

Response to Question on Notice from SEVEN Network

Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee

Question

What is the difference between public interest and the commercial interest in newspaper publishing?

Answer:

Seven West Media believes that the editorial policy of West Australian Newspapers (**attached**) encapsulates our views on the public interest and its relationship to commercial interests.

There is close alignment between the public interest and the commercial interests of newspaper publishers because:

- if people do not buy a newspaper then it will no longer exist. This would not serve the public interest in diversity of voices. The commercial interest of newspapers in selling their product therefore aligns with the public in this way.
- factors that influence people in their decision to purchase a newspaper include whether the newspaper can be considered a reliable and credible source of news and information. They also want to read material that will keep them entertained. In this way the public interest in fair, accurate and balanced reporting is aligned with the commercial interest of selling more papers.

While there is a public interest in diversity of voices and fair, accurate and balanced presentation of factual material, we strongly believe that this should be distinguished from the right to freedom of expression.

This applies both to individuals and to news media organisations. It should be open to any publication to express views and opinions as they see fit. In most cases, if these views do not accord with those of its readers, those people are likely to not purchase the product. There is a strong public interest in freedom of expression.

ATTACHMENT TO ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

EDITORIAL POLICY

WEST AUSTRALIAN NEWSPAPERS

The Board recognises that it has a responsibility to develop and implement an editorial policy which will enable its newspapers, and web-sites, to fulfil their role as part of “The Fourth Estate,” a cornerstone of our democracy.

A newspaper is a commercial business, but the Board recognises it also has a role in our political and judicial systems that other businesses do not.

While the Board’s imperative is to drive returns for shareholders, the Directors recognise the papers have a duty to their readers, the communities they serve and the freedom of the press upon which our liberty depends.

The Directors also acknowledge that the rights and privileges extended to the newspapers’ journalists by the nation’s political and judicial institutions bring with them a duty to report the workings of those institutions fairly and accurately in the public interest. Fulfilment of this duty will require the newspapers to appeal to the widest possible cross-section of their communities, to maintain the highest standards and traditions of journalism and the English language and to provide training in the skills and principles of journalism to young people.

The Board has therefore laid down broad parameters for the type of newspaper it believes will best meet this duty and has developed a set of ethical guidelines for the papers to follow.

This in no sense implies any interference by the board in the day-to-day running of editorial.

The Board of Seven West Media Limited requires its journalists and editors to adhere to principles of integrity, balance and fairness in all news gathering and presentation.

The Board expects its newspapers to be probing, sceptical, honest, courageous and or the right.

Fact and comment should be clearly delineated in all news reports. Every possible step should be taken to ensure the accuracy of reports and significant errors should be promptly corrected.

Any technological alteration of a visual image used in the newspapers must be acknowledged.

No member of the editorial staff will be required to make an unwelcome intrusion on the personal grief of another person.

The papers should reflect the aspirations of all West Australians, with particular regard to the diverse nature of the community.

They should be engaged with the community and recognise their vital role in encouraging the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of community life.

At the same time they should recognise disadvantage.

Commercial factors must not override editorial decisions.

Any member of the staff who accepts any inducement from any third party in relation to the writing or presentation of a report or photograph will be instantly dismissed.

Plagiarism will not be tolerated.

Freedom of the press is a tenuous concept in this country. It is not enshrined in law and depends almost entirely on public support. That support can only be diminished if the public loses faith in the media as fair, honest and reliable sources of information.