

NT Independent Submission to the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee: Inquiry into media diversity in Australia

I'd like to thank the committee for the opportunity to contribute to this important review into media diversity in Australia.

Our story is, I hope, unique to the rest of Australia. I say that because I have not heard of another start-up publication being banned by a state or territory government days after it launched due to the personal grudges of a political leader and I hope it will not happen again anywhere else due to the detrimental effects it has had on Australian democracy.

By way of introduction, I am the editor of the NT Independent online newspaper. I was previously employed as senior political reporter with the NT News and as investigations producer with ABC Darwin.

How the NT Independent started

We started an independent online newspaper based in Darwin earlier this year to provide greater diversity in media in the Northern Territory where a small pool of corporate media players have been controlling the media landscape for decades.

Our focus was to report on matters of community interest as a source for reliable, accurate and independent news with a specific focus on investigative political journalism, essentially exposing matters in the public interest that weren't being reported in more mainstream publications in the NT.

We launched at the end of March. By mid-April, the NT Government led by Labor Chief Minister Michael Gunner informed us that "due to the nature of the ownership" of our online newspaper that our reporters would not be permitted to attend government press conferences. It was later extended to include the public service, as the NT Labor Government instructed the apolitical NT public service and departments not to respond to our reporters' questions or disseminate public information to us to provide our readers.

While the Chief Minister claims this ban is due to his personal dislike for the NT Independent's director Owen Pike, we believe the ban was enacted to prevent scrutiny of his government by me, an investigative journalist with a long track record in the Northern Territory of exposing misconduct in office that led to numerous political resignations.

Advertising challenges

Our only self-applied restraint when it came to advertising was that we would not accept government advertising because we knew our stories would be exposing matters the government did not want exposed and we felt we could not do that in good faith while accepting government advertising money.

We initially employed three journalists but as of now, we have only two, having to lay one off due to budget constraints brought on by local advertisers being scared off from advertising with us for fear of reprisals by the Gunner Labor Government. We did not account for that when we launched.

Darwin is a small town relatively speaking and it's also very much a government town with most people relying either directly or indirectly on government funding. Our owner has been told by local business owners that they did not want to risk putting the NT Government offside by being seen supporting us. This of course is not the case with every business, as some have supported us publicly, but many have not because they fear government shutting them out or losing government contracts.

The government's ban has affected our ability to raise advertising revenue and has resulted in a loss of jobs in the Northern Territory.

NT Labor Government's ban of independent media affecting confidence in democratic institutions of the NT

What the Labor NT Government's ban on us has revealed is the dark underbelly of the NT's democracy and that abuse of power by those in high office can be committed with no checks in place.

Respected constitutional legal experts have stated the ban is unconstitutional. The ban also violates the NT Government's own MLA Code of Conduct and Ethical Standards Act, which requires all MLAs to foster the freedom of reporting by the media, as well as respect the independence of the public service.

Violations of the Act are dealt with by the NT Parliament's disciplinary committee known as the Privileges Committee. This particular group has not had much activity in recent years. And the only way an MLA is referred there is by the Legislative Assembly, which right now is majority controlled by the Gunner Labor Government. So, the only way those responsible for the illegal ban of our publication can be held accountable is if the government were to essentially refer its own for discipline.

What Michael Gunner has unwittingly exposed with his ill-conceived ban is that the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory can abuse the power of the office and execute bans on the free press because of personal grudges and nobody can stop him. It's very quickly leading to a loss of confidence in the democratic institutions of the Northern Territory.

The effect of media concentration on democracy in the Northern Territory

For decades the Northern Territory has been served by the News Corp-owned NT News, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Channel Nine.

Nine News abandoned their local bulletin in 2017 and relegated local news to a 90 second spot at the back of its nightly Brisbane bulletin. It has since returned recently, but was missing for more than three years.

In that time, the major news outlets that employed journalists in Darwin were the ABC and the NT News. The NT News is heavily dependent on advertising it receives from the NT Government. I know from working there as the senior political journalist for more than three years that the government does throw its weight around as a large advertiser and has attempted to exert political influence over the publication in the past.

The paper is also beholden to the government for so-called "drops" – exclusive stories that the NT Government provides it that get published, in some cases verbatim and on the front page, without having proper journalistic rigours applied to it. Essentially, it's a free kick for the government to spread propaganda to the public through its largest news source under the guise of a proper news article.

The ABC meanwhile has a cloud over its many fine journalists caused by employing the Chief Minister's wife and having her work in different roles there that include chief of staff, nightly news bulletin producer, general assignment reporter and radio news reader, while never properly addressing the conflict of interest.

News pieces authored by Kristy O'Brien were recently examined publicly, including by the ABC's Media Watch program, with concerns raised that some of the articles appeared to advance the political interests of her husband, the Chief Minister.

The issue was recently raised at Senate Estimates overflow hearings when the ABC's managing director David Anderson committed to personally review the situation. We remain hopeful he will do that and properly address a glaring conflict of interest that has affected Territorians' trust in the public broadcaster.

The value of diversity in media in a smaller jurisdiction

This is where we see the value of an independent media voice in the Territory that is not beholden to anyone or any group and is free to report on matters of public interest and expose the goings-on of politicians and highly-paid public servant executives.

Ultimately, we see our role as a crucial part of the democratic process of the Northern Territory, and our commitment is to reveal stories that other media won't. In the nine months that we have been operating, we have broken big stories that have been extremely well-read while making those in positions of power uncomfortable.

Diversity in media is essential in a functioning democracy to present voters with crucial information they need before making decisions on who they want to lead their jurisdiction and to provide ongoing accountability to the public of its elected and unelected leaders.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit. I will make myself available should the committee wish to further discuss any of the issues raised in this submission.

Christopher Walsh

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