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PRESIDENT
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Wednesday, January 10, 2018

The Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee

Re: Inquiry into the Communications Legislation Amendment (Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund) Bill 2017

Country Press Australia - Submission

As Country Press Australia, we present this submission on behalf of our members nationwide, they being regional and rural non-daily print/online publishers, and non-aligned to the major media outlets.

Firstly, CPA applauds the Federal Government, and the joint Senate Committee of Inquiry into Public Interest Journalism, for its initiatives in relation to small regional and rural publishers.

As the journal of record, regional and rural publishers remain today both relevant and necessary to the communities they serve and for their well-being. Yet they struggle to maintain profitability in the face of the global information revolution.

The allocation of significant funding in the \$50.1 million Regional and Small Publishers Innovation Fund is welcome.

However, CPA is concerned that this money can be more wisely spent, with better long-term outcomes for business and for jobs, and therefore a better result for Federally-allocated finances.

We understand that the purpose of the Fund is to assist small publishers to transition, compete and innovate more successfully in a changing media environment, with an additional emphasis on quality content using different mediums.

Some suggested funding opportunities include technology/equipment; the promotion of civic journalism; delivery of news application; staff training and upskilling; and proposals to increase revenue and readership.

All this is well and good, well-intentioned and welcome to a degree. However, CPA would argue that it is missing the mark, with the emphasis seemingly on the expansion of online publishing.

For rural and regional publishers, the future is about survival. And online journalism is not going to save these businesses; they cannot replace print, but must co-exist.

CPA argues that this money would be better spent supporting long-term employment, making it possible to support local young adults from school into permanent employment. This can be done, as CPA argued along with former Senator Nick Xenophon, through taxation rebate or wages support.

(We note and support that the further funding allocations for Regional Journalism Scholarships and Cadetships goes some way towards this, however it is a limited period of opportunity).

CPA believes the industry needs long-term relief to ensure small communities can retain their only source of quality local journalism. CPA questions that the \$50.1 million can be spent wisely with long-term benefits.

Greater sustainable employment, better trained and upskilled, would be a better outcome for small communities in many ways, as well as ensuring quality journalism remains accessible.

Further to this submission, CPA urges a review and adjustment to the qualifications to access this fund, namely the requirement that the publisher must have an annual turn-over of more than \$300,000. While this seems fair and reasonable and CPA understands why it was introduced, to guard against start-ups and the like, we ask that the threshold be reduced to \$200,000.

Or, if this is not acceptable, there be a safety net opportunity for small print publishers of long-standing who can demonstrate that they, too, should qualify. This would cover many small, mainly weekly publications, but well-established.

An example of this is the Coonamble Times, which has served its district since 1885. Since assuming ownership, Editor Lee O'Connor has grown this publishing business, is employing more and generating more income. Ms O'Connor, also, has embraced online, with a digital edition and Facebook page.

However, as a small weekly publication, it is unlikely that the Coonamble Times will reach the \$300,000 threshold. Yet Ms O'Connor would like to apply for funding.

We urge that an adjustment to the Bill be amended to allow such applications fair consideration, and without compromising the intent of the Fund.

Thank you for your consideration,

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Ben Taylor,
President

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Bruce Morgan,
Executive Director