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15 June 2017

Mr Tim Watling
Committee Secretary
Public Interest Journalism
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr Watling

Submission - Future of Public Interest Journalism

There has been a lot of emphasis, media attention and public discussion by Members of Parliament about the future of journalism. Most of that attention has been focused on the metropolitan dailies.

This, inadvertently, has been to the detriment of local communities and regional centres.

Journalism in these communities is more vital and integral to their growth and well-being; to their connection and communication. Much more vital than in the cities where a global media environment prevails.

This is because, in regional and rural Australia, the local newspaper, combined with an online site, is usually the only source of local information.

It is, in effect, the journal of record for its community. And it remains relevant.

Like all established media, regional community media is challenged by the Facebook and Google duopoly, mass information platforms that are not content-challenged, yet have the capacity to attract significant advertising revenue.

Most regional and community news media continue to have strong local advertising. Where the significant revenue decline is taking place is with national and government advertising.

National marketers do not understand the continued strength and importance of regional and community media. This is especially true of hyper-local media, such as Country Press Australia's country non-daily publications.

Country Press Australia represents more than 250 non-daily newspapers from Queensland, NSW, Victoria, Tasmania, SA and NT.

The organisation is more than a century old and about half our membership is made of small family operators.

These businesses have successfully embraced new technologies over those years but none as revolutionary as the internet-driven “information age”.

However, regional community news media circulations are decreasing at a much slower rate than the metro newspapers as city audiences take advantage of the digital alternatives for broader national and international information.

Digital audiences are often not “traditional” newspaper demographics and regional community media now reaches more “eyeballs” than ever.

In all this, there has been a marked over-reaction from media buyers shifting away from traditional media. They see only the negatives of the metro decline and, erroneously, equate it to the much healthier, more relevant regional community media.

The result of this is that important government communications are not reaching regional communities through the best channels (although media releases still come en masse from government agencies and MPs).

Regional and community media continues to be extremely important to regional Australians, and this recently has been backed up by independent research.

The Victorian Country Press Association recently conducted this independent research using a custom specialist marketing company, Intuito Market Research. South Australia had conducted similar research earlier.

This research proved that:

- 73% of people in regional Victorians read their local paper, and each issue is read by at least three people
- In South Australia their research showed newspaper penetration to be 85 per cent
- Our papers are the number one source of local news:
 - 73% Regional Newspapers
 - 60% TV
 - 49% Radio
 - 32% Internet
- Young people also read their local newspapers:
 - 48% of 18-25 years olds
 - 57% of 25-30 year olds

The results clearly show that regional newspapers play a unique role in their communities. Further:

- 83% of people enjoy the physical aspect of the paper to relax and read
- We reach 1.3 million regional Victorians weekly

It showed our readers are highly engaged and connected with their local paper; that print is not dead – it is read by all ages.

It is a trusted and reliable source of local information that's relevant to them and it gets results for advertisers.

Worldwide creative director of Saatchi & Saatchi, Pablo Del Campo, says the shift by advertisers to online and social media has gone too far and that print is a more powerful medium than most people realise.

WPP chief executive Martin Sorrell expressed a similar sentiment at a recent Broadcasting Press Guild breakfast in the UK (reported by The Times, London), saying print media was more powerful than agencies believed and advertisers should direct a greater percentage of their revenue to print.

“It actually has a level of engagement like no other mass media does. Newspapers still play a very important part in brand building, through the fact that it's a trusted medium and brands want to be associated with a trusted medium,” Mr Steedman said.

(As reported in The Australian, The Newspaper Works, The Times - London, Advertising Age).

Quality local journalism is still strong in local news media, but with the steady decline of agency revenue, including Federal Government advertising, this is likely to decline as publishers find quality local journalism difficult to monetise.

It is essential that the Federal Government continues to invest its messages to regional Australia through the pages of CPA members, whether online or in regional and community news media.

Yours faithfully

Paul Thomas
President