, independent media regulator to harmonise news media standards and oversee an effective process for remedying complaints;
- (g) The culture, ethics and practices of media outlets operating in Australia.

Preamble

As journalism educators and researchers we are responsible for preparing the next generation of journalists around the nation. We aim to prepare graduates who know how to practice journalism across a range of media forms and who have been encouraged to think about, read about and debate issues concerning the practice of journalism, the business of media and the role of the news media in a democratic society. We prepare them ecumenically; that is, we prepare them to work in all parts of the news media, large or small, city or country, in a newsroom or freelance, News Corp Australia or the ABC. We do this in the belief that the hardest transition to make is the one from university to paid employment, so it is less important where a graduate begins their career than that they get to where they want to work. News Corp Australia is one of the biggest, if not the biggest, media employer in the country. It has and does produce good journalism. It also produces journalism that is far from good. What concerns us as journalism educators is the feedback that a number of us have received from former students who have begun their careers in News Corp Australia outlets and found the newsroom environment less than welcoming, especially on newsworthy issues to do with cultural, gender and linguistic diversity.

As journalism researchers we welcome and encourage colleagues to research the news media. This includes work that is critical of aspects of the news media. We would not be doing our jobs as academics, nor as public intellectuals, if we mouthed the industry line on any and every issue. In this context, we want to highlight a current example of a journalism academic conducting research about the industry, and becoming the target of hostile coverage by the media outlets about whom she is doing the research. We are referring to Dr Victoria Fielding of the University of Adelaide who has been commissioned by the group Australians for a Murdoch Royal Commission (<https://murdochroyalcommission.org.au/>) to lead their Murdoch Referendum Accountability Project. She and three casual staff members at the university who are doing weekly monitoring and reporting of News Corp's coverage of The Voice referendum issue, with an interim report and final report due to be released at the midway and end of the referendum campaign. Appended to this submission are an overview of the project and a sample of their weekly monitoring. We not only defend her right to do this work but want to call out the level of intimidation she has been subjected to. Robust debate in the public sphere is welcome; intimidation and personal attacks are not.

Terms of reference (a), Whether the existing system of media regulation in Australia is fit-for-purpose and (e), The need for a single, independent media regulator to harmonise news media standards and oversee an effective process for remedying complaints.

The question of whether the existing system of media regulation in Australia is fit-for-purpose has been analysed for many years. As far back as 2012 both the Convergence Review and the Independent Inquiry into the Media and Media Regulation concluded that a regulatory system that was divided according to medium was already becoming out of date. That is, the Australian Press Council (APC), an industry-funded regulatory body, received complaints about journalism published in print and to a degree online outlets while the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), a government-funded regulatory body, received complaints about news and current affairs broadcast on radio and television.

Despite these reports, regulation of the news media in Australia remains largely the same as it was a decade ago even though the convergence of the news media is even more entrenched now. It is not clear why this anomalous situation continues. Among the reasons advanced, though, are an unwillingness on the part of government to change the regulatory environment without widespread industry support, a focus by industry on what it sees as more important issues, such as the massive, expanding power of global tech behemoths, swift, well-organised opposition by these big companies to any form of government regulation, a rejection on their part that they are publishers, cautiousness on the part of the Press Council and inertia on the part of ACMA. Harmonising the range of media covered in a regulatory system is, therefore, long overdue.

Terms of reference (g) The culture, ethics and practices of media outlets operating in Australia

In March 2023, News Corp CEO Michael Miller described the future of Australian news media as “robust” and “flourishing.” He told the assembled audience about Verity, an online tool the company launched in 2019 that provides real-time metrics about article performance. Verity 2.0 also includes a feature journalists can use to predict the number of subscribers a particular headline will attract. In Miller’s words, “Verity has specifically changed the way I manage our business. On a daily basis, it has informed how we allocate staff and assign stories.” News Corp journalists on the ground interviewed by academic researchers in 2023 bemoan this technology and the impact it—and their results-driven editors and managers—have on editorial independence and on which stories get told and in which ways. “If you're doing a story and it's not attracting a subscription, they don't want to know about it,” one News Corp journalist said.

Current News Corp journalists told the academic researchers the pressure to acquire subscriptions is the main influence on their outlet’s editorial agenda. This means that substantive public service journalism, while important, is likely to be ignored and replaced with clickbait journalism and sensationalist reporting that has a higher potential of attracting clicks and subscriptions. In the words of one of its former journalists, “News Corp is very much, you know results-oriented. They're very much like ‘Get that story out there, I don't care if it's clickbait’. Because what News Corp is asking you to do is stalk their Facebook and get their photos and pick the most, you know, unflattering one get, you know, the photo of the guy in the wife beater.”

Community members in towns with a News Corp-owned outlet have noted a difference in (declining) quality and are lamenting the diminished competition the increasingly tight market is supporting. In the words of one community member: “I know there’s a lot of pressure for subs [subscriptions], basically, and so it's like, insert town here's top five worst criminals and it's a lot of clickbait. The substance journalism that they used to do really well has diminished a lot. It's quite obvious that their staff have dwindled as has their quality, which then therefore reduces the amount of competition that we have locally”.

Even when the content is not reported in a sensationalist fashion, more subtle forms of bias and a lack of diversity can be present. For example, who or what is used as a source can reinforce stereotypes or disrupt them as well as advance certain viewpoints and interests. A recent study found that News Corp journalists over-relied on politicians as sources at the expense of ordinary Australians (Thomson, et al., 2023, “Who or What Gets Referenced by

Whom, How Often, and in Which Ways? Exploring Journalists' Sourcing Practices in the Context of Aged Care Coverage", *Journalism Practice*, pp. 1 – 21).